AOSIS

First-year History Education students' personal narratives of the history of South Africa

CrossMark
click for updates

Author:
Johan Wassermann[1] (ORCID)

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Humanities Education, Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Johan Wassermann,
johan.wassermann@up.ac.za

This article is based on a free writing exercise given to 31 first-year History Education students in which they were, asked to write 'The history of South Africa according to me'. Using narrative enquiry, the stories of the students, who all had History at school up to their final year, were analysed. What emerged was that South Africa as a political entity is focalised as a place where apartheid took place. Post-apartheid South Africa by contrast is narrated as a free and democratic place. It is focalised by the majority of students as a strong well-established country – a leading example to other nations. In line with this, the vast majority of students tended to limit their account of the history of South Africa to the period prior to the achievement of democracy in 1994. The personal narratives spoke about race being the dominant factor in their historical discourses.

Introduction

The genesis of this article lies in the many words uttered publically in the recent past about the imagined value and importance of school history in the South African context. In the process, it has been argued, on several occasions, by politicians (Phakathi 2015) and educationists (South African Democratic Teachers Union 2014) alike that South African learners do not know 'their history'. 'Their history' was taken to mean the history of South Africa or at the very least some unspecified encyclopaedic national version thereof. Such talk is not unique to South Africa and similar pronouncements have been made elsewhere in the world about the youth not knowing their national history (Wineburg 2001). Unsurprisingly, across the world school history has been seen as a means for the construction of a national identity (Barton 2009; Seixas 2007; VanSledright 2011).

In South Africa, however, this kind of thinking was taken a step further and the Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, had announced in 2015 that a Ministerial Task Team would investigate the possibility of making school history a compulsory subject up to Grade 12. Early this year, the Ministerial Task Team handed their report to Motshekga in which they recommended that school history becomes a compulsory subject up to Grade 12 (Ministerial Task Team 2018). In light of this announcement, this article will attempt to come to an understanding of the narratives on the history of South Africa students who had History at school level up to Grade 12. Their narratives should have some roots in the official version of the history of South Africa as found in Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for history. With reference to the above, it must be remembered that any curriculum has a strong political agenda (Ndlovu 2009) and that CAPS history is no exception. In proposing some answer to what first-year History Education students regard as the history of South Africa, it is envisaged that this article will contribute to the debate on young South Africans and History, and more specifically how their own personally constructed narratives spoke to that.

To propose a possible understanding to what first-year History Education students regard as the history of South Africa a narrative approach was used. Connelly and Clandinin (2000) argue that a narrative inquiry framework allows the inquirer to travel inward, outward, backward and forward while situated in place. The inward refers to internal conditions such as feelings, hopes, reactions and moral disposition. The outward looks at the existential conditions such as the environment. Backward and forward refer to temporality, the past, present and future. Narratives of the world that point simultaneously in these four ways are countless and are able to be carried by spoken or written language. Moreover, narratives are present in every age, in every place and in every society and they express our way of experiencing, acting, living, making meaning and thinking (Bal 1997). As such, it is a way of translating the knowing and experiencing into a telling. Consequently, narratives should not be seen as separate from real life, but as a way of forming

meaningful connections to life. In this article, the personal narratives of the participating students on 'The history of South Africa according to me' were analysed by means of narrative enquiry so as to understand what they narrate the history of South Africa to be.

In terms of a way forward, a succinct review of the literature will follow. Then, the research methodology used to analyse the personal narratives will be discussed. Next, the findings from the data analysis will be presented and discussed. Lastly, the concluding arguments will be presented.

Literature review

An emerging field of research in History Education relates to young people – this contested term can include amongst others, learners, students and adolescents – and their versions of national narratives. Groundbreaking in this regard has been the *London Review of Education* 15(2), July 2017, special feature which engaged with 'Negotiating the nation: Young people, national narratives and history education'. This follows in the wake of work performed in this regard across the world.

