



Can history be used to build the nation? An analysis of the idea of a compulsory school history curriculum in post-apartheid South Africa

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Abstract

Despite the critical role of education in peacebuilding, few studies in South Africa have interrogated the role of the school history curriculum on nation-building, leaving a critical gap in our understanding of the impact of a wrongly designed, developed, and implemented history curriculum. This conceptual paper, informed by the sociological foundations of education, responds to one question underpinning this study: What opportunities and threats are there for making school history compulsory in a country composed of diverse histories? Using the case of South Africa, the paper deploys document analysis to explore the risks and possibilities for making a school history curriculum compulsory. The findings replicate that making school history compulsory can be useful for nation-building. The study also argues that school history has two faces: rather than promoting nationalism and social cohesion it can also be a wedge that divides and fragments the society. Considering

these findings, the study argues that the curriculum is a product of people and recommends that the school history curriculum in any country must be a selection from the history of all people. Significantly, this study extends and enriches the yet small number of studies that debate making school history compulsory for nation-building. The paper contributes practical insights into how the school curriculum can be designed, developed, and implemented for the good of the whole nation.

Keywords: Opportunities and threats: Nation-building; School history; Sociological perspectives; South Africa

Introduction

While empirical evidence exists on the critical role of education in peacebuilding, little is documented in South Africa on the impact of the school history curriculum in nation-building. This conceptual paper navigates this under-researched territory and explores the opportunities and challenges of making the school history curriculum compulsory in post-apartheid South Africa, a country characterised by a heterogeneous society. Before 1994, South Africa was marked by racial segregation in all aspects of social, political, and economic life. The arrival of Europeans in Southern Africa, their progressive subjugation of African peoples, the creation and exercise of colonial power over Africans, and, subsequently, apartheid all had significant effects on group identity development and social cohesion (Baloyi, 2017). Despite the known immense contribution of education in peacebuilding, few studies in South Africa have interrogated the influence of the school history curriculum on nation-building, leaving a critical gap in our understanding of the impact of a wrongly packaged history curriculum. While a good curriculum draws from the histories of all kinds of people in society, namely the minorities, majorities, once colonised, colonisers, men and women; a wrongly packaged curriculum is selective and its narratives are confined to very few people in the country. What ignites this study is that the purpose of school history is always being questioned anew because societies are constantly re-locating themselves (Furrer et al., 2023). What we little understand in the studies is an analysis of the opportunities and threats of the proposal to make school history a compulsory subject in South African schools.¹ The current study contributes to this debate using sociological perspectives as the theoretical lens. The study is underpinned by the question: What opportunities and threats are there for making school history mandatory in a country? The study argues that history can be used for nation building and this can be possible when history is made compulsory. Nation-building is constructing or structuring a national identity using the power of the state (Mylonas, 2017). The goal of nation-building is to bring the people of the state together so that the country can endure politically and economically. Given the limitations of the current school history curriculum as explained by the History Ministerial Task Team (HMTT) (2018), the study claims that a

1 History Ministerial Task Team (HMTT) was set up in 2015 to investigate whether history should become a compulsory subject in the school curriculum. Then the Ministerial Task Team, after public consultations, recommended in 2018 that history be made compulsory at the Further Education and Training (FET) phase (Grades 10-12). Up to the time of writing this report, History has not yet been made compulsory.

new curriculum can be crafted that considers all citizens to build South Africa and be made compulsory to all phases of education in South Africa.

By exploring the opportunities and constraints derived from making school history mandatory in a country, the study hopes to unlock more practical insights into how the school curriculum can be designed, developed, and implemented for nation-building. The paper extends and enriches the yet small number of studies that debate making school history compulsory in nation-building.

Literature review

Post 1994 history reforms in South Africa

Dismantling the education system implemented during colonial apartheid, which was based on race, class, gender, and ethnicity and prioritised separateness, overlooking shared citizenship, has been a monumental task for South Africa since the country's independence in 1994 (Maluleka, 2023). In response to that segregation, numerous curriculum reforms were implemented across all subject areas. The curriculum for school history was not an exception, and changes were made in three different areas. As explicitly explained by Maluleka (2023) the reforms made sure that history teachers and their learners acquired the necessary historical skills needed to engage effectively and meaningfully with the past, developed a common national identity through studying history, and finally encouraged social cohesion in the hopes of breaking down racial, class, and ethnic boundaries by recognising the problem of prejudice and the challenges that a multi-cultural community faces. The reforms were facilitated by the rainbow nation discourses, which assumed that a new country would be reborn and that the newly created South Africa would primarily depart from apartheid's racist and racialised logic, fostering diversity, social justice, and democratic tolerance in its foundation (Hlatshwayo, 2021). As a result, the history curriculum has undergone numerous reforms, ranging from cleansing the content following apartheid to eliminating disciplinary boundaries (HMTI, 2018; Wasserman et al., 2023).

