

WHERE HAVE ALL THE LEARNERS GONE? (A SMALL SCALE STUDY TO DETERMINE REASONS FOR THE DECLINE IN NUMBERS OF LEARNERS TAKING HISTORY IN THE FET PHASE)

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Few academic subjects evoke as much passion as history; to make a study of the future of history in schools, is therefore not a new debate topic at all. The aspect of the importance of history has been debated more than once and it seems as if no new arguments are coming to the forth; especially by teachers, officials from the Department of Education, and historians. Some educators of History claim to have an answer, but possible solutions are constantly absent.¹ In this paper the views of the learners themselves will be heard – many of which correspond with those uttered by historians, teachers and officials over the past decades, but some different. Whatever the case may be, it is definitely worth listening to those who could become the historians and history teachers of the future, namely the learners themselves.

Concern about the declining numbers of learners taking History as a subject in the secondary (FET) and tertiary (HET) educational phases is not a new phenomenon and certainly not restricted to South Africa. It is this decline which has resulted in the formal establishment of the South African Society for History Teaching (SASHT) in 1986. Problems experienced in the field of History being offered and promoted at schools are also not new. Tensions between political parties during the period 1918-1948 resulted in History being declared non-committal.²

1 E van Eeden, A 21st century perspective – value and way forward of History – a motivational discourse. Book of abstracts. FET History workshop: empowering the History teacher. North-West University, Vanderbijlpark, p. 7, 2006.

2 E van Eeden, A 21st century perspective..., p. 9, 2006.

The widespread perceived notion about history as a school and university subject is one of merely memorising facts without application of those facts to other situations. This fact is echoed by Wilson³ in research on history instruction which includes, among others that students generally find traditional teaching dry and largely senseless, resulting in “little intellectual engagement, a dominance of teachers and textbooks, and minimal problem-solving or critical thinking”. Research done by Wineburg⁴ showed that historical thinking was not a natural process and that it would not arise automatically from normal cognitive development.

Curriculum revision began immediately after the 1994 election. In the immediate aftermath of the election, syllabi were ‘cleansed’ of their most offensive racist language and purged of their most controversial and outdated content.⁵ The virtual disappearance of history teaching from schools in the immediate aftermath of the 1994 election, combined with an organized history profession and a Minister of Education sympathetic to this constituency and nation-building concerns, led to a movement to reinsert history more strongly into the curriculum. Both the Report of the History/Archaeological Panel,⁶ presented to the Minister in early 2000, and the Report of the Review Committee on C2005⁷ emphasized the importance of history having its own space in the curriculum. Although there was not much resistance to the environment lobby, there was to the history lobby. This resistance came from a constructivist perspective expressed in the form of an opposition to content, as well as from the Christian right.

The first controversy in the history curriculum debates was over whether there should be a space for history at all. History, it was argued, should not have a separate status, especially in the junior years; this view emphasized boundless concepts of knowledge that ought to be expressed in the integrated curricula.

3 SM Wilson, “Research on history teaching”, in V Richardson, (ed). *Handbook of research on teaching*, pp. 527-544. Washington DC. American Research Association, p. 530, 2001.

4 S Wineburg, *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts: charting the future of teaching the past*. Philadelphia: temple University press, 2001.

5 JD Jansen, “The school curriculum since Apartheid: intersections of politics and policy in the South African transition”. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 31(1), pp. 57-67, 1999a.

6 DoE, Report of the History/Archeological Panel to the Minister of Education (Pretoria:DoE).<http://education.pwv.gov.za/content/documents/304.pdf> (visited 3 Dec.2003), 2000.

7 L Chisholm, “The making of South Africa’s National Curriculum Statement”. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37(2), pp. 193-208, 2005.

