

# POST-GRADUATE EDUCATION STUDENTS' ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH: A REVIEW OF RETIRED TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE FORMER BANTU EDUCATION SYSTEM

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## ***Abstract***

Throughout the centuries, irrespective of the nature of the society or culture, social history seems to have been narrated or written by the victor glorifying his/her own cause.<sup>1</sup> The voice of the ordinary person is rarely captured in standard historical works and consequently research in this area is certainly warranted and has currently become a vibrant field of research. With this article the author intends to fill one of these gaps in the narrative of social history and focuses specifically on the experiences of teachers who taught under a previous education system in South Africa, namely Bantu Education.

As part of their studies in a History of Education honours course, students were required to conduct interviews with retired teachers (or teachers who had a significant number of years' experience in Bantu Education) as part of their practical research. The interviews aimed to determine these teachers' experiences and perceptions of teaching in the Bantu Education system. The collected data was analysed following Tesch's method of qualitative data analysis. Although there was consensus among all the interviewees that Bantu Education was morally wrong and unjustifiable, the majority of the interviewees also identified positive experiences which call for consideration and reflection. The role of and need for conducting oral history interviews to provide a personalised perspective of past events is clear.

**Keywords:** Oral history research; Post-graduate research project; Apartheid; Bantu Education; Retired teachers' experiences Bantu Education.

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<sup>1</sup> T Carlyle, 1841; S Hook, 1955; W James, 2005.

## Introduction

The Scottish historian and philosopher, Thomas Carlyle (1841) noted that “The history of the world is but the biography of great men”. His theory clearly reflected his belief that it was the great men or heroes of the times who were:

the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men (Carlyle 1841).

It was Herbert Spencer (1896), who, in the 1860s, provided a counterargument that these “great men” were but products of their social environment. Although this does not necessarily suggest that the voice of the ordinary person would be reflected in the historical writings that emerged from that time, it does perhaps intimate the recognition of the role of ordinary people in shaping history and the influence of a particular ideological background underpinned by social, economic and political trends at the current time.

In the recording of histories – especially the histories of societies that lack a rich written record – oral sources have been used, although initially with a significant measure of scepticism. However, Jan Vansina’s<sup>2</sup> approach particularly in the recording of the histories of Africa represented a methodological advance that brought a breakthrough in and acknowledgement of the use of oral histories as a modern, scientifically valid research method (Phillips 2006).

Since the 1994 political changes in South Africa, there have been attempts to re-examine the historical narrative of the country critically and to strengthen the study and teaching of history in schools and higher education institutions. In 2001, the South African History Project was launched by the Department of Education to promote and enhance a historical conscience and to encourage the recording of oral histories in a post-apartheid South Africa (Asmal, 2002). Prior to this project, the National Archives of South Africa Act (Act 43 of 1996) had already emphasised that one of the functions of the state archives was to “document aspects of the nation’s experience neglected by archives repositories in the past” (South Africa, 1996). As a means of fulfilling this mandate, the National Archives and Records Service (NARS) maintain a National Register of Oral Sources (NAROS). Orality is an essential aspect of the tradition of a significant proportion of South Africans. NARS (nd) has

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<sup>2</sup> Jan Vansina is a Belgian historian and anthropologist specialising in Africa. However, his work on oral traditions is internationally acclaimed (Arnhaut & Vanhee, 2001).

turned to this cultural asset by stating:

... as one means of filling these gaps by bringing into the archives the stories and narratives which reflect the experiences and memory of those South Africans that had been marginalised in the contestation of social memory and the nation's experiences.

Committing to these ideals, since 2009 the Honours Bachelor of Education (Hons BEd) programme offered at the University of South Africa (UNISA) has included a compulsory module entitled "South African Education in Context" in the programme. One of the intended outcomes of the module is to provide students with a critical sense of location and a theoretical perspective on the provisioning of education from pre-colonial times up to democracy. Another outcome is to enable students to gain insight into how education is responsive to changing circumstances and needs. Generally, and in the module specifically, the history of the provision of education is contextualised within the dominant social, political, economic and ideological paradigms of the times and questions are asked whether and how these contexts relate to each other within a particular environment or set of events (Le Roux, 2011:18; cf. Du Bruyn & Oelofse, 2012:123). Equally importantly though is a reflection of how individuals who lived through these times, experienced the major events in education provision and responded to them. In addition, since this is an honours-level research module and the module developers view the history of education as being equally an academic field of study and an applied science, emphasis is placed on providing students with the opportunity to build and hone skills associated with history of education research methods. The rationale underpinning this emphasis is to support students to develop a hands-on encounter with the construction of an historical literacy in the field of education. The research methods taught and practised in this module are archival work, literature reviews, visual data analysis (artefacts, illustrations, period cartoons) and oral history (OH) research – the latter being the focus of this article.