The first attempt at curriculum reform resulted in the introduction of the Interim Core Syllabus (ICS), which sought to rid school history of any sexist or racist content, eliminate inaccuracies in subject content, and establish a common core curriculum (Bertram, 2006; Maluleka and Ledwaba, 2023). In 1997, the Outcome-based Education Curriculum 2005 (C2005) was adopted as the second attempt at changes that abolished disciplinary barriers and fostered a constructivist approach. The failure of the C2005, which was attributed to

'its epistemic and recontextualization logics were still very much dominated and controlled by government officials, academics, policymakers, curriculum developers who were still very much aligned with colonial-apartheid' (Maluleka, 2021: 78), led to the adoption of the third curriculum reform, the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) in 2002. This reform was intended to encourage reparation, reconstruction, and reconciliation while remaining outcome-oriented. According to Maluleka (2021), Euro-western knowledge traditions and canons have received disproportionate significance in the RNCS, displacing African-centred knowledge forms. To overcome these restrictions, the fourth attempt at curriculum reform, known as Curriculum and Policy Statement (CAPS), was launched in 2011. This reform reduced the history curriculum and returned to a content-based approach, with a stronger emphasis on citizenship (HMTI, 2018). While the content of teaching African History in CAPS remains sanitised, there were concerns that the youths in South Africa do not respect their country's and the African continent's histories. As a result, calls have been made to make the school history curriculum compulsory for the Further Education and Training (FET) phase (Grades 10-12) in South African schools.

It is imperative to note that South Africa has not yet decided to make school history a compulsory subject at Grades 10-12 and thus this is still a contentious issue. At present and as part of social sciences, history is a compulsory subject until Grade 9 and an elective subject at Grades 10-12. The proposal was first premised on the recommendations of the Ministerial Review Committee appointed in 2000 (Maluleka and Ledwaba, 2023), which in part pointed out that there was a need to make the school history curriculum more understandable in South African classrooms (Chisholm, 2005) by promoting values that were:

To ensure that a national South African identity is built on values different from those that underpin apartheid education. The kind of learner envisaged ... is one who will be imbued with the values and act in the interests of a society based on respect for democracy, equality, human dignity, life, and social justice (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2002: 8).

Second, the History Ministerial Task Team (2018) was formed in response to concerns that South African youths do not respect their country's and the African continent's histories, following a spate of violent and xenophobic acts in 2008 and 2013. The presumption was that these attacks were the result of a lack of awareness about the continent's history (Davids, 2016). Following that, the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU)

argues that history should be made a compulsory discipline in schools to improve students' understanding of the fact that African countries and Africans are not defined by their borders. That, and subsequent discussions on the idea, sparked a heated debate about the proposal's feasibility since the curriculum derives directly from society and serves as both an ideological instrument and a vehicle for social change driven by the dominant social group (Ndhlovu, 2009). Nation-building is undeniably difficult in countries with diverse cultural, ethnic, racial, religious, and other social identities. To address this difficulty, the Ministerial Task Team (MTT) advised that history be declared a compulsory subject for the FET phase and that the history curriculum should be updated using an African nationalist paradigm influenced by the *Ubuntu* framework (Nussey, 2018). In this study, we set out to proffer insights on the opportunities and threats that can be derived from making school history compulsory in South Africa for nation-building.

Context of the study

The proposal to compulsorily introduce school history at the FET phase in South African schools has generated mixed reactions from diverse academics in South Africa and globally. As confirmed by Furrer et al. (2023) the fundamental uncertainty about the goal and purpose of history education stands in strange contrast to the public sphere because confidence in the orienting function of history in both the present and the future is low. After noticing that young people in South Africa did not appreciate the country's history and that of the African continent, the Minister of Education set up a Ministerial Task Team (MTT) in 2015 and enlisted it to advise on the feasibility of making history compulsory in the FET phase among other tasks (Davids, 2016; MTT, 2018). After public consultation with the country's provinces, the MTT recommended that history be made compulsory in Grades 10 to 12. However, up to now, History is a compulsory subject until Grade 9 which is the General Education and Training (GET) phase. History is an elective subject in the FET phase (Grades 10–12). After the announcement of the intention to make school history compulsory in South Africa, several studies that explored and reflected on the possibility of launching it in all phases in South African schools emerged (Chisholm, 2018; Davids, 2016; Mavhungu and Mavhungu, 2018; Nussey, 2018). A recent study by Maluleka and Ledwaba (2023: 91) reflected on the History Ministerial Tasks Team's report and argued that school history should not be used for 'political expediency that would result in a nationalistic approach to constructing a new school history curriculum.'