The second controversy was over content. History as a separate learning area was taboo for the original framers of C2005 and for some departmental officials, because it was seen as involving content. Such a response is testimony to the deep aversion to the nature of the history taught under apartheid. History teaching was symbolic of apartheid. Reinstating history was, and is, for these critics, like reinstating apartheid. History, therefore, was seen as having to be negated by integration. Authoritarian pedagogies typical of many schools under apartheid were also seen to have their home in History as taught in schools.⁸ Finding a place for History in the curriculum was resolved in having two relatively autonomous and strategically integrated sections, history and geography, within one learning area, namely. Social Sciences. Content had to be taught through the development of skills, knowledge and understanding.

The “weight” of History as subject has decreased and the content stripped of all folk history (volksgeskiedenis).⁹ Kok¹⁰ however argues that the present syllabus, with ‘two histories in one,’ could be a dividing factor but one advantage of the ‘new’ History is there are now more and more different perspectives than in the past on the table and that can enhance a better understanding of the different perspectives.

Nation building

Political discourse in post-apartheid South Africa has set education on the course of nation building. As South Africa addresses the task of transforming a divided and profoundly unequal educational system, nation building is proposed by some as a strategy for creating unity from diversity.¹¹ As part of addressing this problem, Higgs argues that education should primarily be concerned with an individual person’s self-empowerment as a human being. This will mean that education will not be concerned primarily with the acquisition of a subject competence, or of skills for professional and vocational preparedness in the interests of nation building. But rather, education will be concerned

8 L Chisholm, “The making of South Africa’s National Curriculum Statement”, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37(2), p.199, 2005.

9 M Pretorius, “Volksgeskiedenis: verwerp Kurrikulum 2005!”, *Afrikaner*, 19 January, 7, 2006.

10 M Kok, “Een land, twee geskiedenis en nuwe perspektiewe”, *Rapport*, 5 February, 2006: 15, 2006.

11 P Higgs, “Nation Building: A dilemma for education”, *Journal of education and Training*, November 1998, 19(2), p. 41, 1998.

with, what I call, a competence for life, which reveals itself in the development of resourceful human beings who creatively strive for a more humane social order in their commitment to a common good. Education is consequently an activity directed at self-empowerment, whereby persons are equipped for the task of living meaningfully, and guided in their aims and actions by their different experiences of *human agency*. By 'human agency', I mean, that fundamental orientation that we adopt in relation to our inter-subjective engagement with our world.

H G Wells¹² in reflecting on the course of human history commented:

"Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe".

Value of History teaching

Arthur and Davison¹³ emphasises the importance and value of History as a school subject in order for learners to become socially literate. The traditional subjects of the school curriculum focus almost entirely on cognate aspects of teaching and learning, but the knowledge and learning processes that they impart can have a value in directing activity towards desired social ends. For example, History is, above all else, about people and has an important and unique contribution to make to social education. In the primary school History develops certain skills which can be said to be key aspects of social literacy: the ability to reflect on evidence and draw conclusions: the ability to consider various interpretations of the same event, developing a respect for evidence. History also develops attitudes which a social being needs: tolerance of various viewpoints, a critical approach to evidence, and respect for the value of reasoned arguments. The study of the past is increasingly set in a cultural and moral context, looking at law-making, abuse of power, introducing persecution and religious conflict, as well as ideas such as cultural interdependence, diversity of beliefs and philanthropy.

Govender¹⁴ argues that history puts the present into perspective and

12 P Higgs, "Nation Building: A dilemma for education", *Journal of Education and Training*, November 1998, 19(2), p. 48.

13 J Arthur & J Davison, Social literacy and citizenship education in the school curriculum", *The Curriculum Journal*, II No. I Spring 2000, p. 9.