### **A theoretical framework: the place and role of the history of education**

Depaepe (1982:614-620) asserts that the importance of the history of education as a discipline is that it has practical, theoretical, educational and intrinsic value. The intrinsic or personal educational value includes cognitive moulding and the shaping of a personal and civic identity. McCollough (2000) and Robinson (2000) emphasise that the inclusion of History of Education

in teacher training facilitates an understanding among aspirant teachers that there are indeed “histories” of education. These histories can be categorised as an official history of education that is best explained as a state or government version of educational provisioning that is used to justify education policies and practices; a private or detached history of education generated by academics that is influenced by and based on the broad mission and vision statement to which their particular educational institution subscribes; and a collective history of education where the public contribute towards the generation of the content. The latter perspective highlights the contribution that ordinary citizens of a country can make towards the debate on what actually constitutes history. This concept of experience-oriented personalised knowledge generation is grounded firmly in acknowledging the value of how people construe and experience events and the contribution this can make to the creation of a counter-hegemonic perspective of history and the shaping of identities (Novoa, 2001).

### ***The responsibility of the historian of education***

Although it is said that historians are subjective and biased in their interpretation of the history they write (Marwick, 2001:1, 39), Aldrich (2003: 134-136) draws attention to Laslett’s (1987) comments on the responsibilities of historians. These he describes as being three-fold:

- a duty to their own generation to record as fully as possible and interpret the events of the past by filling the gaps and rescuing from oblivion the voices from the past for contemporary and future generations;
- a duty to the people in the past to record and interpret events as fully and as accurately as possible;
- an academic and scholarly duty to search after the truth to the utmost of his abilities while acknowledging that it is inevitable that some degree of bias is probable, but that the research has been conducted in such a way that all has been done to circumvent this.

### ***Historical literacy***

When one traces the development of the concept “historical literacy”, a variety of developments and broadening of perspectives becomes evident. The concept was initially introduced by Hirsch (1988) and Ravitch (1989), who defined it as an individual’s level of historical content knowledge of

past events. Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) advanced a broader notion of the concept, positing that historical literacy varies from context to context, while Wineburg (1991) argues that the concept includes the content-knowledge dimension as well as the methods of collecting, verifying, interpreting and contextualising the subject matter. Husbands (1996), Taylor (2003) and Lee (2004), in furthering the developing of the concept as outlined by Wineburg, emphasise the importance of understanding historical content in terms of time, cause and effect, change and continuity.

### ***Some underlying theoretical assumptions regarding oral history research***

Research paradigms inform researchers' thinking about knowledge and the nature, purpose and way in which knowledge is constructed (Williams, 1998). Because history is often criticised for embedding the ideas and assumptions of those by whom it was recorded (Bos, 2011), revisions to this formal history can be provided by asking individuals to share their personal recollections, perspectives and experiences of historical events (Gluck, Ritchie & Eynon, 1999:2). These particularized accounts are collected through OH research. Data collected in this manner is not confined to the factual, but also allows for narrator reflection: description, explanation and viewpoints that personalise the data. In current research circles, data collected in this manner provides researchers with the opportunity to contribute to the process of the democratisation of society, as a process constituting transformation, or as a means of realising social advocacy. Acknowledgement of the importance of individuals' historical narratives is also a means of assisting individuals to make sense of and come to terms with the past.

Symon and Cassell's (1998), Plummer's (2001), and Grele's (2010) work significantly influence the theoretical framework regarding researchers' approach to OH research in a postmodern paradigm. Plummer's work can be described as a "humanistic social-historical research approach" while Grele's (2010) and Symon and Cassell's (1998) comment that qualitative research draws on a subjective ontology and a constructivist epistemology also points to a post-positivist approach as does Plummer's. The work of scholars such as Denzin and Lincoln (2003) and Du Bruyn and Oelofse (2012:123) – who posit that OH research strives towards locating the individual in his or her overall life experience within the broader socio-historical context of life and that knowledge is not always textbook-bound – also supports the preceding

authors' opinions that OH research is significantly subjective and is firmly grounded in the post-modern or social-constructivist framework.

The relevance of the preceding cursory theoretical framework on the place and role of history and OH in the context of this research is that:

- history of education contributes to individual and civic identity (Depaepe, 1982);
- OH research allows for the personalisation of history and the creation of a counter-hegemonic perspective of history and although subjective, it is no less significant than the narrative of scholars (Bos, 2011, Novoa, 2001; McCollough, 2000; Robinson, 2000);
- historians of education fill the gaps in knowledge and capture and include the experiences and perceptions of ordinary members of society (Laslett, 1987);
- historical literacy requires the application of relevant research methods (Wineburg, 1991);
- history should be understood within the spirit of the times and in terms of change and continuity (Husbands, 1996; Taylor, 2003; Lee, 2004).

Together, this summary of ideas is central to the way the theoretical and practical dimensions of the module "South African Education in Context" are approached.

## Research context

"South African History in Context" is a compulsory module in a B Ed Hons programme offered by UNISA which is an open distance learning (ODL) institution. The number of students who register for this module annually exceeds 4 000. Since 2009<sup>3</sup> when the module was first presented, the compulsory assignment dedicated to History of Education theory and research has included an OH interview assignment due to the researcher's<sup>4</sup> specific interest in OH research and her belief in the meaning of personal narrative as a means of acknowledging the contribution of "ordinary" people – whose recall of experiences and perceptions is rarely sought or valued by society. One of the purposes of setting this task is to provide students with the opportunity to engage first-hand in historical research.