Wasserman et al. (2023) employed a case study to interrogate the teachers' opinions

on the matter and reported that two opposing positions emerged, of which some argue for the subject to be compulsory as they regarded it as a way for them to enjoy an elevation of their personal and professional benefit. Other teachers criticised the move as they feared a return to the old times when the subject was employed as a political tool during the apartheid period because by that time the curriculum was tilted towards the ruling class. Less recent studies such as the works of Mavhungu and Mavhungu (2018) reported that it was a noble idea with a novel intention so that learners get a grounding in their country's history. However, Nussey (2018) criticises the proposal because of the fear of the temptation to repeat the faults of the past, namely to use history education during apartheid as an instrument of propaganda and to justify a particular interpretation of the past which stimulated abhorrence and skirmish among a diverse population. The study of Davids (2016) also reveals that the call to make history compulsory in all phases of schools has reawakened this fear. More studies will probably emerge to get insights from stakeholders such as students and parents to have a comprehensive understanding of the proposal. This study adds to these scholarly voices on the debate by using sociological perspectives to interrogate the viability of the proposal.

History curriculum design: A global perspective

History curriculum design and implementation remain a global concern. While some countries push for a school national history curriculum that speaks to their ideologies, others implement the history curriculum faithfully without creating division within the country. The promotion of patriotic history in countries across the globe is attracting considerable critical attention. The concern revolves around transforming school history into patriotic history, which is commonly at variance with scholars and democrats. As Kończal and Moses (2022: 153) argue:

The state-mandated or state-encouraged "patriotic" histories that have recently emerged in so many places around the globe are a complex phenomenon because they evolve around both affirmative interpretations of history and celebration of past achievements and an explicitly denialist stance opposed to acknowledging responsibility for past atrocities, even to the extent of celebrating perpetrators.

This suggests that making history compulsory can be politically inspired and likely to reflect the country's intention to use the subject as a tool to strengthen its hegemonic control at

the expense of nation-building.

Recent evidence suggests that many countries have changed their history curriculum so that it promotes patriotism and thus becomes commensurate with their intents and ideology. For instance, the Chinese Ministry of Education demanded in 2016 that patriotic education be incorporated into university and school curricula, educating Chinese students to always follow the political party line and strengthen their sense of national identity (Buckle, 2016). Not to be outdone, in America, the 1776 Commission was established in 2020 with the goals of promoting patriotic education and defending American history against revisionism on the left and by liberals (Baker, 2020). Politicians in Germany have openly called the Nazi past ‘bird droppings’ in the country’s one-thousand-year-old history and called for a 180-degree turn in German memory politics to advance narratives that glorify the nation and its merits (Volk, 2022). The Indian state government, as submitted by Sarkar (2022), has reportedly implemented a curriculum on patriotism for all pupils enrolled in all government schools in classes 6 through 8, requiring them to learn about the subject for forty minutes every day. According to the Chief Minister, the foundation of the course is the history of earlier national heroes. In a similar vein, the Russian government has worked to tighten its hold on historical education. The Ministry of Education in February 2013 was instructed to write textbooks that would teach the history of Russia in a way that avoided contradictions (Koposov, 2022). Taken together, these studies provide important insights into how nations promote their ideologies. However, loyal patriotism based on patriotic history can lead to a forced commitment to one’s native place, a narrow view of history, and an unhealthy sense of cultural superiority. A non-patriotic history takes everyone aboard and can be used to unify the country. History will teach learners various skills and values, including the promotion of peace, human rights, social rights, empathy, tolerance, and non-racialism. Given such a context, South Africa is on course to make the school history curriculum compulsory after three decades of political independence. In support of that position, this study argues that making school history curriculum compulsory is a noble idea with a novel intention to build the nation. However, this is not feasible with the current history curriculum, considering the weaknesses pointed out by the HMTT (2018). Using sociological perspectives, the study argues for a harmonious history curriculum that can be used for nation-building.

Theoretical framework

This conceptual article uses the sociology of knowledge as a theoretical framework.