14 P Govender, The importance of history: it's also your story, *The Star*, 23 June 2003; *S.A. Media*, p. 1, 2003.

shapes the future and that the subject lends itself to critical thinking. Furthermore, according to Govender, history teachers themselves are inadequately equipped, especially due to curriculum changes and many do not have the extensive knowledge needed to teach the subject and come up with half-baked ideas that bore learners. History teachers also need to be good story-tellers and not many people possess over that gift. Potenza as quoted by Govender¹⁵ supports this view but also motivates that history could make an immense contribution to society and ‘can do a lot for nation-building.’ There seems, however, to be a different view also. Wood¹⁶ reports that educationists claim the new curriculum to be a fundamental attempt to revitalise it in line with new developments in the 21st century and that the new content is being taught and tried out with a variety of creative skills and approaches (the buzz word being outcomes). These outcomes give teachers more scope for stimulating assignments using skills of judgement, comparison, empathy, synthesis and much more – all part of the real challenge of the subject. More important, no longer empty vessels, learners are expected to engage actively, with their own personal views and backgrounds.

At Glenwood High School, Durban, various projects are offered to promote History as a subject; history tours, history field trips, Young Historians History Conference and an annual inter-school history quiz. These projects are all initiated by their aim, which captures the value of history teaching, that “it is essential that each learner who leaves school leave with some historical knowledge, particularly on understanding of their present situation in relation to their heritage. Moreover, each school leaver should take with them a working grasp of several key skills gained in History: detecting bias, developing empathy, presenting coherent arguments, understanding logic and other reading and writing skills; not only because the learning aspect in History is important, but learners must also enjoy themselves”¹⁷.

International trends regarding the studying of History

A few examples of the general trend regarding the situation of history as a school subject, are discussed here.

15 P Govender, “The importance of history...”, *The Star*, 23 June 2003; *S.A. Media*, p. 1.

16 K Wood, School history isn't what it used to be, *Saturday Star*, 18 September 2004, p.15.

17 Anon. www.glenwoodhighschool.co.za/academic/history.

In 2004, professor A Wessels¹⁸ pleaded that history should become a compulsory subject at schools; not only so that learners should be equipped to account for the past but in order for them to be better prepared for life. History, he said, does not necessarily give solutions to problems but, a person who has mastered history, knows how to identify and analyse a problem. To ensure the future of the past of all the people in South Africa, history should be studied more; if you do not know your history, you are suffering from amnesia. You do not know who you are, where you are, where you come from or where you are going. He is supported by Greyling¹⁹ who supports history as a means of nation-building and surviving as a nation. The concern about declining numbers of learners taking history as a school subject is not restricted to South Africa. An event in 2006 in Southampton saw thousands of people writing a blog of a normal Tuesday as part of the 'History Matters' campaign. This event led to a vital question being asked by Richard Harris,²⁰ namely "how have things got to the stage where we need a campaign such as "History Matters?" He answers his own question by pointing out that it is crucially important that learners have a very clear sense of why they are studying a topic if they want to connect with the subject. The arguments that history has a social purpose and so forth are highly abstract to learners and seem to have no immediacy to them. The 'skills' argument can apply equally to other subjects in terms of employability. In Scotland a handful of schools have dropped history from the curriculum entirely in favour of subjects that are more 'relevant'. For some, this means that we have to justify the place of the subject due to its 'relevance' and if history is not relevant, then we need to alter the history curriculum to make it more 'relevant'. This term seems to have overtones of utility and presentism. It suggests a curriculum where topics are taught that are 'useful' either in terms of employability or it helps to make sense of current affairs.

..."Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the introduction of the subject of history in high schools has gone through many ups and downs; in 1995, a new curriculum was introduced and history has since become a Senior I compulsory subject, although, due to limited teaching time, the

18 A Wessels, *Volksblad*, 17 April 2004, p. 4.

19 E Greyling, "Bring geskiedenis terug as skoolvak", *Beeld*, 21 October 2004, p. 16.

20 A Harris & A Rea, "Making History meaningful", The South African History Association Conference, 2006.

content has to be limited to modern and contemporary history of China.²¹

In neighbouring Southern African countries the same trend of declining numbers of history learners are being experienced. In Swaziland, for example it is not uncommon to find that in some schools the subject does not even feature as one of the subjects on offer. Of the 14000 students who sat for the year 12 public examination in 2006, only 4200 opted for history.²²