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3 The OH interview is still one of the assignment tasks and has again been set for 2013. Students comment that the experience of conducting OH interviews is rewarding, informative, adds value to their studies and gives them the experience of doing history of education research in the field. This observation is based on personal feedback received from students and comments that are made on the online forum.

4 The researcher is a primary lecturer in the module.

Each year four topics<sup>5</sup> related to education (the scope of the module extends from pre-colonial education to education provisioning up to 1994) are identified by the researcher and students are required to select one of these topics for their interview. One of the topics is “Bantu Education” and for this specific topic, students are required to probe teachers’ perceptions and experience of teaching during the Bantu Education era. The requirement is that teachers should have had at least 10 years’ experience of teaching in the Bantu Education system implemented in 1953 (Republic of South Africa, 1953).<sup>6</sup> The expectation is that by engaging in this type of research students will gain a personalised view of how teaching was experienced and perceived by their respondent and at the same time, establish to what extent an individual’s perspective and perception of an event is aligned with the conventional historical discourse on the issue as published in scholarly and popular sources.

In preparation for the interview, students need to familiarise themselves with the:

- purpose and value of doing OH research;
- logistics of preparing for and conducting an OH interview;
- topic chosen for the interview and the period in question by doing a substantial amount of preparatory reading so that they are knowledgeable about the topic and are able to draft their own interview schedule that will encourage the interviewee to provide rich information relevant to the topic and period. A firm grounding in the topic places students in the position to probe the interviewee’s responses to substantiate and clarify their comments so that meaningful analysis and interpretation of the emergent data can be done;
- process of transcribing, analysing, coding and categorising data, contextualising and interpreting the interview findings.

The preparatory readings on Bantu Education would provide students with certain core knowledge such as:

- the schooling conditions for black children before the National Party came to rule ie that education was provided on an ad hoc basis by various religious bodies (Mission Schools) and provincial administrations with minimal attention to secondary education (Union of South Africa, 1951);

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5 The topics have included Discipline, Teacher Training, Christian National Education, Language and religion, Classroom practice, and Bantu Education. The latter is a popular topic and consequently it has been set as an option each year thus far.

6 The Bantu Education Act (Act 47 of 1953) was repealed by the Education and Training Act (Act 90 of 1979).

- the passage of the Bantu Education Act in 1953 (implemented in 1954) for the first time provided a structured, uniform system of formal education for black children that included primary and secondary schooling, teacher and vocational training and instruction in the mother-tongue in primary schooling;
- Bantu Education was instituted to provide mass education for black children and to eliminate widespread illiteracy among blacks and also as a means of curbing the mounting juvenile delinquent behaviour in the cities that was becoming a considerable cause of concern;
- because the government controlled black education, the tenets of apartheid such as the policy on separate development, could be propagated and later on, with the creation of the Bantustans (1968) and decentralisation of education to Bantustans, education was planned for and supervised by black inspectors in each homeland;
- although the government subsidised black schools and was responsible for the payment of teachers' salaries, the subsidy was not sufficiently adequate to provide education comparable to that of white children and consequently, parents had to purchase their children's books and many of the schools were under-resourced;
- the curriculum was the same for black and white children in many of the subjects (environmental studies was an exception where the curriculum was adapted to local needs and circumstances);
- instruction in both official languages (English and Afrikaans) was introduced in secondary school;
- according to the Afrikaans Medium Decree passed in 1974 certain subjects at secondary school level such as mathematics, arithmetic and social sciences had to be taught in Afrikaans (the intention was to first introduce this practice to schools in Soweto and the Northern Transvaal – which was the impetus for the Soweto Uprisings) while certain subjects were taught in English and others in the mother-tongue;
- the struggle for the abolition of unequal, segregated education started in earnest in the mid-1970s and escalated to the extent that the schooling for black children was severely disrupted (more so in certain areas of the country than others) and conditions at schools were often tense (Booyse, 2011: 240-248; Giliomee, 2012).

Students use their prescribed textbook and additional study material as provided in tutorial letters and recommended sources for the above. In the absence of contact sessions in the ODL teaching environment, various other methods are used to support students. Students are invited through tutorial

letters, short message system texts (SMSs) and the myUnisa online discussion forum (which could be described as a “facebook” type forum for students registered for the module) to approach their lecturers for assistance and advice and to discuss constraints relating to the interview process, the drafting of an appropriate interview schedule and their preparatory reading on the topic and period. Students generally email, telephone or use myUnisa to approach lecturers for assistance. Since 2010 a 90 minute satellite broadcast that focuses specifically on research methods used in history of education is presented by the researcher. The session is broadcast live to 22 UNISA regional centers countrywide approximately a month before the assignment due date. Rebroadcasts are scheduled for two weeks later and two months before the examination. In addition to providing guidance on the necessity of the preparatory readings and logistics pertaining to planning the interview, examples of how OH assignments are marked and commented on are discussed during the broadcast. The slides, presentation notes and additional material are posted on the online discussion forum prior to the broadcast so that students can prepare for the presentation. The notes and slides can also be used to refresh their memories subsequent to the presentation.