However, for the purpose of this article, two publications stand out because of their African contexts. Two Afrocentric studies were used to benchmark this article. The first is by Holmberg (2016; 2017) with the title: *Significant history and historical orientation – Ugandan students narrate their past*. In his research, Holmberg explored 219 narratives created by 73 Ugandan upper secondary students. The results showed that either prospective or retrospective approaches influenced student narratives. Furthermore, region of origin tended to inform the national narratives produced. Additionally, the narrative was informed by a meta-narrative of Africa with students identifying equally as Africans and Ugandans. Based on his research, Holmberg (2016) argued that researchers should handle the nation concept with care.

The second work is by Angier (2017). In her study, Angier reported on the knowledge and understanding of young South Africans of their national history. This was based on the narrative accounts of 27 university students who had History at school level. Two fundamental differences were reported by her – firstly, the emphasis assigned to periods and people, and secondly, agency in terms of who did and who was done to. These differences, Angier argues, point to the continued importance of racial identity as a factor in the formation of a national historical consciousness in post-apartheid South Africa. In the process, the South African past was used selectively, which served to highlight the importance of sociocultural factors in the development of young people's historical consciousness.

Research methodology

In this article, a qualitative approach rooted in the interpretivist paradigm was used to understand first-year personal students' narratives of 'The history of South Africa

according to me'. Thirty-one first-year History Education students took part in this study. To participate, they all needed to have done History at school up to Grade 12, which implies that they knew some South African history on which they could draw in a reflective manner. The student participants were predominantly African but also included a substantial number of minority students, slightly more women than men, and came from a diverse range of schooling contexts. Furthermore, it was assumed that the students, as prospective History teachers, had a vested interest in the subject. At the same time, the participants were willing to participate in the project. Although by no means homogeneous, they were bound by a number of important links – they were all first-year students, all have done History at school and all were planning to teach History in the future. Patton (1990) refers to the selection of a research population in this manner as criterion-based purposive sampling.

Data collection took place during the first week of university lectures. This was carried out so as to avoid the participants, who were fresh out of school, being tainted by their exposure to academic history. They were given 45 min to write, on a double-paged A4 sheet, their personal narratives of 'The history of South Africa according to me'. The topic purposefully suggested a point of view so as to elicit selective personalised narratives from the first-year students. The rationale for selecting this method was to allow the participants to divulge, in a historian-like manner, from their presentist position, their personal narratives in an uninhibited and unconstrained manner. In other words, a history from below. This was possible because reflective free writing lends itself to that and has the ability to yield rich and diverse data. Furthermore, reflective free writing allows freedom of expression and permits participants to qualify their views in an in-depth manner. The thinking was also to permit first-year History students the opportunity to think and reflect on their version of the history of South Africa before committing to a response. In so doing, it was hoped that rich, detailed, creative and expressive narratives would evolve. Furthermore, no marks were involved which further served to entice free writing.

In adopting the above method, it was hoped that the students would express their own meta-narratives of 'The history of South Africa according to me' replete with the events, characters, happenings and settings that they wanted to foreground. The aim was not to see how much or how little the students knew or to measure their narrative against existing texts or curricula but to understand what they collectively viewed the history of South African to be. This is what is called focalisation – the anchoring of the narratives by means of foci, views, thoughts, reflections and knowledge. In other words, the historical orientation of what the students deemed important enough to include in their narratives (Jahn 2005). Narratives, such as the one written by the students, will always have certain views which are based on the choices made on what to include. This will, in turn, lead to the narratives differing when referring to the

same events. Such multiple focalisations are what I ended up working with.