Hope for the future

Hope for the future of history as a school subject, has varied between optimism and pessimism over the recent few years. Prof P Kapp²³ announced in 2002 that he has hope for the future of History as a school subject after the growth in the number of learners participating in the History Olympiad. The increase was especially among learners with an African language as home language, which can be explained as support for the Olympiad was marketed strongly in township schools. This bright future which was envisaged for History as a school subject, did not last long. The last History Olympiad took place in 2003 and a 'bosberaad' was held at the Vaal Triangle campus of the North-West University, with the topic "What went wrong with the previous Olympiad? A challenge for the future". It is not the aim of this paper to discuss the reasons for the fact that the last Olympiad took place in 2003; but to express the hope for the possible revival of the History Olympiad as has been mentioned by the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns.²⁴ Racism can be minimised or even eliminated through education. Without knowledge of the other groups' history, the attitudes, beliefs and prejudices that have been inherited and passed down from one generation to another, cannot be eradicated. In order to promote inter- group relationships which could only be to the benefit of the South African nation as a whole, the serious decline in the numbers of learners taking History as a school subject in the FET phase, will have to be addressed.

21 C Qingjun, "Reform of history teaching in high schools in the new era", <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?>, p. 8, 2007.

22 ZM Mazibuko, "Developments in History teaching at secondary school level in Swaziland: Lessons from classroom research" (Conference paper), SASHT Conference Durban, 2007, p. 3.

23 P Kapp, *Beeld*, Media 24. Johannesburg, 2002.

24 Die Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns <http://akademie.org.za>, ca., 2005.

Empirical study

(i)	We want to know what happened in the "old" times.	14
(ii)	One needs it for specific careers.	3
(iii)	If you know what happened in the past, you will understand the present and current events better.	26
(iv)	We must learn about our history	11
(v)	Just because 'sommer'	2
(vi)	Because the children of today know nothing about history	3
(vii)	It is very interesting	6

In order to find possible reasons for the decline in the number of learners taking History as a subject at FET level and also to find possible solutions for the problem, a small scale study was undertaken in the Vereeniging District, Gauteng. The research was done among grade nine learners in so-called ex Model-C Schools. The reason for selecting these specific schools is because in the whole district only two of these ex Model C Schools, still offer History in the FET phase; both of which are English medium of instruction schools. There are 14 township schools still offering History at the FET level. It could be regarded as a limitation to the study but it also provides for further research. The research could not be done during teaching time and as a result only six questions (with sub-sections) were asked.

Semi-structured questionnaires, composing of both close-and open ended questions were constructed. All the learners of a specific grade nine class formed part of the sample group. The responses of the Afrikaans- and English schools will be discussed separately and only similarities and differences pointed out in the summary.

Afrikaans: *Three schools were involved*

Male	Female	Total
63	66	129

Question 3: Do you think History should be taught in schools?

	M	%	F	%	Tot	%
Yes	25	75	40	82	65	79
No	8	25	9	18	17	21

Question 3.1. Motivation as to why history should be taught, the following responses were received:

Question 3.2. Why should history not be taught in schools?

(i)	We don't want to know about the suffering of long ago.	3
(ii)	It only deals with Apartheid and Blacks	7
(iii)	It is boring	5
(iv)	We must go forward and not backwards	2

Question 4.1. What do you like about history?

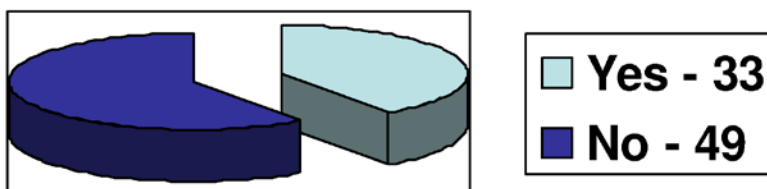
(i)	To learn about the old days	22
(ii)	When the teacher tells jokes about the 'old' people	1
(iii)	It is <i>sometimes</i> interesting	15
(iv)	Everything	15
(v)	Wars	8
(vi)	The South African War (Boere – oorlog)	4

Question 4.1. What do you not like about history?

