

## CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

# HISTORY EDUCATION IN A DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA\*

*Peter Kallaway  
School of Education  
University of Cape Town*

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"Alternative education (for a post-apartheid South Africa) should be so that we don't turn our backs on what happened in the past, but look at history and use it in our lessons and teaching to build a new nation".  
(HDE student at UCT, 1992)

Should a controversial and potentially divisive subject like history be taught in the schools of the new South Africa? If so, how is it to be justified? What should the objectives of that history education be? How will those goals relate to the project of nation building, so vital to construction of a post-apartheid citizenship? Who will be involved in the process of curriculum development? What will the features of that process of curriculum development be in a democratic context? What historiography will we tap into for a satisfactory curriculum that redresses past imbalances but leaves space for the history of all of the people? How will we balance interpretations which variously emphasise race, colonialism, community context, working life, region, class, religious identity, gender and a multitude of other perspectives? What methods or pedagogy will be promoted? What materials will be developed? How will they differ from the practices of the past? How, in a context where equality of opportunity is emphasised, will we cut the coat of our ideals and expectations regarding the future educational development in this area according to the cloth of financial reality with respect to educational quality (eg materials and textbook provision) for a future educational system that will inevitably be strapped for funds?

In short, how do we define the necessary conditions for a satisfactory school history in the new democratic context?

If we view these issues and this topic as a totality we tend to lose heart at the magnitude of the task and the multiple challenges to be confronted. It is then just as well to attempt

to cut the problem down to size by locating it somewhere in our own reality. I would like, if I may be permitted, to begin therefore with a snatch of autobiography: My own experience of teaching in a white boy's high school at the height of the apartheid era in the sixties. The irony of that situation, in retrospect, was that it provided the ideal context for teaching critical history in the oppositional mode.

The majority of the pupils in that broadly 'liberal', middle-class, urban English language context were sufficiently aware of the world to understand very quickly that the textbooks were highly suspect in their interpretations of the past, and even as a young teacher I was confident enough (with the help of a headmaster who left me alone to get on with the job) to make it my daily business to demythologise the history curriculum, and to make fun with the pupils of the versions of history enshrined in Fowler & Smit, the *handboek* of those times. In other words, even in the dark days of apartheid, it was possible in some contexts, for white teachers in middle class schools to use the code to break the code - to tackle the essential issue of the partialness of knowledge and the fragility of our interpretations.

That educational location, which emphasised the crudity of the ideological bias inherent in

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the syllabus and textbook, ironically paved the way for the very opposite of what the educational politics of CNE implied. It made it necessary to attempt a more adequate version of the past to allow it to square with the common sense of the students. As a consequence, it paved the way for critical thinking!

Of course, we all participated in an elaborate charade at the times of the external examination, where we cooked up prepared answers that we all knew from the study of past papers were "what the examiner wanted" - but none of us was ever under any illusion about what we were doing by the time pupils arrived at the top standards of the school. Once they understood the issue of interpretation, the ability to produce a particular version on demand did not usually prove to be beyond the ability of the average student!

This process and these insights taught the most valuable lessons that any student can learn. That the school curriculum is not definitive; that knowledge is always partial, problematic and ideological; that in a society like South Africa under apartheid the political assumptions and ideology of the ruling groups reached into the very classrooms of the new generation; that we are all in a context of political domination and conservation vs resistance or critique at all times.<sup>1</sup>

In short, the hidden curriculum of the school and society became apparent to the students without any elaborate need to create critical or alternative materials designed for the task. These came with the patch and we used them as best we could, not necessarily out of any desire to make heroic gestures, but because they were required by the educational logic the world of teaching history presented us! Even those children who thought apartheid was a good thing (and of course there were many who did) found it difficult to deny that the basis of the knowledge upon which it was constructed and defended was often highly problematic. Many spirited debates meant that students were constantly engaged in active learning in the process of discussing different interpretations and assembling evidence in favour of specific viewpoints.

Of course it was not so in all schools. When I later worked with African teachers in Soweto in the seventies, I quickly realised that the norms of the classroom at Wynberg Boys

High could not be applied to Orlando West or Madibane SSS! Teachers were monitored much more carefully and were liable to be dismissed if they engaged in the very same practices which were here defined as "bring politics into the classroom".