The ethical requirements for conducting research involving people are clearly outlined in the Institution’s Research Ethics Policy (UNISA, 2007). Since the research in question applies to a specific cohort of students annually, it is the researcher’s responsibility to ensure that class approval for the assignment has been obtained from the College of Education’s Research Ethics Committee where after clearance for the assignment is sought from the Senate Research and Innovation Committee. To ensure that the ethics protocol is strictly followed, students are provided with a pro forma letter that requests the interviewee’s consent to participate in the interview. The letter thus outlines the purpose of the interview and how the data will be used, that participation is voluntary and that the interviewee may withdraw from the interview without reprisal or choose not to answer specific questions during the course of the interview. The letter also mentions that confidentiality and anonymity will be upheld, but, given the context within which OH research is conducted and the purpose of doing OH research for example, to acknowledge the role an individual has played in the historical course of events, interviewees are specifically asked whether they would like to waive their right to anonymity. The informed consent document asks interviewees to indicate whether they grant permission that the findings from their interview be captured on an OH data repository administered by the lecturers for the module and whether

this information can be used for further research. Students are requested to indicate on the same form whether their own research may be used by the lecturers for further research. It is emphasised that the agreement must be completed by both the student and the interviewee prior to the interview taking place. If a student does not submit the necessary signed documentation together with the assignment, the OH interview answer is not marked.

Students are advised to record the interview (with the interviewee's permission), as note-taking is not necessarily an effective means of capturing a narrative. However, given the socio-economic contexts of many of the students audio or video recording is not always possible. Furthermore, students report that at times their interviewees are reluctant to have their narratives recorded as they are suspicious of the students' motives and those of the university. Those interviewees who are opposed to the interviews being recorded are generally concerned that the recording will somehow be used against them. This is despite the fact that interviewees are assured during the consultation and preparation phase that confidentiality and anonymity will be stringently upheld if preferred and that this can be indicated on the informed consent document.

After students have conducted the interview, the recording is transcribed or a comprehensive narrative from the notes taken during the interview is written up. Using Tesche's method of qualitative data analysis the body of data is organised according to broad topics that are coded and then grouped into categories with their particular themes (Tesch, 1990: 142-145). The findings are written up according to a rubric provided in the assignment brief that indicates the required structure of the answer and mark allocation. Students are asked to provide a:

- justification for the choice of topic and the process followed to identify a suitable interviewee;
- summary of the research findings, presented and discussed in the form of an academic essay;
- reflection on conducting the interview, constraints and how they were dealt with, and also the student's and interviewee's perception and experience of participating in the OH interview.

## **Research design and method**

The data used for this article is based on a sample of students' interviews on

Bantu Education that were conducted in 2011. During June and July (the assignment was due mid-July) the assignments were delivered to the primary lecturer. A random sample of 100 assignments was drawn by the researcher from the approximate 4000 assignments that were received. Despite the fact that ethical clearance forms had been signed by the student as well as the interviewee, a note from the researcher was included in the sampled assignment prior to it being marked asking the students to consider submitting their OH findings to the database that has been set up for research purposes. The reason the note was included prior to marking was to ensure that the sample was not biased in relation to the mark the student achieved for the OH task. Since not all students responded to the note, an announcement was subsequently placed on the online discussion forum site requesting students to consider submitting their OH assignment answer to the database for research purposes<sup>7</sup>. Despite the fact that the researcher has legitimate access to use any or all of the OH interviews submitted by students for research purposes on the basis of the letter of consent signed by the respondent and the interviewer, the researcher believes that, as a matter of courtesy, the students should be asked personally to sanction the use of their OH interview for further research.

In 2011, 279 students made their OH interviews available to the researcher. Of these, 72 (26 per cent) of the assignments were on Bantu Education. A random sample of 35 (49 per cent) of these assignments was selected for qualitative analysis; that is, a critical analysis, description and interpretation of the data by the researcher. Upon closer inspection, four of the assignments from the selected sample needed to be excluded since the students had not focused their interviews specifically on Bantu Education. Each of the remaining 31 assignments was studied and analysed in depth to identify major and minor topics. Following Tesch's method of qualitative data analysis, these topics were clustered and reduced to categories or themes that were coded for analysis. To facilitate the organisation of the identified themes, comparative tables were drawn up on an Excel spreadsheet.

Apart from following Tesch's guidelines for the categorising of data, the researcher noted that White, Miescher and Cohen (2001:3-4) draw a distinction between the raw data that results from OH interviews, which they describe as "words", and the "voices" that symbolise the perspectives and opinions sought within the raw material of words. Given that students had

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<sup>7</sup> Since 2009, an average of 300 students has respond to this request annually. Once the students forward their assignments (either electronically or as a hard copy which is then electronically scanned) the data is filed on the electronic data base according to the topic of the interview and the year of submission.

already written their analysis and interpretation of the raw data as a research essay, a particular onus was placed on the researcher to delve deeper for the voice of the narrator to ensure that the analysis of the sampled interviews revealed the underlying currents and emotions of the narrator in relation to his or her experiences and perspectives of teaching under the policies of Bantu Education.