Working with the different narratives meant engaging with 31 different mostly surprisingly systematic, coherent but sometimes naive texts that were generally 1.5 A4 pages in length. These were read, analysed and evaluated line-by-line, while at the same time questions were asked. The rationale behind this approach was to keep the focus on the various narratives on 'The history of South Africa according to me' and its meaning at both a surface and a deeper level. In the words of Tambling (1991:3), 'To investigate narratives means investigating the everyday beliefs that operate through a culture'. However, as the researcher who read the narratives, I also became an active participant in constructing it, because receiving the story depends on how we construct it (Abbott 2005).
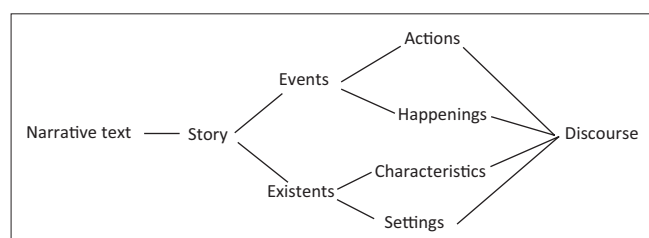
The analysis of the narratives took place by means of Chatman's (1978) components of a narrative (see Figure 1). Chatman (1978) conceptualises the necessary components of a narrative as twofold:

- The first is the story (histoire) or the 'what' and includes the chain of events that took place. The chain of events includes (actions and happenings) as well as what is called the existents (characters and settings).
- The second is the discourse (discourse), in other words, the expression or the means by which the content is communicated. The discourse is therefore the 'how'.

To Chatman, the story is 'the content of the narrative expression, while discourse is the form of that expression' (Chatman 1978:23).

The constituent parts of narrative are represented in the model in Figure 1. Chatman's model was used because it had the necessary components of a narrative that could be used in understanding the versions of the history of South Africa as produced by the students.

The extemporaneous writing tasks on 'The history of South Africa according to me' were collected and typed up without editing. The approach followed during the analysis was to first read the 31 narratives in terms of what was said (the story in terms of events and existents) and then at how these stories were told – in other words, the discourse around the topic. The first level of analysis focused on coding the stories using Chatman's components of narrative – characters,

Source: Chatman 1978

FIGURE 1: The necessary components of a narrative.

settings (existents) and actions and happenings (events) as a guide. This meant reading and rereading the 31 narratives while creating codes related to events (actions and happenings) and existents (characters and settings). These were then further grouped by collapsing the very similar, such as, for example jail and prison, school and high school and Bantustan and homeland. Secondly, further themes were created by grouping, for example political leaders as characters together. The various themes created, for example race or ethnicity, historical individuals and positions of authority in the case of historical characters, were then analysed for what they would reveal about focalisation. This analytical engagement was then used to arrive at the discourses on 'The history of South Africa according to me' emanating from the students personal narrative texts. At a second level of analysis, the discourses were brought into conversation with the existing literature.

Analysis and discussion
Historical characters

The analysis of the student narratives revealed that, with reference to existents (Chatman 1978), 648 historical characters were identified from the 31 'The history of South Africa according to me' texts (see Table 1 for a list of the characters identified).

Unsurprisingly, considering South African history, the historical characters found in the personal narratives of the students were dominated by race and ethnicity. Especially foregrounded was black people (76) white people (52) binary. Race in this regard was used to refer to characteristics such as gender (e.g. white men), occupation (e.g. black labourers) and skin colour (e.g. white people and black people). These references did not keep to neat black or white racial boundaries with, for example 'gender' and the collective term 'people' used for both racial categories. Considering that apartheid era racial designations (black people, white people, Indian people, mixed race people) are currently still in use, Indian people (13) and mixed race people (7) as labels for historical characters, were completely dwarfed by references to black and white historical ones. Related to the racial binary of identifying historical characters as black people or white people were those identified by ethnicity such as, for example British (31), Dutch (13), Afrikaners (12) and Africans (11). Characterisation that transcended the narrow categories of race and ethnicity, such as nation (10) and South Africans (17), were, however, overshadowed by race. Furthermore, in the personal narratives, faceless historical characters not identifiable by race also came to the fore. This was carried out by the foregrounding of the broad designation of people (e.g. other, lots, communities) (59) as historical characters. All considered the most numerous historical characters in the narratives on South African history were collectives of racial and ethnic ones.