The sociology of knowledge is one of sociology's most recent disciplines (Mutekwe, 2012), and it arose from Karl Mannheim's pioneering work. It relates to the existential determination of knowledge (Goodman and Ritzer, 2007), a distinct corpus of writing about the social nature of knowledge. At the heart of the sociological perspectives is the agreement among sociologists that knowledge, or what constitutes valuable information, is socially constructed, stratified, and disseminated. Viewed in this way, knowledge is seen as having a social character. Mannheim (1971) observes that the sociology of knowledge is a field that enables society to examine how the various intellectual standpoints and styles of thought are rooted in an underlying historic social reality. Focusing on the different theoretical viewpoints about knowledge is what Mannheim termed doing sociology of knowledge which implies a process of undertaking a critical assessment of the social roots of knowledge or that which is considered worthwhile knowledge by a given social group (Turner, 1995; Mannheim, 1971; Mutekwe, 2012). According to Coser and Rosenberg (1989) the sociology of knowledge studies the relationship between thought and society and includes the entire range of intellectual activities such as ideologies, doctrines, dogmas, and theological thoughts, among other things. Mutekwe (2012) shares that in all these fields, the main concern of the sociology of knowledge is examining the relationship of ideas/knowledge to the sociological and historical settings in which such ideas are produced and received. Doing sociology of knowledge is appropriate for this study as it can pose questions to challenge certain assumptions about the history curriculum. The theory was helpful as it provided questions such as: what counts as the history curriculum, who defines what suitable knowledge for teaching and learning is in schools, and why knowledge is stratified. As supported by Simonds (1978) the sociology of knowledge promises its followers a careful unmasking of the distortions associated with what counts as knowledge in any given society. The study benefits from the sociology of knowledge as a tool for understanding the social roots of school history, its stratification, and social distribution in South Africa. Employing the sociology of knowledge in this study was useful as it assisted us to bisect the usefulness of the call to make school history compulsory in South African schools by x-raying and undressing the social character in the projected implementation of the history curriculum in the context of South Africa, given that the country is a heterogeneous society.

Methodology

Employing the sociology of knowledge as a theoretical framework, this study explores

and reflects on the opportunities and threats of making school history in South Africa compulsory, drawing references from the literature. We searched the literature in different electronic databases, namely the ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Science Direct, using the phrase 'making school history compulsory in South Africa' as search words. There were over 52 journal articles that appeared initially from various databases. A check for relevance using the abstracts was conducted and 14 articles were engaged for content analysis based on the research question. To complement data from the journal articles, the study employed Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) documents and the Ministerial Task Team Report (2018). The study included document analysis which was effective because the findings were not completely affected by the researchers' influence (Morgan, 2022). As such, using documents as data-generating tools was useful in reducing the researcher bias. The documents also ensured the trustworthiness of the study as they could allow replication of the study (Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2018). This was quite helpful in examining the contents of documents pertaining to initiatives to make the school history curriculum compulsory. All sociological perspectives were employed to unpack the affordances and threats. They proffered insights on the usefulness and the perceived challenges of making school history compulsory for nation-building and on the way forward. The arguments presented were themed according to sociological perspectives to unpack the research questions.

Findings and Discussions

Functionalists' perspective on making history compulsory

Drawing on the functionalists such as Auguste Comte, Talcott Parsons, and Emile Durkheim, education instils in children the values and conventions that society requires, as does school history. Functionalist theorists maintain that education serves society's needs and is only dysfunctional when social knowledge is so severely criticised as to upset the social equilibrium, lead to social pathology, or have other dysfunctional effects on society (Mutekwe, 2012). Because it is essential for acclimating students to societal norms, school history has a functional purpose for society's survival as well. School history teaches pupils about many cultures, civilisations, and ideologies, building empathy and global awareness. Based on these insights, school history is a gateway to understanding our past, including the victories, failures, and moments that changed humanity. Additionally, as students examine historical events, identify trends, and form conclusions, history fosters critical

thinking skills. However, such attributes are not promoted by the CAPS document at the FET phase as argued by the MTT (2018: 40) report that the main objective of history education is to ‘produce a learner who knows the “story” of who we are in its many layers. It is not just content for content’s sake as the CAPS history curricula seems to suggest.’ This suggests that a new history curriculum is needed in South Africa for those attributes to be inculcated. Since history education has a role in socialising the youth, as pointed out above, where society’s identity is passed down from one generation to the next for the benefit of all citizens, there is a need for it to be made compulsory at all levels for nation-building. South Africa must therefore implement a compulsory history curriculum at both the GET and FET phases since history is one of the subjects that can socialise students into good citizens. While some scholars, for example, Nussey (2018) and Jansen (2018) argue that the idea of making history a compulsory subject at schools may reawaken fears of a second abuse of school history like what happened during apartheid, it may be a panacea for South Africa’s social ills through its socialisation function. According to Davids (2016), SADTU argues that school history should be taught to develop young South Africans who are patriotic, aware of the nation’s past, and eager to help create the kind of progressive society South Africa wants. All of this comes down to the idea that teaching history in schools helps society survive by instilling in young people a sense of nation-building.