(i)	Too much politics	9
(ii)	Too tedious	8
(iii)	Nothing, I like everything	24
(iv)	Rote learning and all the dates	24

Question 5

If History was offered at your school in grade 10, would you choose it as a subject?



No response = 17

Question 5.1 Motivate why you would take history.

(i)	It is interesting	17
(ii)	Then you can converse with your grandparents	1
(iii)	To learn more about the past	15

Question 5.2 Motivate why you would not take history.

(i)	I don't need it for the career that I want to follow	26
(ii)	I don't really like it	6
(iii)	Boring	8
(iv)	It will not be needed once I am finished with school	8
(v)	You only learn about black people	1

Question 6. In what careers will History be a recommendation?

(i)	Teaching	39	(vii)	Nature conservator	4
(ii)	Work in a museum	15	(viii)	Historian	14
(iii)	Lawyer	6	(ix)	Writer	5
(iv)	Singer	1	(x)	President	11
(v)	Excavations	10	(xi)	I don't know	7
(vi)	Professors	6			

English schools (Five schools were involved, consisting of approximately 90% black learners)

Male	Female	Total
63	66	129

Question 3. Do you think history should be taught in schools?

Yes	No
114	25

3.1 Motivate why you should take history

(i)	We want to learn about the history of South Africa	64
(ii)	You learn to know your country better	
(iii)	We want to learn about the history of the world	9
(iv)	Because history is part of our lives	
(v)	It tells us how early humans lived	
(vi)	We can learn from the mistakes of the past	

3.2 Motivate why you should not take history

- Not required for my future career
- You must study too much
- I don't want to know more about what happened in the past

4.1 What do you like about history?

- It gives you an idea what happened in the past
- I like to learn about other countries
- I like to learn about the Nazi party

4.2 What don't you like about history?

- Modern people don't want to know what happened in the past
- All the calculations (it is not clear what the learners referred to)

Question 5

	Yes	No
Male	26	
Female	19	

Question 5.1

- It gives you a feeling of experiencing what happened in the past
- Because it is fun and challenging

Question 5.2

- I won't need history for my career
- It cannot get a job for me

Question 6: Answers to the question of possible careers with history as a subject, are indicated in the table below

Lawyer	Talk shows	Museum
Historian	Travel and tourism	Professor
Astrologist	Artist	Doctor
Journalism	Working with the weather	Dancer / actor / singer
Pilot	Nursing	Astronaut
Technologist	Researcher	Don't know any
Architect	Nature reserve guardian	Investigator
Work with voting	Librarian	News reader
Teacher	Working with maps	Policeman and work at correctional services
Politician and working at the parliament	Sociologist	Archaeology
President	Psychologist	Making ancient movies Collector

Discussion of empirical data

Question 3: Do you think history should be taught in schools?

From the response it is clear that the majority of learners reacted positively about the teaching of history as a school subject. It thus seems as if there is a future for History if the opportunity would be available. In the district where the research was done, 14 out of a possible 30 schools offer History at FET level, less than 50%. No Afrikaans medium schools offer History any more in the specific district.

What is a concern, are the reasons learners provide for the teaching of history (question 3.1). If the different dimensions of the learner which need to be addressed in all learning in Outcomes Based Education, namely knowledge, skills and attitudes (SKV's), are kept in mind, the reasons provided by the learners almost all lie on the 'knowledge' level. Aspects such as the development of critical and analytical skills, to name but two, are not mentioned at all. Values could be implied in the following two answers; "if you know what happened in the past, you will understand the present and current events better" and "we can learn from the mistakes of the past", but these were mentioned by only 34 learners in total. It thus seems as if history is taught in a way that the learners still regard it as a 'knowledge' subject, which could be detrimental for the future of the subject. The learners from both the Afrikaans and English medium schools gave similar responses to this question. It is regarded as appropriate to quote the following words here.