The space that I enjoyed in my classrooms always came as a surprise when I described it to foreign educationalists or to employees of the Bantu Education Department. They found it difficult to understand that within the system of apartheid education such space for flexibility could be created. They imagined that the extent and degree of ideological control in South African schools was much more monolithic than it actually was, and they perhaps failed to grasp the differences between stated educational objectives and the problems of implementation of the National Party government's educational master plan. Despite declarations of intent it proved to be impossible for the government to monitor every classroom and every teacher for political purity. The history of the Teacher's League of South Africa in Cape Town also demonstrates how such spaces came to be used by whole groupings of teachers rather than solitary individuals.<sup>2</sup> At the same time it must of course be acknowledged that such variations were more frequent in white education and more a feature of the privileged sectors of the system, where such actions were not so easily identified as being linked to liberation politics.

I have written elsewhere about the context of history education during the era of apartheid and the historiographical background to the practices of the time<sup>3</sup>, and will therefore not dwell on the topic here other than to suggest that there is a tradition of alternative educational thinking, research and material production in South Africa that has challenged the *status quo* ever since the seventies, and I am proud to have been part of that tradition. The recent launch of the HISTORY IN PROGRESS SERIES in Cape Town demonstrates the vigorous perpetuation of a school History convention that challenges the myths of apartheid education and seeks to promote new learning methodologies.<sup>4</sup> This paper argues that the basis of a critical and democratic practice in the field of history education has already been laid and that the experience gained during the development of that alternative tradition now provides the basis for future planning in the field of history education. The unique contribution of the

history teaching fraternity means that the policy slate for a post-apartheid education is not clean. Very considerable experience in the field is available to inform future initiatives. What is the relationship between that educational experience and the needs of curriculum development for a new era?

## **HISTORY EDUCATION UNDER APARTHEID**

The need for fundamental change in the area of history education in South Africa is uncontested at the present time. The production of a school History that is in keeping with the political climate of the times is an essential element of a transformative education. For most teachers and students this means abandoning of Afrikaner nationalist historiography and the domination of a specific set of textbooks by authors like Joubert, Lambrechts and Lintvelt.<sup>5</sup> While we certainly need a new school History that will provide a platform for nation-building in the broadest sense, the temptation to once again make school History the handmaiden of political ideology must be resisted at all costs. That is not to make an old-fashioned appeal for objective history - whatever that might be - but to recognise the ideological nature of the subject and use this to develop critical capabilities and analytical skills to enable children to make sense of history and of the complex political, social and economic changes through which they will live in the "new" South Africa.

The area of history education has long been one of the most contested and publicised aspects of apartheid education. A long, if not particularly rigorous, debate has been conducted in newspapers and other public forums ever since the 1960s on what was usually referred to as the "bias of school History" and its exclusive focus on the 'myths' of Afrikaner nationalist historiography. There was also some academic research on the topic, notably by Frans Auerbach,<sup>6</sup> Paddy Mulholland,<sup>7</sup> and UNESCO researchers Marianne Cornevan and E. Dean et al.,<sup>8</sup> but given the centrality of this educational issue in the political arena it is very surprising that it did not receive more attention from liberal, Marxist or Africanist scholars. This is not the place to explore why this was the case, but it presents an important area for further enquiry.

Suffice it to say that up to the late 1980s school History was a topic that attracted a great deal of negative criticism and generated a lot of heat in public debate. Any educational gathering of black South Africans was likely to focus on this as a key aspect of the ideological agenda of inferior education associated with apartheid. Within the People's Education movement (circa 1986-88) the call for *People's History* was very prominent. Yet it is of some significance that this emphasis has died away completely in the context of the "new politics" of post-February 2, 1990. The move from resistance politics to the politics of negotiation seems to have sidelined school History as a significant site of protest and contestation. Again, the reasons for this are by no means clear, but for present purposes it is sufficient to note this fact.

Of course we need to move away as rapidly as possible from apartheid education - the grand narrative of Afrikaner nationalist History, colonial history, or white history - whatever it might be called - in order to engage with new historiographical perspectives that identify with African or People's history so as to provide a new content for the syllabus. Precisely what that will look like and how it will be defined and arrived at is part of the problem I wish to raise here.