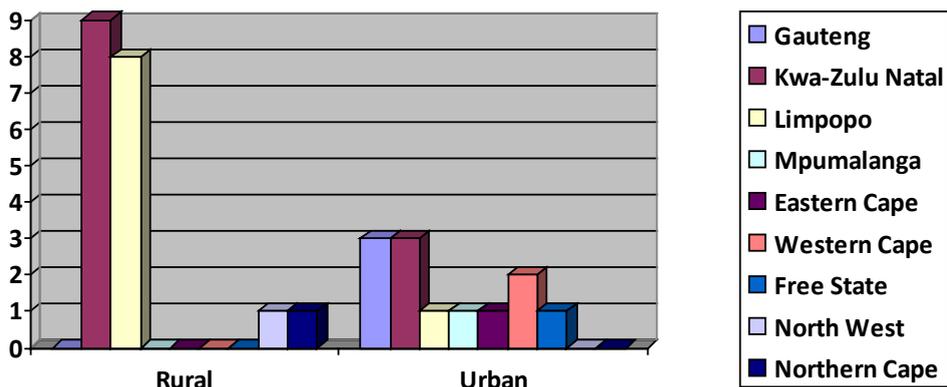
## Presentation and discussion of the research findings

The findings of the study were organised according to the themes that emerged and each of these themes is discussed individually. In addition, a profile of the respondents and an overview of interviewees' and interviewers' responses to participating in the interview are provided to add depth to the discussion and interpretation of the findings.

### *Interviewee profile*

Of the 31 interviews, 25 of the interviewees were retired and 6 were still in the teaching profession in 2011. The interviewees were all South African. The assignment answers were grouped according to province and locality in an attempt to establish whether a particular trend emerged from the narratives. The majority of the respondents (61 per cent) reside in rural communities. Kwa-Zulu Natal and Limpopo were the most represented in this group. The graph below represents the distribution of the interviewees per province and locality.

Image 1: Distribution of respondents based on province and locality



## **Distribution of interviewees per province and locality**

Those who were still teaching started their teaching career in the late 60s. Two of the former teachers who were interviewed were white females who had both taught at historically black schools. One remained at the school despite the boycotts and continued teaching at the school until her retirement; the other transferred to a former Model C school in 1983 after having spent 15 years in Bantu Education.

All the interviewees responded that teaching was their passion and that they had chosen the career because of their love for teaching. They looked back at their teaching career with happy memories, except for the two white teachers who mentioned that the intimidation they had been subjected to during the struggle years had been very difficult to cope with. One of these teachers had been resolute to remain at the school despite the difficult times and, in retrospect, was proud of the fact that she had persevered until her retirement.

More than half the teachers (most of them now retired) had started their formal teacher training after having completed Standard 6 [Grade 8], which was the minimum requirement to enter a training college and study for the lower primary certificate. However, most of these teachers furthered their studies and one completed a B Ed (Hons). One teacher was awarded an honorary doctoral degree for her dedication to the improvement of teaching for the black child.

## ***Themes***

Three specific themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews, namely:

- interviewees' attitude towards and perception of Bantu Education;
- interviewees' experiences and perceptions of the Bantu Education curriculum and the implementation of the curriculum; and
- the infrastructure and resources available to teachers during the years of Bantu Education.

Another category in which observations relating to Bantu Education that did not fall into one of the main themes was created and these findings will be discussed in the section on additional comments. It needs to be noted that the researcher drew a distinction between interviewees' perceptions and their experiences: the experiences related to what Bantu Education entailed and expected of teachers while the perceptions were the views and reflections of

their lived experiences. Each of the themes was discussed separately together with the experience and perception of the interviewees.

It should be remembered that, although OH is aimed to “get at” how people experienced an event at the time of its occurrence, accounts and perceptions obtained through OH research are influenced by circumstances or events that occurred later on in a person’s life. What the OH interview achieves is to capture the respondent’s recollections of the period being researched. Most of the retired teachers who were interviewed had taught for between 37 and 40 years and some also went through mind shifting curriculum changes instituted since 1994.

### **Theme 1: Attitude towards Bantu Education**

All 31 interviewees, including the two white female teachers, described the Bantu Education system as discriminatory, constructed to marginalise black people and ensure that they were subservient to the white minority, and averred that the system provided inferior education. Most of the black teachers had strong opinions about the inequalities and discrimination that were imposed by Bantu Education and the following quotations eloquently articulate these teachers’ general opinions of Bantu Education:

- “Bantu Education was a well-orchestrated, legalised system aimed at maintaining at all costs white supremacy over the black majority. The creation of Bantustans was used to further entrench the system.”
- “The creation of the homeland system perpetuated apartheid and created discordance amongst blacks.” (Several respondents made comments to this effect.)
- “Bantu Education was slavery education.”

Apart from these negative comments 7 of the 31 respondents, provided positive comments regarding the system:

- “Bantu Education was slavery education, but a good education. Teachers were disciplined and exemplary and were good role models for pupils.”
- “Teachers [under the Bantu Education system] were assertive and confident because they were respected by the pupils, parents and the community.”
- “The system was designed for blacks, but inherently the principles of teaching were sound.”

- “Bantu Education should be reinstated because the current system is appalling.”
- “At least children could read and write after they had left school – I guess better than pupils who leave school today.”
- “Teacher training in black colleges was excellent and produced well qualified teachers. The training was theoretical that provided content knowledge and practical that prepared teachers with the skills how to teach.”