Considering that, despite over three decades of democracy, South African society lacks social coherence, compulsory school history is a novel idea (Chimbunde, Moreeng and Barnnet, 2024). With the idea of nation-building and the spate of conflicts in South Africa stemming from differences in race, languages, and culture, we contend that mandatory school history is a commendable proposal with a noble goal if the country is to be rebuilt using school history curriculum. The Department of Basic Education’s History Ministerial Task Team report argues that ‘history is necessary to inspire the psyche of the nation’ (MTT, 2018: 8). This statement also demonstrates how history promotes understanding and problem-solving of the state’s tasks and issues (Furrer et al., 2023). To back up this idea, there is a need to adopt an eclectic approach to capture the history of all tribes of the country considering the heterogeneous nature of the society to develop a sense of togetherness. As argued by Hawkey (2015), in most cases school history has traditionally aimed to develop national identity, which is regarded as an important means of providing social cohesion in society. To fulfil this concern, the history curriculum should be constructed around all people’s histories to serve as a bridge that connects citizens to different cultures and eras.

We argue that teaching history in schools is functional because it equips the next generation with the knowledge, skills, and perspective to navigate an increasingly complex

world. Rather than only understanding the causes of past conflicts to prevent future ones or appreciating the origins of modern-day democracy, history also offers a wealth of truths that hold today just as they did centuries ago. Thus, drawing from the functionalist perspective embedded in the sociology of knowledge, we advance that a discourse of nation-building, national identity, and social cohesion using the school history is of national imperative for a successful South Africa. Therefore, an essential function of history is that it presents identities. As such, the history of history teaching in schools is nevertheless marked by the fact that socially desired knowledge is disseminated (Furrer et al., 2023). This implies that South Africa's self-image can be shaped by a national-political view of history and therefore can create the desired citizens it envisages by making school history compulsory in schools. According to Mavhungu and Mavhungu (2018), SADTU advocates that history be a compulsory subject in schools to raise awareness amongst the students that Africa and Africans cannot be defined by borders. To SADTU, making history compulsory to the FET phase is a welcome move and goes beyond nation-building but extends to continent-building.

The conflict perspective and the compulsory school history

The conflict perspective draws insights from Karl Marx who advances the argument that society is made up of social classes competing over scarce resources leading to conflicts. The ruling class dominates the working class. While Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote little about education, their followers called the Neo-Marxists such as Louis Althusser, Pierre Bourdieu, Basil Bernstein, Samuel Bowles, and Herbert Gintis drew on their ideas to amend or extend them (Gwirayi, 2010; Marshall and Scott, 2005) and did a sociology of knowledge (Mutekwe, 2012) by examining how the school curriculum as a value-laden aspect promotes the propagation of ruling class values or ideologies disguised as knowledge (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). According to Cole (2018), Althusser sees education as an ideological state apparatus that propagates the opinions of the privileged implying that the elites may influence and control the educational system to further their goals. Thus, the underlying presumptions of the conflict perspective on educational implications are that the views of the powerful, whether found in mass media, schools, colleges, universities, families, or religion, predominate over those of their subordinates. According to Burges (1985), school knowledge or what passes for knowledge in educational institutions is a product of ruling class ideology designed to distort members of the subject class's perspective of reality and uphold the status quo of social class disparity. Althusser (1971) and Bowles and

Gintis (1976) further note that all the values cherished in educational institutions are pro-capitalist in that in the final analysis they benefit the power elite. As such, the contributors to the conflict perspective view the education system as an extension of the bourgeoisie's ethics and morals in line with their definition of pedagogic relevance (Mapindani, 2015). Benefitting from this argument, the curriculum from the conflict perspective is designed to suit and communicate the intents and purposes of the bourgeoisie for the subjugation of the struggling proletariat.