On the opposite end of the scale, 93 individual historical characters were identified by name. Completely dominant

TABLE 1: Historical characters and times referred to.

Historical characters	Times referred to
Race or ethnicity	
Black people (e.g. people, natives, African, labourer, non-white people)	76
White people (e.g. race, people, men, Europeans, South Africans)	52
British (e.g. settlers, people, troops, Englishmen)	31
Groups (e.g. race, ethnic, diverse, San, Pedi, Zulu)	22
South Africans (e.g. people, locals)	17
Dutch (e.g. settlers, seamen)	13
Indian people (e.g. nation, man, labourers, Gandhi people)	13
Afrikaners (e.g. Boers, people)	12
Africans (e.g. people, men, tribes)	11
Races	10
Nation (e.g. rainbow nation)	10
Mixed race people	7
Total	274
Historical individuals	
Mandela	34
De Klerk	7
Biko	5
Verwoerd	4
Mbeki, Thabo	3
Sisulu, Walter	3
Malan	3
Van Riebeeck	3
Slovo	2
Botha, Louis	2
Ghandi	2
Smuts	2
Zuma	2
Shaka	2
Bhambatha	2
Tambo, Buthelezi, Tutu, Moosa, Ngoyi, Joseph, Peterson, Hani, Hertzog, Strijdom, Kruger Paul, Botha PW, Rhodes, Nandi, Nkrumah, Kenyatta, Boigny (mentioned once each)	17
Total	96
Positions of authority	
Leaders (e.g. young, political, corrupt, good)	21
Government (e.g. black people, SA, GNU, white people, apartheid, NP)	19
President (e.g. black people, ANC, NP)	11
Prime Ministers (e.g. Afrikaner PM)	3
King	3
Chief	3
Rulers, Queen, God (mentioned once each)	3
Total	63
Occupation	
Workers (e.g. maid, servant, labourer, garden boy, sailors)	9
Professionals (e.g. nurse, teacher, missionaries, police)	7
Business people (e.g. mine owner, merchant)	2
Total	18
Characters by gender and age	
Men (e.g. great, guys, his, him, father, forefathers)	31
Young people (e.g. children, youth, students)	18
Women (e.g. she, her, mother)	11
Other (e.g. old people, granny, elders)	3
Total	63
Organisations	
Parties (e.g. political, ruling, banned, little)	22
ANC (e.g. members, youth league, armed wing)	18
Communist Party	2
National Party	2
IFP	1

Table 1 continues →

TABLE 1 (Continues...): Historical characters and times referred to.

Historical characters	Times referred to
ICU	1
Indian National Congress	1
United Nations	1
Total	48
Other	
People (e.g. other, lots, communities, innocent)	59
Institution (e.g. government, unions, organisations)	4
Activist	3
Freedom fighter	3
Prisoners	2
Citizen	2
Other (fittest, HIV-positive people, siblings, sponsors, victims, killers, perpetrators, immigrants, splinter group, classes, uncivilised, tsotsi, short people, tourists, slave, slave owner (mentioned once each)	16
Total	89

ANC, African National Congress; NP, National Party; SA, South Africa; GNU, Government of National Unity; IFP, Inkatha Freedom Party; ICU, industrial and commercial workers; HIV, human immunodeficiency virus.