Perhaps it should be noted that none of the positive comments quoted was made by the two white teachers. They both spoke about the system in negative terms, stressing that it was racially segregated and entrenched the policies of apartheid. Although all the respondents had experienced Bantu Education as politically discriminatory and aimed at subjugating blacks, some perceived Bantu Education as having merit – especially in contrast to what was happening in schools currently (cf Motshekga, 2011). The positive aspects that were pointed out reflect traces of well-grounded teaching principles; that teacher training of the time appropriately equipped teachers to teach confidently and focus on quality teaching; and that teachers were respected in their communities and at school and they were perceived to be good role models for the youth.

## **Theme 2: Curriculum and related matters during the years of Bantu Education**

Under this theme, the comments related to the medium of instruction, subjects offered in the curriculum, methods of instruction, discipline, and career opportunities for which school leavers were prepared are discussed.

### **Medium of instruction**

Most of the respondents pointed out that mother tongue instruction was used until Standard 6 [Grade 8], after which the medium of instruction was English. The introduction of Afrikaans as a/the medium of instruction (instituted in 1974 as the Afrikaans Medium Decree and repealed in 1979) was experienced incongruously. Some teachers remarked that the cause of the school boycotts and struggle for liberation were based on the fact that Afrikaans had become the medium of instruction [for all subjects] in secondary schooling.<sup>8</sup> Because

8 In 1974, according to the Afrikaans Medium Decree, [Northern Transvaal Region, “Regional Circular Bantu Education”, Northern Transvaal (No. 4), File 6.8.3. of 17.10.1974] Afrikaans was introduced as the medium of instruction from Standard 5 (grade 7) upwards in Soweto and some Northern Transvaal schools for certain subjects namely mathematics, arithmetic and social sciences. The other subjects were to be taught in English or in the vernacular (Boddy-Evans, 2012).

many teachers were themselves not conversant with Afrikaans, teaching came to a virtual standstill. Others mentioned that only certain subjects were authorised to be taught in Afrikaans, for example mathematics, while one teacher said that at the school where she taught (a rural school in Kwa-Zulu Natal), it was “business as usual” and that they continued teaching in English despite the Afrikaans Medium Decree. Even though mother tongue instruction is generally seen as having a positive effect on a child’s learning experience, some of the interviewees’ saw this as a further entrenchment of apartheid and segregation. School leavers who left school after or before having completed Standard 6 were “unequal as an employable population” due to having been taught in the vernacular. However, one teacher indicated that mother tongue instruction should have been used throughout the pupils’ schooling. One of the white teachers who taught at secondary level mentioned that after the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in certain subjects in 1976, the [black] teachers continued to explain concepts and methods in these subjects (for example mathematics, arithmetic and social studies) either in the vernacular or in English which was more understandable to the pupils. In this teacher’s opinion this was one of the reasons pupils struggled when it came to the examinations which had to be written in Afrikaans.

### ***Curriculum issues***

Respondents who commented on the curriculum itself mentioned the actual subjects that were taught at school included the mother tongue, arithmetic, nature studies, social studies, health, crafts and needlework, agriculture, music, religious instruction and English. The official languages (English and Afrikaans) mathematics, science, biology and home economics were mentioned as additional subjects that were taught at secondary school level which started in Standard 6 (grade 8). (Initially Standard 6 was accommodated in the primary phase and later moved to secondary school level). Respondents were generally negative towards some of the subjects that were included in the curriculum, in particular towards crafts, needlework and agriculture since they perceived these subjects to be inferior and aimed at preparing pupils for domestic service or farm labourers thereby ensuring that they would not be able to rise above a certain social station. In contrast, others mentioned that these subjects gave students the opportunity to learn useful life skills and to express their creativity. Crafts as a subject was singled out as a means of keeping alive traditional crafts of the particular ethnic groups. Twenty-eight

of the respondents (90 per cent) indicated the value of religious instruction in the curriculum, arguing that it taught respect, dignity and the Word of God. Many attributed the fact that school discipline was not a problem during these years to the fact that positive moral values and respect were instilled through religious instruction. None of the teachers (those who did not refer to it specifically) spoke of religious instruction in negative terms.

Sport (as an extramural activity) and music were commended as forming an important feature of the curriculum. It was suggested that, because participation in sport and music activities requires pupils to follow instructions and learn to follow rules, this contributed to pupils learning discipline. One teacher explained the value of sport as follows: “Sports have to be played according to rules and regulations – if these rules are not followed, you can’t play”.

### ***Teaching in the classroom***

Several of the respondents indicated that teachers came to school well prepared to teach their lessons because their lesson preparation was checked by the principal at least twice a week. It was also mentioned that this proper preparation ensured that the pupils were kept busy and that there was no time for disruptive behaviour. All but one of the interviewees who commented on teaching methods said that teaching and learning were teacher-centred with enforced rote-learning and note-taking [from the blackboard]. One teacher described teaching as spoon-feeding while another described it as a “jug and mug” method. One teacher mentioned that the “Socratic” method of instruction (question and answer) was used and that this amounted to rote-learning. Teaching towards preparation for the examination was another allegation levelled against the system. One of the white teachers who was interviewed indicated that pupils were encouraged to engage in discussion in her classes. She disagreed that teaching and learning methods were necessarily teacher-centred or that they were imposed through policy.