Equally important, yet often neglected in the past, is the whole question of the educational objectives, curriculum development procedures, methodologies and forms of evaluation to be recommended for the area of history education in the future, all part of the effort to get away from the racist ideological legacy and emphasise the role of History in creating critical citizens for a democratic context. Stress must be placed upon the development of critical skills and conceptual development in the planning of educational objectives. Teachers, teacher educators and educational administrators must recognise the importance of emphasising these objectives in the syllabus and in the classroom. The pedagogy and learning methodologies promoted by the school and the forms of assessment used to evaluate teaching and learning must reflect these values. All this needs a great deal of clarification and research in conjunction with the task of formulating a new syllabus content.

In short, many of the critics of apartheid history in the schools have been concerned to ensure that reform does not simply lead to a



change of content from Afrikaner nationalist history to African nationalist history (though this is of course a necessary part of the change). As the whole nature of history education in the schools comes under review it is necessary to ensure that the subject regains its educational legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the public in general and the teaching profession in particular.

Once these issues have become part of a public debate it will be possible to turn to the area of textbook and resource development, and the priority need for in-service courses for teachers in order to ensure that such policies are implementable. Evidence drawn from international sources indicates that teacher education is vital to the development of the total curriculum package, as it is only through the participation of teachers in the overall curriculum development process that meaningful changes will occur and the nature of the educational process will be significantly influenced by democratic educational procedures.

It is against the broad background sketched out above that the need arises to address the situation facing educators and teachers in the area of history education at the present time. The need for a public and professional debate on History education is a significant part of the overall quest for new educational policies.

### **ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO SCHOOL HISTORY DURING THE SEVENTIES: POSSIBLE OPTIONS FOR A NEW PEDAGOGY?**

Considerable experience and expertise relating to the development of an alternative history education is already available as a result of a variety of initiatives taken over the past decade. Three elements of such a foundation for policy-making are considered below. They are the development of alternative history materials for use in the classroom, the experience gained through the development of innovative evaluation mechanisms geared to the testing of skills and critical thinking in the JMB and other examinations within the present system, and the experience already gained from the writing of alternative textbooks for schools.

#### **a) Alternative materials:**

During the 1970s small groups of teachers and historians began a process of experimentation aimed at transforming History education in their classrooms. These initiatives were largely based on the (Schools) History Workshop in Johannesburg and the Natal History Teachers Society, and drew much of their inspiration from the work the "New History" movement and the Schools Council History Project in Great Britain.<sup>9</sup> Teacher seminars on African history and the new neo-marxist historiography, as well as the introduction of "New History" methodology, which emphasised the acquisition of critical skills and historical understanding as against the memorisation of content, broke the ground for teacher involvement in the production of resource materials on a modest scale. Most of these materials were circulated locally for teacher use and proved to be the beginning of a culture of "alternative history" for teachers.<sup>10</sup> Prior to 1976 Soweto teachers were enthusiastic participants and a number of meetings were held at Orlando West High School at that time, but on the whole black teacher involvement in these initiatives was limited.

The overall lesson of the experience was not inspiring. The energy put into such projects very seldom seemed to justify the rewards. Limited markets for the materials, teacher shyness of new methods, the controls which black teachers were subjected to in the course of their work, limited funds and facilities for copying materials - and simply pressure to "get through the syllabus" - all militated against the use of alternative materials in the classroom. Indeed the children themselves were often the most resistant to "alternative history", especially when it was seen as irrelevant to the dreaded final examinations that were looming.

#### **b) Skills-based evaluation:**

A second aspect of innovation the 1970s was associated with the area of public examinations. As one of a team of examiners for the JMB History examinations between 1977 and 1981 under the leadership of Mr Viglieno, I was able to participate in the introduction of an exciting new assessment procedure developed for this external public examination. For the first time in South Africa this examination focused on the evaluation of a candidate's critical understanding and assumed that the purposes of teaching history was to develop critical



skills and insights, rather than to remember vast hunks of factual content. By changing the nature of the external examination and marking procedures it was possible to influence school pedagogy. In this small area of relative freedom from the large educational bureaucracies we were able to set out the elements of a policy that would promote a new kind of History evaluation free from the bias and selection of the present system. Similar initiatives were also undertaken in the context of the Senior Certificate examination of the Natal Education Department and the DEC, House of Delegates (Indian Education). In this way it was possible to lay the foundation for a new process of evaluation that will (one hopes) inform future History evaluation in South Africa. These developments provide part of the background to the report on History evaluation for the HSRC that is referred to below.