was Nelson Mandela with 34 references. This meant that, statistically speaking, each student referred to him at least once in their personal narratives. Mandela thus stood head and shoulders above all other individual historical characters. Other characters who received prominences as protagonists or antagonists were 'big men' such as FW de Klerk (7), Steve Biko (5) and HF Verwoerd (4). The remaining 28 individual historical characters were but bit players in 'The history of South Africa according to me' narratives. What was striking though was that contemporary male historical characters dominated as only four women were identified by the 31 participating students. Thinking about men as dominant historical characters was further reinforced by 31 references to 'men' (e.g. great, guys, his, him, father and forefathers) and only 11 to women (e.g. she, her and mother). Furthermore, every single historical character mentioned by name can be, in one way or another, identified as a politician. This is supported by the fact that of the 44 references made to 'positions of authority' all was political in nature. Unsurprisingly, considering the suggested view of the free writing piece, only three non-South Africans, all African politicians, were mentioned as historical characters. A plethora of other individual historical fringe figures that could either be, for example identified by occupation (e.g. police and nurse) or actions (e.g. activist and tsotsi) were also referred to. These scattergun-like references are the closest the narratives ventured to linking historical characters to social and economic rather than only political history.

Considering the dominance of historical characters related to politics, it was not surprising that organisations identified as historical characters were dominated by politically orientated ones. In what was a discernible trend amongst the 31 narratives the collective unidentified, namely 'parties' (22) and 'government' (19), garnered the most references. This was closely followed by the ruling African National Congress (ANC) with 18. Other parties, including the National Party (NP), were merely referred to in passing.

Historical settings

In what historical settings, the second existent component of Chatman's narrative components, then did the historical chapters, as identified above, function? Based on an analysis of the 31 first-year History Education student narratives, 390 historical settings were identified (see Table 2).

Unsurprisingly, considering the purposefully suggested point of view, the students had to work with their personalised narratives foregrounded South Africa as the geopolitical setting for historical actions and happenings (162). Closely related to the direct references to South Africa were the slightly more oblique references to 'country' (50) as a historical setting. Without fail the use of 'country' were related to the geopolitical setting of South Africa. Examples in this regard ranged from the personal 'my country' to the political 'the apartheid country'.

From the national, the narratives made a quantum leap to the personal, and specifically to public amenities such as hospitals, schools, parks, jails, toilets and streets as historical settings (49). These very personal settings, which invariably touch the private in a public manner, were for the most part related to the apartheid and post-apartheid eras and issues of privilege, racism and access. Striking was the fact that jails (12) were the most prominent public amenity mentioned as a historical setting. This, in all probability, not only spoke to the imprisonment of prominent political activists but also to that of ordinary black people suffering under the plethora of apartheid era laws. Underpinning the personal public were references to places of work (e.g. sugarcane plantations) as historical settings.

Related to the local were the abundant references to places of residence (e.g. shack, houses, urban areas and farmsteads) (28). Places of residence are the most intimate and personal and private of spaces. Here, individuals or families can feel safe and secure. As with public amnesties, residences as historical settings were very strongly linked to the apartheid and post-apartheid eras. The historical settings as gleaned from narratives then swung from the personal public and personal private to provinces (11) and towns and cities as local geopolitical settings (21). It is noteworthy that

TABLE 2: Historical settings and times referred to.

Historical settings	Times referred to
South Africa or versions thereof	162
Country (meaning South Africa) or versions thereof	50
Public amenities (e.g. hospitals, schools, parks, jails, toilets)	49
Places of residence (e.g. shack, houses, urban areas, farmstead)	28
South African cities and towns	21
References to Africa (countries or regions)	15
References to Europe (countries or regions)	15
The world or versions thereof	13
Land or versions thereof	12
South African provinces	11
Other (workplaces, exile, north, south, places, trade routes, sugarcane plantations)	14
Total	**390**

Sharpeville, the setting of the 21 March 1960 protests against pass laws and subsequent police shootings, was by far the most prominent town (7). From the local, the students moved to continental Africa (15) and Europe (15) and the world (11) as settings for South African history.

Historical happenings and actions

Having gained an understanding of the historical characters and their settings, it was necessary to turn to what Chatman (1978) termed events. Events, as explained above, consist of two components: happenings (actual historical events in historical settings) and actions (people's reactions to the actual historical events). The happenings and actions, as per the personal narratives of the students on 'The history of South Africa according to me', are outlined in Figure 2. The contents of Figure 2 came about by collapsing the 31 personal narratives into a single collective meta-personal narrative. In the process, not all references to happenings and actions were used and selective choices were made on how to present a comprehensive and representative picture of 'The history of South Africa according to me'.