Several interviewees stated that the curriculum prepared pupils for one of three careers – teaching, nursing or entering the police force. The majority of school leavers (those who left the system early or prematurely) became blue collar workers and mostly, because of being unskilled, took on manual jobs as domestic workers, farm labourers or miners.

### **Discipline**

Linked to a previous discussion related to the inclusion of religious instruction in the curriculum, and the respect and obedience assumed to have emerged from this, a number of teachers commented that problems of discipline seldom occurred. Pupils were respectful and helpful towards their teachers and school hours were respected. Punctuality was never a problem. Disciplining a pupil was at times necessary and generally took the form of manual work such as weeding the garden or digging holes for trees to be planted. Corporal punishment was used, but none of the teachers in the sample mentioned that it had been abused. Teachers who mentioned corporal punishment, spoke of it in relatively positive terms as being a reminder to pupils to be diligent, do their homework and learn conscientiously for tests and exams.

Teachers also remarked that the moral code instilled by religious instruction and daily assembly, which included scripture reading, prayer and singing, reminded teachers that they had to lead by example. They worked hard and were well prepared for their lessons, were respectful towards each other and the pupils, and followed a formal dress code. Pupils were also expected to wear a proper school uniform. Informal dressing was only allowed on sports days.

### **Theme 3: Circumstances and resources during the years of Black Education**

This theme covered topics that looked at the infrastructure, teachers' conditions of service, teaching resources and school attendance.

#### **Infrastructure**

Regarding the infrastructure, about 20 per cent of the teachers mentioned that the schools they had taught at had had no electricity or water and no toilets. Pupils and teachers had to relieve themselves in the "bush". All mentioned that the classrooms were overcrowded and that in many instances teaching took place outside under a tree. A significant number of teachers mentioned the platoon system of teaching, which meant that teaching was spread over two sessions a day with some pupils attending in the morning and others in the afternoon. This system was implemented to try to deal with the overcrowding in schools. The community, according to several interviewees - specifically mentioned by those from rural areas, was responsible for building their own schools and became responsible for the maintenance of the buildings, the

administration of expansions to the school, and the employment of private teachers who were paid from funds collected from schools fees. One of the key limitations with regard to the payment of private teachers was that parents were not forthcoming in paying their children's school fees.

### **Remuneration**

Government-employed teachers complained that it was common for them not to be paid on time and that the salaries were poor. Several mentioned the inequality of salaries, with men earning more than women, and men receiving an increase when they got married and now had a wife and possibly a family to support. Pregnant married female teachers were given unpaid maternity leave while unmarried women who fell pregnant were dismissed. A particular teacher once petitioned the government to increase the salaries of black teachers. The response, she recalls, was: "You live in mud houses and wear cow-skins. Why do you need more money?" Such comments indicate the level of indifference towards the plight of black teachers.

### **Resources**

Schools were generally under-resourced which ranged from a lack of classroom furniture to a lack of teaching resources. Often the teaching resource was limited to a single textbook. The teacher would then write notes on the black board which the pupils had to copy. Parents were expected to purchase their children's school books, but many were too poor to do so. Consequently, teachers had to improvise and produce their own learning-support materials. The under-resourced schools were generally known for poor scholastic achievement and a lack of pupil and teacher motivation. However, with regard to the latter, it would seem that even in the face of difficult circumstances, most teachers were generally so dedicated to their profession that they managed as best they could. It was interesting to note that most teachers responded to the challenges positively and were proud of this fact. Very few indicated that the difficulties they experienced were an excuse not to give children the best education they could.

### ***School attendance***

School attendance was a particular issue of concern and a number of points were raised by the teachers in this regard. Children generally started school after the official school-going age of seven. This was attributed to the fact that children of this age were still expected to be involved in household tasks such as herding cattle or sheep. However, this practice led to age differences in classes that complicated teaching and pupil interaction in the classroom and on the school grounds. Absenteeism in winter was common since parents could not afford suitable winter clothing for their children. In summer, it often happened that pupils had to be turned away from the school for safety reasons. Because school buildings were generally thatched mud structures, they were in danger of collapse if it rained heavily or if the wind was blowing strongly. Pupils who had to attend initiation schools when they came of age generally stayed away from school for the whole year. Teaching in the face of such constraints would certainly have had a negative effect on learning quality and consistency.

### ***Additional comments emanating from the interviews on Bantu Education experiences***

Two teachers raised the issue of nepotism in the Bantustans which they perceived to be associated with the clear class distinctions prevalent in black society. There was an elite class of blacks whose children were given privileges at school and were not required to do manual work such as sweeping the classroom or scrubbing the floors, which was part of the regular pupil's school day.

Teachers were divided on the value and purpose of school inspection and school inspectors. Some reported that the inspectors were helpful and followed up on assistance provided; others mentioned that if the teacher made a mistake in the lesson that was being monitored, the inspector would take over, which was a great embarrassment to the teacher.