Employing the sociology of knowledge from the conflict perspective, we argue with Neo-Marxists that making school history curriculum compulsory in South Africa can be used to inculcate the dominant ideology and that what children may learn in schools as school history may be knowledge that is wrapped in the ideology of the ruling class. This is because school history taught in schools, drawing from the Neo-Marxist perspective, can suffer flagrant distortion of historical evidence by the State or elites (Cole, 2018). For instance, attempts may be made to avoid painful aspects of a nation's past that dehumanised people. Cole (2018) also supports that education in everyday usage is no longer perceived as neutral in a party-political sense. We also assert that, even without any attempt at deception or manipulation, most school history teaching will represent the biases and goals of those who create and instruct the curriculum, resulting in an uneven narrative that emphasizes events that further certain political objectives while downplaying others. Such was the case with South Africa's pre-1994 school history curriculum, which was known to be ideologically prejudiced against the vast majority of South Africans and in favour of the political establishment. Because of this, several academics in South Africa worry that making school history mandatory in schools may lead to a repetition of the apartheid era when the history curriculum contained inaccurate facts (Davids, 2016; Jansen, 2018; Maluleka and Ladwaba, 2023; Nussey, 2018; Mavhungu and Mavhungu, 2018). As claimed by Davids (2016), the proposal to make school history compulsory has strong political intentions. In support, Nussey (2018) contends that the proposal has reawakened fears of how history education was abused during apartheid. The fear expressed by academics and stakeholders emanates from the claim by Mavhungu and Mavhungu (2018) that history is written by the victors who have the power to shape historical narratives through school textbooks, public iconography, movies, and a range of other mediums. This resonates with the sociology of knowledge from the conflict perspective that advances the bourgeoisie fails to offer real education, and instead education is used to spread bourgeois moral principles (Cole, 2018). According to Ndhlovu (2009), political elites use the curriculum to safeguard their power. This point was raised by Basil Bernstein, a Neo-Marxist when

he defined curriculum as a message system and demonstrated how shifts, ruptures, and dislocations at the societal, political, educational, and pedagogical levels manifest as reconstructions at the curriculum level (Ndhlovu, 2009). From the Neo-Marxists' views, school history can destroy a country if the elites are allowed to craft the curriculum on their own. Chimbunde et al. (2024: 898) state that 'some interferences by elites dilute and usurp the strength endowed in a history curriculum that considers all people'. Therefore, we argue with Davids (2016) who contends that school history must be taught to advance nation-building, healing of wounds, and bridge the gap between the rich and the poor in South Africa to enable nation-building. In concurrence, Giroux (1997: 5) claims that history education must provide a vehicle for developing a 'collective critical consciousness, and through developing historical consciousness those who study history are enabled to live together in a heterogeneous society'. Seen in this way school history can be used for nation-building where citizens will live together harmoniously, and making it compulsory will go a long way in reaching this goal.

The feminist perspective

The feminist perspective, an offshoot of the conflict perspective, draws inspiration from the Marxists' views that society is conflict-ridden (Gwirayi, 2010). The feminist perspective is a window through which women's issues are viewed and thus is a perspective for women, about women, and by women. Feminists query men's control and monopoly over the production and use of knowledge. Feminist perspectives address 'the question of women's subordination to men: how this arose, how and why it is perpetuated, how it might be changed and what life would be like without it' (Acker, 1987: 421). To the feminists there is conflict between males and females. Feminists are concerned about the subordinate position of women in society. The perspective argues that the oppression and marginalisation experienced by females are influenced not only by gender but also by other environmental or social factors such as race and class (Msambwa et al., 2024). When juxtaposed with education, feminists argue that schools transmit the ideas and values of males overlooking those of females. As such, their ideas are pushed to the margins because males dominate the society. Borrowing from feminist discourses, school history can be used to transmit male values, the same way it can be used to inculcate the values of the elite. According to Mutekwe (2012), feminists have discovered that there is a tendency for men's experiences and observations to be regarded as knowledge while women's experiences and observations are marginalised in many, if not all, societies. For a balanced school history,

curriculum designers and implementers must not perpetuate male values by glorifying only males through history narratives, pictures, and textbooks but rather must also have women as heroines in the making of a country's history, given that the thrust of feminists is to emancipate women from oppression and exploitation by men. When the school history curriculum captures the women's stories in the national history, then school history seen this way can be used for nation-building.