The happenings and actions, as revealed by the analysis of the narratives, were grouped into five broad historical eras: before the arrival of white settlers under Jan van Riebeeck, the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck up to the end of the South African War (1902), the end of the South African War up to the start of apartheid (1948), the apartheid era (1948–1994) and the post-apartheid era (1994 to present). The outlined periodisation unfolded quite naturally from the personal narratives. This speaks to an innate-like sense of periodisation the students had of the history of South Africa that is in all probability rooted in what they studied in school history. What was also clear at the outset was that the knowledge on happenings and actions in South African was not encyclopaedic in nature. It was instead partial to certain topics in certain eras. The proportions of the different eras as outlined in Figure 2 bear testimony to that.

In terms of happenings, the era before the arrival of white settlers almost went by unmentioned. The 250 years that followed (1652–1902) are punctuated by the arrival of white settlers and their dominant cultural and economic ways which spread systematically into the interior of South Africa. This caused conflict between white people and black people. In the process, local labourers were exploited and augmented by slavery and indenture. At the same time, natural resources such as land and mineral wealth were claimed and squabbled over by white people. This process of colonisation left Africans marginalised and only Shaka are portrayed as a black historical character with historical agency. The era that follows (1902–1948) is treated even more miserly in the personal narratives on 'The history of South Africa according to me'. However, the portrayal of the era is very revealing as it speaks about constitutional change in favour of white people, the rule of white men and resistance to such rule by

FIGURE 2: Historical happenings and actions.

black people. This served to set the scene for the apartheid era that followed.

Quantitatively speaking the personal narratives spiked, as can be gleaned from Figure 2, for the apartheid era (1948–1994). Collectively, the personal narratives gave a general blow by blow account of the happenings under apartheid starting with white dominance under Afrikaners which resulted in the legal institution of apartheid. This resulted in a systematic increase in the oppression of black people while simultaneously white people's privileges were enhanced and legally enshrined. The result was a cruel and oppressive system that dehumanised and marginalised black people. What followed were various kinds of resistance to apartheid and white supremacy, both non-violent and violent, which resulted in even harsher oppression. Systematically, black people moved from being victims to exhibiting increasingly more and more agency. In the end, because of internal and international pressure, white rule through apartheid was negotiated away and freedom arrived under Mandela – the messianic figure of the liberation process. He was succeeded by other black leaders as South Africa, still facing certain challenges, moved into the post-apartheid era (1994 to present), that are characterised by freedom, human rights, democracy and an Afrocentric turn.

This potted version of happenings (Figure 2) as drawn from the personal narratives, was underpinned by clearly discernible actions. These actions took on a clear black–white binary. Over a period of roughly 350 years (1652 to present), the actions of most white people were to squabble with black people and each other, dispose black people of land and culture, oppress them legally and physically, exploit their labour and destroy their cultural, structures and families. This left deep emotional scars. However, black people systematically moved beyond victimhood and fought back. This struggle gained momentum and over time evolved into a violent one that brought about a negotiated freedom, black rule and democracy.

Historical discourses

Based on the existents (characters and settings) and events (actions and happenings) as discussed above, what historical discourses emerged from the analysed narrative texts (Chatman 1978:23)?