#### c) **Alternative textbooks:**

The third aspect of the alternative legacy of the apartheid era refers to the development of textbooks. Despondent about the gains to be made by attempting to get direct access to teachers for workshops in the volatile political climate of the late seventies and early eighties, and disheartened by the possibilities of developing alternative resources for the History classroom while locked out of possible influence on the educational bureaucracy, the offer in 1985 by a small publisher of the opportunity to produce an alternative textbook for schools presented a small group of teachers and academics with an exciting set of possibilities. In the context of the curriculum revisions this seemed to present a novel opportunity for getting a new kind of content and a new pedagogy into the schools and into the hands of teachers.

The **History Alive** textbook series covered the full range from Std 2 to St 10 by 1988. It was welcomed by a number of teacher organisations and very well reviewed by the liberal press. The team I was associated with worked on the Std 9 and Std 10 volumes.<sup>11</sup> Our goal was to produce a textbook that would conform to the formal requirements of the syllabus but encapsulate a challenge to the Afrikaner Nationalist/Christian National Education paradigm that had dominated school History. We were particularly concerned to produce a workbook for teachers and students who wanted to explore beyond the confines of conventional history teaching in the senior

school and include revisionist historiography. Although we were constrained by the content of the core syllabus as laid down by the JMB, we agreed to do only the bare minimum to fulfil the needs of the formal syllabus. Indeed we wished to challenge many of the assumptions, both about content and methodology, built into that code.

All the work drew heavily on the methodologies developed by the Schools Council History Project in Britain which emphasised skills-based learning as outlined above. The text was organised in an interrogative manner rather than the conventional direct narrative. An explanatory, rather than a chronological or narrative approach, was our goal. We attempted as far as possible, through the use of documents, diagrams, pictures and extracts, to raise issues of interpretation and translation in the context of exercises included in the text and through skills development exercises.

A full evaluation of the project still remains to be completed, but preliminary findings in Natal, where the texts were most used in Natal Education Department (NED) and House of Delegates (Indian) schools, would seem to indicate a favourable response. Some teachers found the content unfamiliar and difficult; others used the book mainly as a teaching aid; many thought that it was an exciting initiative but were wary of using it in the context of Standard 10 external examinations, where the conventional modes of examining encouraged teachers to be cautious and use the generally accepted texts.<sup>12</sup>

On completion of the **History Alive** series the members of the team who lived in Cape Town continued their informal involvement with these issues by establishing a History Education Group (HEG), based on the School of Education at UCT and the History Teachers Society of the Western Cape. The aim was to keep in contact with developments in the field and seek opportunities to develop our strategies more fully. This group is still functioning and, in association with members of the UCT History Department is seeking to influence future developments. The thinking in this paper is representative of the deliberations and challenges we are seeking to address. Above all, the question that has faced us for some time is how best to proceed in the current phase of political transition.

## PEOPLE'S EDUCATION AND PEOPLE'S HISTORY: NECC History Commission 1987-1988

Prior to the changes of 1990 the period of educational crisis during 1987-8 led to the emergence of the whole discourse on People's Education, which was coupled to a period of intense political activity in popular politics. In that context the NECC (National Education Crisis Committee) People's History Commission was set up to investigate the needs in this area of education and to make recommendations. The committee, under the leadership of Prof. Colin Bundy, then of the University of Cape Town, consisted mainly of academics from UCT and University of the Western Cape, and also drew on the membership of the History Workshop in Johannesburg.