Symbolic interactionist perspective

Symbolic interactionism seeks to explain how meanings generated during the interaction process influence the development of the self or human behaviour. According to Blumer (1962), the core interactionist perspective is that humans are active, creative, and interpretive beings capable of creating their social world. As such, people create symbols to which they attach meanings and respond accordingly (Ritzer, 2012). These symbols and their meanings are learned or socialised through social interaction. People interact based on shared meanings, and without shared meanings meaningful social interaction may not be possible. Symbols and their meanings are not fixed entities, hence are modified and changed through negotiation. Interactionists argue that social order and change are based on negotiation and shared meaning (Mutekwe, 2012). Drawing from symbolic interactionism, the development of the school history curriculum is a negotiated process that must involve key players to establish social order, which is necessary for nation-building. Furthermore, symbolic interactionism suggests that education is a social construct and therefore the curriculum designers must negotiate with all stakeholders to construct a harmonious curriculum if it is to be used for nation-building. Since meanings are not fixed, so is the school history curriculum. This suggests that the school history curriculum must be revised regularly should it not serve the purpose of a group as exposed by the HMTT (2018). We, therefore, argue that the school history curriculum in South Africa must be renewed first before it is made compulsory if nation-building is to be achieved by that curriculum.

Reflections and the way forward

The importance of school history justifies its inclusion in the curricula of any country. However, making school history compulsory in South African schools has generated debates among academics premised on its feasibility and viability given the heterogeneous nature of the country. Despite many opportunities that school history can offer, it can

sometimes be manipulated to drive a wedge between tribes, rather than drawing them closer together. In short, school history reflects the society around it. We conclude that school history curriculum packages using an eclectic approach promote tolerance but will have little impact if they are delivered within educational structures that fundamentally promote political expediency. History education cannot succeed without measures to tackle the destructive educational practices that fuel hostility. We argue that making school history compulsory has two faces (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000): rather than promoting nationalism and social cohesion, it can also be a wedge that divides and fragments society.

The erstwhile discussion has shown that since the history curriculum is prone to political manipulation for nation-building, it is essential that both good and bad examples be examined so that we know what to avoid and what to emulate. Furrer et al. (2023: 17) argue that some countries focus on issues of multi-perspectivity, global citizenship, or transnational issues that we believe South Africa intends to do, and ‘others demand historical knowledge about their national pasts and seek to encourage a positive view of the nation’ When countries avoid the multi-perspectivity approach, it corroborates the Neo-Marxists’ view that education is an ideological state apparatus used to disseminate the ideas of the elite. For example, in the United Kingdom the Chief Inspector of Schools made announcements in 2017 that ‘pupils should learn how they became the country they are today and how their values make them a beacon of liberalism, tolerance and fairness’ (Furrer et al., 2023: 17). In their study, Mbatindah and Eloundou (2023) report that state power and authority are used to influence the teaching and learning of Cameroonians’ history for identity construction and nation-building through prescribing the content, purpose, and teaching methods of the subject and that alone has manipulated the school history for identity construction. Zimbabwe is another example of a country in Africa that has used a history curriculum to perpetuate the interests and hegemony of the rich (Ndhlovu, 2009; Ranger, 2004) that cannot be reconciled with the notions of respect for diversity and cosmopolitanism. For example, the history curriculum that was made compulsory in Zimbabwe was officially called Syllabus 2167. That syllabus was crafted in such a way that it lessened the analytical load of earlier curricula and presented a national history of the struggles for independence by the key Black Nationalist movements in Zimbabwe against imperialism (Moyo, 2014). That demonstrated a state-driven fixation with history—but for political reasons, and not for educative analytical purposes.

While learners in South Africa must be taught in line with the nation’s aspirations, we also believe that the way the school curriculum is designed and implemented must be treated with caution given the heterogeneous nature of the country. The obvious danger

of any history curriculum that is politically subordinate as in Zimbabwe, is that it does not produce critical history graduates but instead extremely biased and dangerous citizens who cannot embrace difference and diversity (Ranger, 2004). Thus, it becomes highly undesirable for students to be exposed to misinformation peddled in history classes, which can lead to violence, hatred, or discrimination. Since the government plays a central role in the development and reproduction of society over time and geographical area, we implore the South African government to adopt a multi-paradigmatic approach to school history curriculum design and implementation to help beneficiaries unmask the distortions associated with the social roots and social stratification of what counts as school history in the classroom. The MTT (2018: 40) advises that the various 'contextual factors and concerns or challenges specific to South Africa would have to be carefully considered, for example: capacity, teacher training, content, budgetary implications, and planning'. This shows that making school history compulsory in schools needs resources.