At the outset, it became evident that being asked to write 'The history of South Africa according to me' in a free writing manner, proved to be liberating as it allowed for a very personal discourse to emerge. This is borne out by the excessive use of the pronouns 'me', 'my' or 'myself' or 'I' and 'us' or 'we' in the personal narratives. On no less than 81 occasions, the aforementioned pronouns were used to personalise historical settings, characters, happenings and actions to which many students felt they belonged. Examples include – 'according to me', 'my grandmother

told me', 'I find it hard to think …', 'us as black people' and 'we suffered under apartheid'. Juxtaposed to the personal was the use of 'they', 'their' or, 'them' as a form of othering on no less than 94 times across the 31 personal narratives. Such pronouns were used to exclude historical settings, characters, happenings and actions from truly belonging to 'The history of South Africa according to me'. Of the many examples that exist in this regard, the following will serve as illustration: 'to them [*white people*] apartheid was an advantage', 'they [*white people*] grabbed the natural resources of the country': and 'Their [*white people's*] culture were seen as superior'. Racial identities were thus paramount in the construction of the personal narratives.

A very personal discourse of 'The history of South Africa according to me' could also be distinguished in the foregrounding of the faceless collective. Across the 31 personal narratives, 'people', 'us', 'blacks' and 'whites' appear as nameless characters in public and private settings. Amongst the faceless and nameless masses hides the personal for the students, for as ordinary historical characters in the present, they have roots, through their families and communities, to the past. This narration spoke to a history from below with the students giving a historical space to the voiceless and faceless. This also spoke to a very personal discourse that behind the big men were ordinary people whose histories played out in local public spaces and in private homes. Such a personal discourse free of specifics did not mean that the students did not know History but signalled that they also knew it differently on a family and societal level outside of national history and the official versions found in CAPS history.

However, considering that the setting was pre-given the narratives also focalised very strongly on South Africa. Unlike the Ugandan students who partook in Holmberg's (2016; 2017) study, which identified equally as Ugandans and Africans, the students in this study embraced a certain exclusive South Africanism. South Africa is represented as a geopolitical entity only linked to the rest of the continent by a handful of reference to colonising or decolonising events. Greater links were seen between South African history and parts of Europe as the origin of the 'whites' found in the country. In turn, this served to promote a discourse that South Africa as a place where apartheid, discrimination and oppression were perpetrated.

Considering the above a national history discourse played itself out in terms of a racialised black- or white-polarised representation of South African history. In this, clear roles were generally assigned, with white people for the most part being the oppressors and black people the oppressed. The sheer volume of references to black and white characters bears testimony to this. This is in line with what Angier (2017) has found with a similar research sample what she referred to as who did and who was done to. In this study, the focalisation on a black or white binary in terms of selective happenings

and actions was ballooned by references to the apartheid era (1948–1994), and its characters, settings, happenings and actions as an era of decline. At the same time, other eras were strongly downplayed. However, post-apartheid South Africa is represented as a place of progress, freedom and a democratic place unlike its troubled past of slavery, colonialism and apartheid. South Africa is focalised by the majority of students as a strong well-established country. The very dominant racial focalisation spilled over into the historical characters that were foregrounded with Mandela towering above all others in almost the same messianic way that he is portrayed in school History textbooks (Van Niekerk 2013). In all of this, 'big men' dominated and women appeared as mere fringe figures.

Reasons for the foregrounding of the apartheid era can in all probability be attributed to the traumatic nature of the period, the fact that it is within living memory of the students and also a key focus area in CAPS history for Grades 11 and 12 which they studied a couple of years before. In fact, as can be gleaned from the proportions in Figure 2, it can be argued that, according to the narratives, South Africa, outside of the apartheid era, has little history.

But dominant across the 31 narratives is the race. Historical characters, for example were strongly racially focalised as black people or white people. Furthermore, at times these broad descriptions were further subdivided with 'white people', for example becoming the 'British', 'English', 'Europeans', 'Dutch' and 'Afrikaners'. The discourse on race and South African history did, however, also contain certain silences. Observable in this regard was the marginalisation of mixed race people and Indian people beyond being seen as part of the black people collective. The latter, for example tended to appear as either 'Ghandi people' or indentured labourers working on sugarcane fields.