### ***Interviewees' and interviewers' experiences and perception of the interview process and experience***

None of the interviewees was reluctant to be interviewed and many felt honoured and excited that they had been selected for the interview. All the

interviewees were cooperative and eager to participate. Most were described as being confident, at ease, fluent and having excellent recall. One student mentioned that the interviewee had been overwhelmed by being able to share his experiences with someone who wanted to listen to him. Some were curious that they were being interviewed and that their opinion actually mattered. One interviewee hoped that her contribution could be used to advise the Department of Education on teaching matters.

Many of the students indicated that they felt overwhelmed by being required to engage in OH research and were unsure whether they would succeed. Frequent comments students made were that they were concerned that the interview schedule would be inappropriate; that the interviewee would be annoyed by the intrusion or that they would embarrass themselves due to their lack of experience on the topic and in doing fieldwork. Despite these concerns, all the interviewees seemed to have enjoyed the interview as can be deduced from the following selection of responses:

- “I learnt new skills, I felt empowered and I would love to continue searching for information this way.”
- “I found the process very informative and enlightening. I had a marvellous experience – it was a real “wow” and I am inspired to do further research.”
- “It was an emotional experience – it was like watching a movie of the past.”
- “It felt so good to do the interview.”

Five students specifically mentioned that by doing the OH interview, they had learnt the importance of being objective and withholding personal opinions. The following statements from students support this statement:

- “I did not agree with many of the statements the interviewee made, but I had to withhold my own opinion.”
- “Conducting the interview was an exercise in professionalism: I had to withhold my own opinions and listen to arguments and statements that I did not agree with.”
- “I learnt to tolerate different viewpoints, but at the same time gained compassion and respect for the teacher’s contribution in being determined to do the best for his nation.”
- “Our views differed and I had to reserve mine no matter how strongly I felt about them.”

In my opinion, the comments relating to the experiences and perceptions of both the students and the interviewees in relation to the OH interview indicate that interviewees engaged willingly, were forthcoming with their opinions and reminiscences and consequently that the credibility of the research can be endorsed in principle.

## **Conclusion**

In this article the researcher reported on the role that OH interviews can play in the field of history of education in giving retired teachers or teachers who have many years of experience an opportunity to narrate their personal experiences and their perceptions of experiences in relation to a particular episode of their teaching career. The topic for discussion on which this article focused was teachers' experience of Bantu Education [1953-1979] – possibly one of the most contested educational policies passed in Apartheid South Africa. The generally accepted (and perpetuated) perception is that Bantu Education was disparaging, oppressive, degrading and held the black child back from venturing into careers supposedly reserved for their white counterparts. Looking back, one cannot deny that the country has suffered because of the Bantu Education policy passed under Apartheid. It is still blamed for failures in education (Mohamed, 2012; X-press, 2012: 3) almost four decades after its repeal and the change of government for whom the introduction of new education policy was a matter of immediate concern. The Bantu Education Act was racially based – there is no doubt about that – however it was the first legislation ever passed that provided for the formal education of the black child. One of the chief concerns that the policy hoped to address was to provide education for black children in order to eradicate widespread black illiteracy and to provide instruction in the mother tongue in the primary school years – a practice that is generally accepted to be academically sound (Giliomee, 2012).

The purpose of this research was to establish how a sample of teachers who had actually taught under the Bantu Education system personally experienced and perceived the education system. The data was gathered by Hons B Ed students who conducted OH interviews with these teachers. From the interviews it was clear that all the teachers perceived and experienced Bantu Education as being racially segregated, inferior and marginalising. Despite this, interviewees also highlighted positive aspects of the system and the contexts within which they had taught. The researcher's review and reflection

of the interview findings provided a constant reminder that, despite the perceived constraints and challenging educational circumstances and teaching contexts, most of the teachers who formed part of this study were champions in the cause of education that was driven by their passion for teaching. What I personally regard as being a striking outcome of the interviews is that so many of the teachers were profoundly proud of what they had achieved as teachers and that they had persevered in their cause despite the poor circumstances and salaries they received. They were proud of their social status as teachers and the respect that communities accorded them. But most of all, these teachers were especially willing to share their experiences with the researchers and were astonished that their reminiscences were important and that people actually wanted to hear about their experiences. It is a humbling thought that perhaps society has become blasé or neglectful of recognising and valuing the role the older generation has played in shaping society – a deficiency that can be resolved by collecting the OH narratives of ordinary people.

One of the responsibilities of historians and historians of education is to fill the gaps in history and capture the voices of the ordinary members of society if they intend to be true to past, present and future generations. This is where OH research can play a pivotal role, and its contribution to this cause needs to be acknowledged and used. However, because only 31 OH interviews were analysed for the purpose of this study, this could be viewed as a limitation in that the results cannot be generalised to the broader population of retired teachers who taught under the Bantu Education system. However, the research on which this article is based, at the very least, should alert researchers in education to the importance of OH research to provide fresh perspectives on events and practices that have occurred in the provisioning of schooling to children. From these oral narratives it is possible to better understand history within the spirit and context of the times and to attempt to gain different and perhaps more balanced perspectives of the history of education in South Africa.

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