Although the campaign for People's History was fundamentally associated with political mobilization rather than the revision of school History, the latter provided a unique space for considering the nature of the history that should find its way into the national curriculum in the future. Although there was no sense at that time that these debates would transform themselves into policy issues in such a short space of time, this provided an invaluable framework for future debate of the issue of history education in the schools. African history and the history of the liberation movements were given a position of prominence, and the issue of methodology and interpretation was highlighted in the publication of the group that emerged at the beginning of 1988.<sup>13</sup> Yet the initiative failed to really make much headway with regard to school History, suffering much the same fate as the earlier attempts to introduce alternative materials. Once again the DET refused permission for the publications of the NECC to enter its educational institutions. The political moment was not right for such a move into the schools, whatever significance the People's Education campaign had for the general purposes of political conscientization. By 1988 the Committee had effectively ceased to function.

It needs to be mentioned in this context that the 1980s also gave rise to a crop of independent projects which were aimed at the development of history for popular education outside of the formal schools context. These included worker histories, such as Luli Callinicos's **Gold and Workers** and the

innovative readers published by the Foundation of Education with Production - Gay Seidman's **Working for the Future** (1985) and Judy Seidman's **In Our Own Image** (1990).<sup>14</sup>

## HSRC INVESTIGATION INTO THE TEACHING OF HISTORY IN SCHOOL IN THE RSA (1988-1991)

A major opportunity for the History Education Group between 1988 and 1991 was the chance to engage in the investigation into History Education initiated by the HSRC's Education Research Programme. We were at first wary of the exercise as the influential HSRC report on **Provision of Education in the RSA** (1981) [the De Lange Committee report], which formed the background to this investigation, had been heavily criticised in the early eighties as a front for reformist National Party thinking in education.<sup>15</sup> Immediate questions were posed regarding the nature of the relationship of this initiative to the state's Education Renewal Strategy and the degree of 'legitimacy' to be granted to such an investigation. After consultations with members of the defunct NECC History Commission and members of the NECC executive, and after receiving assurances from the head of the working group that this was an independent HSRC initiative, we opted for participation.

Working in the context of experience gained in the JMB examination, as outlined above, our group chose to focus on the area of **Evaluation in History Education** in the belief that changes in the examination and assessment procedures would inevitably have a backwash effect on the teaching and learning of the subject as a whole. If examinations tested critical thinking and understanding, along with insights into the modes of investigation common to the historical discipline, the transformation of teaching and learning of the subject in the classroom would follow. Teachers would then automatically be provided with the space for experimentation and teaching for critical understanding regardless of the content that would inform any new curriculum revision. We felt that the adoption of such policies would provide a powerful lever for promoting a break with the practices of apartheid education. Three other reports were also produced which, together with our own, helped to stake out the territory for future policy debate.

A full account of this exercise is to be found in the recently published report of the HSRC Education Research Programme, **The Teaching of History in the RSA**.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, a number of remarks need to be made which might be helpful in understanding the climate in which the investigation was conducted. Firstly, the culture that grew up within the context of this group reflected a much greater degree of agreement on principles and objectives than had ever been experienced in the past, when many of the same people had met in the context of the annual JMB History examination meetings. A common concern for the state of the subject in schools was manifested by a broad commitment to the goals of the new History. Although there was no agreement on how to proceed with defining the **content** of the new curriculum, there was at least a common commitment to a critical, skill-based curriculum. Secondly, the issue of how to formulate guidelines for the selection of content, and the question of whether to follow a set of principles which emphasised a multi-cultural approach to the process of curriculum development, lay at the centre of much of the controversy. Finally, the research methodology of the committee, which at the outset stressed the need for a consensus report in keeping with the procedures developed by the original De Lange enquiry, were challenged and in the end rejected in favour of a much more modest attempt to lay out an eclectic set of recommendations from which to proceed. A full attempt to capture the research culture that informed the initiative is to be found elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> The principles for a new curriculum contained in the Evaluation Report were state as follows:

1. The new History curriculum would reflect trends in the discipline of History internationally.
2. It would be more democratic and more concerned with the History of ordinary men and women.
3. It would be oppositional, that is, sceptical of the establishment version of the past.
4. It would be analytical and critical, dealing with change, continuity and conflict, providing historical skills and enabling students to reflect on, evaluate and apply their knowledge.