Education includes, but is not coincided to basic, professional and vocational training, John Stuart Mills²⁵ captures the importance of history as follows:

"Men are men before they are lawyers or physicians, or merchants, or manufacturers; and if you make them capable and sensible men, they will make capable and sensible lawyers and physicians".

The responses to question 3.2, 'motivate why history should not be taught in schools,' showed similarities as well as differences between the two language groups. Both indicated that it is 'boring' and that they don't want to know 'what happened in the past' but the Afrikaans speaking

²⁵ P Higgs, "Nation Building: A Dilemma for education." *Journal of education and Training*, November 1998 vol. 19(2) p. 48, 1998.

learners also supplied answers, such as: 'it only deals with Apartheid and Blacks' and 'too much politics.' This could perhaps be explained if the content of the new history syllabus is considered. The fact that none of the learners from the English medium schools, who are mainly black learners, supplied any 'political' or 'racial' reasons, could be because they can affiliate with the content and that once again emphasizes the importance of the inclusion of the history of all the peoples of the country in the history syllabus.

Kathleen Vail²⁶ speaks about 'cultural suicide,' because of the impoverished history content of social studies in American syllabi and more time being spent on subjects such as reading and maths and she makes an appeal to go back to balanced teaching.

Another alarming reason provided by too many of the learners why history should not be taught in schools and which could also be linked with question 4.2 (what don't you like about History), is 'it is boring, 'too tedious,' 'rote learning and all the dates.' This is not a very good reflection on History teachers and the way the subject is dealt with; maybe this explains why the learners don't regard it as a subject which can develop specific skills. Furthermore, this could explain the 'no' responses to question 5.2: Motivate why you do not intend (or would have considered) to choose history as a subject in grade 10. The answer provided by the majority of the learners, is "I don't need it for my future career".

Although it may seem as if the respondents are aware of a vast variety of careers for which history could be a recommendation, it is actually an area of great concern as the majority either wrote "I don't know of any" or just mentioned 'teaching.' The other careers were mentioned by one or at the most two learners. This could be an indication that insufficient career guidance regarding the career value of history is a problem at schools or even that some learners just wrote something down for the sake of answering the question, especially if career options such as dancer and singer are considered (although one could argue that it was a singer who put Genl. De la Rey on the map again). Careers like diplomatic services, marketing (sales, banking and economists), military information, heraldry and genealogy, theology and radio and television

²⁶ K Vail, Fighting over History in our schools. *American School Board Journal*. url=<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?>, 2007, p. 36.

have not been mentioned at all. It would have been interesting to ask them why they regard history as necessary for certain of the mentioned careers.

A positive response from all the learners is the desire to 'learn more about the past'. This already provides fertile soil to sow history seeds on.

Conclusion

Has anything positive come forth from this research? Certainly, yes. The fact that so many learners indicated that History should be offered at schools and that they would indeed consider History as a subject if it was possible, certainly send out a positive message. The question is; what can be done to put these positive attitudes into practice? We are convinced that if more History teachers and officials from the different Departments of Education involved with history, could listen to the voices of the young, it will have a positive outcome. Teachers should also receive intensive training on how to present the subject in more creative ways in order for it to becoming meaningful to the learners. This links with the aim of history teaching of Glenwood High School, namely that not only because "the learning aspect in History is important, but learners must also enjoy themselves".²⁷

The learning outcomes, assessment standards and content of textbooks have been adjusted to be more accommodative; but the question can be rightfully asked whether teachers have been equipped to deal with these changes in such a way that the declining numbers of learners taking History as a subject in the FET phase, can be halted.

²⁷ Anon. www.glenwoodhighschool.co.za/academic/history, 2007.