Ideas of race, ethnicity and the other in history are clearly deeply entrenched amongst young South Africans living in a post-apartheid political dispensation and strongly coloured their personal historical narratives. The focalisation of race again served to foreground the importance of racial identity in the constructions of History. In brief, in a liberal historiographical tradition, race and racism were focalised as what drives South African history as a political discourse. In the process, class as a historical factor was almost completely silenced.

Conclusion

In South Africa, narrative inquiry has, according to Nuttall and Michael (2000), an important position:

> Particularly since the political transition of 1994, personal disclosure has become part of a revisionary impulse, part of the pluralizing project of democracy itself. The individual, in this context, emerges as a key, newly legitimized concept … talking about their own lives, confessing, and constructing personal narratives … South Africans translate their selves, their communities, into stories. (p. 298)

In this article, first-year History Education students told their personal narratives of the history of South Africa. In the process, the personal and the national were deeply intertwined with race being the omnipresent glue keeping its characters, settings, happening and events together in a range of discourses. These discourses seemingly revealed a calcified historical culture and tradition that portrayed a black people or white people racial binary as a seemingly historical permanency.

Acknowledgements
Competing interests

References

Abbott, H.P., 2002, *The Cambridge introduction to narrative*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Angier, K., 2017, 'In search of historical consciousness: An investigation into young South Africans' knowledge and understanding of "their" national histories', *London Review of Education* 15(2), pp. 155–172. https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE.15.2.03

Bal, M., 1997, *Introduction to the theory of narrative*, 2nd edn., University of Toronto Press, Toronto.

Barton, K.C., 2009, 'The denial of desire', in L. Symcox & A. Wilschut (eds.), *National history standards: The problem with the canon and the future of teaching history*, pp. 265–280, Information Age Publishers, Charlotte, NC.

Chatman, S., 1978, *Story and discourse structure in fiction and film*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

Connelly, F.M. & Clandinin, D.J., 2000, 'Narrative inquiry', in J.P. Keeves & G. Lakomski (eds.), *Issues in educational research*, pp. 215–225, Pergamon, Oxford.

Holmberg, U., 2016, *Significant history and historical orientation: Ugandan students narrate their historical pasts*, Karlstad University Press Open Access, Karlstad.

Holmberg, U., 2017, '"I was born in the reign …": Historical orientation in Ugandan students' national narratives', *London Review of Education* 15(2), pp. 212–226. https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE.15.2.06

Jahn, M., 2005, *Narratology: A guide to the theory of narrative*, viewed 28 May 2005, from http://www.uni-koeln.de/-ame02/pppn.htm

London Review of Education, 2017, 'Special feature which engaged with "Negotiating the nation: Young people, national narratives and history education"', *London Review of Education* 15(2), pp. 1–3.

Ministerial Task Team, 2018, *Report of the ministerial task team*, Department of Basic Education, Pretoria.

Ndlovu, M., 2009, 'History curriculum, nation-building and the promotion of common values in Africa: A comparative analysis of Zimbabwe and South Africa', *Yesterday & Today* 4, pp. 67–76.

Nuttall, S. & Michael, C.A., 2000, *Sense of culture: South African culture studies*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town.

Patton, M.Q., 1990, *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*, Sage, Newbury Park, California.

Phakathi, B., 2015, 'Department working on making history compulsory in school', *Business Day*, 06 May.

Seixas, P., 2009, 'National history and beyond', *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 41 (Special issue 'National history and beyond' part one)), pp. 719–722.

South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), 2014, *The importance of teaching history as a compulsory subject*, SADTU, Johannesburg.

Tambling, J., 1991, *Narrative and ideology*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes.

Van Niekerk, A.L., 2013, 'The representation of Nelson Mandela in selected grade 12 history textbooks', MEd, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

VanSledright, B., 2011, *The challenge of rethinking history education: On practices, theories and policy*, Routledge, New York.

Wineburg, S., 2001, *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts: Charting the future of teaching the past* Temple University Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.