A major word of criticism regarding the HSRC report! The key element emphasised by the limited intervention of the NECC, namely the question of **redress** in the area of History education, was largely neglected. That neglect was to be identified in the composition and representativeness of the Working Committee. This also led to the deadlock that emerged over the question of content revision. The addressing of the fundamental educational issues of the democratization of **curriculum development procedures** in History education was outside of the committee's brief, though we began to understand that clarity about the structures of democratic decision-making in curriculum development would be central to the operation of a new educational mode. This was something which was addressed in a much more comprehensive manner in the report of the Curriculum Group of the National Education Policy Investigation.

#### **HISTORY EDUCATION AS AN ASPECT OF THE BROADER DEBATE RELATING TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW SET OF EDUCATIONAL POLICIES FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY: NEPI AND THE HISTORY EDUCATION CONFERENCE INITIATIVE IN 1992**

The challenge for those traditionally opposed to National Party politics in the realm of education has been to move beyond the critique of apartheid to policy formulation that is appropriate to educational policy for a democratic society. The central initiative in this regard has been the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI), a project of the NECC. Here the issue of equality of provision, redress and the issue of democratic policy-making have been given a major emphasis.

Key recommendations of the NEPI Curriculum Research Group stress the fact that all recommendations for a future educational policy must take account of the current inequalities and the current crisis in the present system. The report stresses the fact that "the curriculum is not a neutral or technical account of what schools teach; it is a contextual and historical settlement which involves political and economic considerations as well as competing interests. The curriculum itself embodies the social relationships of its historical context". A revision of the curriculum in the area of



history education is then necessarily an activity that must take note of the need for redress in the areas of race, gender and class inequalities which are part of the legacy of apartheid society. Key guidelines for the establishment of appropriate decision-making curriculum procedures in that context include "the need to give expression to the commitment to principles of democracy". "Curriculum policies need to provide for the involvement of and support of teachers; without this, curriculum renewal is unlikely". The principles of equity need to be applied to resource distribution, but more problematically they also need to be reflected in such areas as the curriculum content selection. How are the commonality and the diversity of society to be reflected in the curriculum so as to satisfy all parties?

The report ends with the following statement: "The new curriculum in South Africa will be built on the legacy of the old, and there will be points of continuity as well as point of departure. There is no blueprint for the future, no ideal curriculum for all time and place. The future curriculum will be developed and changed, including its constitutional arrangements, its notions of rights and equity and its human resource development strategies. What (this) report sets out are possible frameworks for change and negotiation in curriculum policy".<sup>18</sup>

With specific regard to the field of history the report argues for the retention of the subject in a national curriculum on the following grounds:

- a) An alternative history curriculum could allow for the redress of past wrongs in the interpretation of History and could restore the History of the oppressed people as part of the common heritage. Rather than being an exercise in the avoidance of past conflicts and disagreements, this could be an important aspect of the construction of a new set of common values and identities.
- b) History teaches valuable skills such as the analysis and comparison of sources and the ability to conceive of different interpretations of the past. Thus it provides the basis for working with both commonality and diversity.

- c) The development of historical insights into the way things are and the way they have been in both South Africa and the rest of the world is an important dimension of general education and also offers a perspective on the changing world of work.<sup>19</sup>

These policy guidelines provide a framework within which to locate the work of the HSRC working committee on History education. The establishment of a democratic voice in the area of History curriculum development is central to the legitimacy of the whole exercise in the current context.

With that notion in mind the History Education Group took some steps to begin such a process of consultation at an informal level. Conferences were held at the Universities of Natal, Witwatersrand and Cape Town in February, March and May 1992 respectively. Over three hundred teachers and interested persons attended. These meetings drew together a variety of educationalists from urban and rural schools and from a range of education departments in a search for new directions in history education. Topics discussed included the issues of content selection (multi-culturalism vs core culture; Africanisation); skills and content; selection and progression; history vs integrated studies; the use of the idea of core and options; the provision of textbooks and materials; assessment, and the establishment of a national history teacher's association. The proceedings of these conferences will be made available to a wider audience during 1993 when they are published, and it is hoped that they will provide a platform for further research, debate and policy-formation.<sup>20</sup>

The challenges for the formulation of a history education policy for a new South Africa are considerable. Yet the considerable legacy of alternative History in schools means that the subject is in a stronger position than many others to meet the challenges of the future.

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