Doing the sociology of knowledge, phenomenologists view knowledge as inter-subjective or social where there is reciprocity of perspectives in which people assume that other people exist and objects are known or knowable by all (Mutekwe, 2012; Turner, 1995). This suggests that the assumption that education transmits elite values and intents is not completely true since the education system is a dialogue between entities that encompasses stakeholders, teachers, and students (Alant, 1990). Given the diversity and inequities in the South African education system, there is a need for the South African government to engage all tribes and key stakeholders for homogeneity in curriculum design and implementation of a compulsory school history curriculum in school. Consequently, students will be examined and instructed using the same rubrics irrespective of their race, sex, social class, or ethnic background.

Now that we have seen the fears expressed by the academics in their studies, we suggest that history must be compulsory on condition that the curriculum content covers national issues without favour and that the textbooks are edited so that they articulate the desire of the people of South Africa rather than be confined to the ruling class. So, when South Africa intends to make history compulsory, it must determine whether it will be a tool by the ruling class by checking the composition of the curriculum designers, the topics to be covered, the teaching methods, and the textbooks to be used. These three are intertwined and inseparable. All stakeholders including parents, academics, teachers, policymakers, and community and church leaders must be consulted to develop a comprehensive history curriculum. This suggests that diverse groups come together to make a harmonious curriculum possible at school, district, provincial, and national levels. The findings from

these levels on the harmonious curriculum are then collated and refined at the national level by experts drawn across political divides.

We advance the proposal that when South Africa finally decides to make the history curriculum compulsory, it must ensure that the textbooks do not communicate the positions of the ruling class. Clark et al. (2024) remind us that in many educational jurisdictions around the world, textbooks are either selected or developed under government direction and then officially approved for classroom use. As such, if not properly edited, the chances are high that the books may be written to suit the political circumstances which might promote divisions among the people of South Africa. This is common in countries where totalitarians are reigning. For example, authorities in Hong Kong recently erased references in new textbooks to the fact that it was a colony of Britain from 1898 to 1997 (Oung, 2022), and Russia is currently reviewing its history textbooks to make them more patriotic by removing references to Ukraine (Clark et al., 2024). We argue for neutrality in the production of textbooks because history textbooks are the official source of knowledge that usually portrays the preferred history of the nation.

Conclusions

The study set out to explore the opportunities and threats for making a school history curriculum compulsory in South Africa for nation-building. Given the diversity and inequities in the South African education system, using the school history curriculum to promote social cohesion and nation-building is a noble idea with a noble intention, though it is a long process. We contend that school history in South Africa can be used to build the country. However, the current form of school history cannot achieve this given the limitations cited by the HMTT (2018). We conclude that if the country intends to use history for social cohesion and nation-building, the current curriculum must be revised so that it aligns with all people's aspirations in the country because sociological perspectives have assisted us in understanding that knowledge or what counts as valuable knowledge is socially constructed, socially stratified, and socially distributed and so does the school history curriculum. Taken together, we argue that the HMTT's (2018) recommendations to make school history compulsory at the FET (Grades 10-12) as well, after consultations and undertaking several case studies, remains valid and can promote nation-building. We argue that in South Africa nation-building efforts can be aided by the way historical events and activities are portrayed, packaged, and distributed. Seen this way, school history education is a vital component for creating, preserving, and fostering a shared sense of

national identity. The subject also conveys collective historical memory and shapes imagined communities, hence better positioned to further the interests of the state in nation-building. Arguing from a functionalist perspective, school history has the potential to boost nation-building as it allows a social process of 'transforming a divided society into a community with peace, equal opportunities and economic viability within which individuals enjoy dignity, basic human rights and the prospect to observe their own culture and language in harmony with other people who may function within other traditions' (Vorster, 2005: 474). History education and history curriculum reforms can therefore be used by different nations to instil the values of patriotism, national identity, and cultural heritage (Zajda, 2015), provided it is a result of unbiased interpretations. Consequently, that will lead to building a nation of citizens who respect democracy and tolerance of others. As such, school history provides a common ground, regardless of age, race, language, or religion, for cultivating a sense of national belonging, loyalty and political consciousness, and encouraging constructive criticisms towards the institutional structures to enable self-improvement. As such we see no harm in making school history compulsory in South African schools to foster nation-building. When countries such as the United Kingdom, Cameroon, and Zimbabwe have adopted a nationalist history, is it wrong that South Africa also took the same stance but with caution? What is important for South Africa is to learn the limitations witnessed in other countries and then purge the threats to make school history usable for nation-building efforts. The study is limited because data generated were from journal articles and policy documents. Further empirical studies can be undertaken to enrich, confirm, or reject the findings and discussions made herein.

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