

TEACHERS VOICE / HANDS-ON ARTICLES

The hands-on section in *Yesterday & Today* is dedicated to providing History teachers at different levels with practical, classroom-ready resources and ideas that bridge the gap between educational theory and day-to-day teaching practice. Designed to support immediate application, this section features, for example, step-by-step lesson plans, reproducible templates, and adaptable strategies that have been tested in real classroom settings. Whether it's through creative pedagogical approaches, low-cost teaching tools, or digital enhancements, the hands-on section offers innovative ideas that cater to diverse learning needs and environments. By equipping History teachers with tangible tools and actionable insights, this section aims to inspire confidence, foster creativity, and promote a collaborative professional History Education community.

Discomfort as a pedagogical mirror – views of a HISTORY teacher

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Background

With over a decade of teaching experience in the South African private school system, I have observed a persistent resistance from history teachers to teach topics that may spark discomfort in the classroom. This experience motivated me to consider a study on uncomfortable histories. As a result, I began a research collaboration with my academic colleague, Marshall Maposa, who is based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban.

We frame our experience in teaching history in the context of private schools in South Africa. These spaces are usually underexplored in academic research despite their growing relevance in the country's current educational landscape. These institutions, characterised by affluent communities and a diverse racial composition, present a complex setting where history is often perceived as a politically sensitive subject.

Some of these private schools follow the national Curricula Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) curriculum, while others implement their own school-based

programmes. However, all are assessed through the Independent Examinations Board (IEB) examinations. The South African teaching practice has revealed that in many of these spaces, the discussion of uncomfortable topics is often avoided or dealt with superficially. The current study is set in this everyday reality, and it seeks to understand the topics that history teachers find uncomfortable, why they find them uncomfortable, and how they navigate this discomfort in their classrooms.

Why uncomfortable?

The concept of ‘uncomfortable histories’ is not widely used in literature; instead, there is more frequent reference to ‘uncomfortable heritage’. In history education, discussions frequently centre on contentious or sensitive topics. In our current study, we chose to use the concept of uncomfortable histories, because it is broad nature. Controversial topics usually refer to issues that provoke public disagreement or debate, while sensitive topics are defined by their inherent content and the shared understanding that they require careful handling to avoid harm or offence. In contrast, uncomfortable issues are shaped by individual emotional and psychological responses, rather than by public or institutional labels. A topic may be considered awkward, even if it is not controversial or sensitive, as discomfort depends on the identities, backgrounds, beliefs and levels of readiness of both teachers and learners.

Topics that generate discomfort

Teachers identified a wide range of content from the history curriculum as uncomfortable and challenging to teach, they are:

- **Apartheid and systemic racism**, particularly the victim-perpetrator relationship.
- **Colonisation, eugenics and land dispossession**, together with current debates on land redistribution.
- **Geopolitical conflicts** such as the Israeli-Palestinian War and ideological tensions between capitalism and communism.
- **Gender and sexuality topics**, including LGBTQ+ rights.
- **Current South African politics**, especially corruption cases and the role played by the different political parties.

These topics share a common characteristic: they are emotionally and politically close to the personal experiences of teachers, learners and their families, which amplifies the discomfort they evoke.

Why teachers hold back?

From time to time, South African social media highlights a scandal involving what a teacher has said or done, often leading to job loss or damage to their reputation. Therefore, many teachers fear adverse reactions from learners and conflict with parents or management, as their comments might be recorded without their knowledge, misinterpreted or taken out of context. Institutional pressure and school culture, especially those with a religious ethos or of a more conservative nature, explicitly or implicitly restrict the teachers' freedom to deal with political, racial and gender issues in the classroom.

In addition, the teachers' identity, race, religion, class and gender influence how learners and parents perceive them. Some white teachers reported feeling insecure when discussing colonial or apartheid injustices, while a few Black teachers reported feeling they have greater legitimacy to engage with these topics. Finally, the lack of specific training on how to deal with uncomfortable content leaves many teachers vulnerable and without the methodological or emotional tools needed to manage these situations confidently.

What do teachers do?

The way in which teachers approach uncomfortable topics in the classroom varies. Some opt to avoid entire topics altogether or to deal with certain aspects superficially, focusing on 'the facts' and ignoring ethical and controversial dimensions. Others try to maintain a 'neutral' or 'balanced' stance, presenting different points of view as equally valid to avoid accusations of bias. However, they acknowledge that this approach significantly waters down historically complex realities. Most teachers plan these potentially uncomfortable lessons carefully, selecting 'safe' resources and anticipating any difficult questions that may arise. Most teachers indicated that they establish rules of respect, structure debates carefully, and try to redirect conversations when they become overly emotional.

Discomfort as a pedagogical mirror

Following Boler's (1999) we understand that discomfort, far from being an obstacle, should be viewed as an opportunity for ethical and transformative learning. Discomfort uncovers the limits of our beliefs and privileges, offering the possibility of reconstructing historical knowledge through empathy and critical reflection.

In this sense, our findings show that many teachers oscillate between the roles of spectators, observing without engaging, to avoid losing emotional control, and witnesses who dare navigate the moral ambiguity of the past and present. However, institutional culture, fear of backlash and lack of training tend to reinforce the latter role, reproducing silence rather than promoting transformation.

Final thoughts

Reflecting on the findings of this research, it becomes apparent that history teaching in private schools continues to be influenced by two opposing forces: the desire to maintain classroom harmony and the need to confront the uncomfortable truths of our past. The topics that make most teachers uncomfortable, such as apartheid colonisation, race, gender and even geopolitical debates, are not merely content in the curriculum; they are still open wounds in South Africa's collective memory.

The closeness of these topics to the personal experiences of learners and teachers makes history teaching not only an intellectual exercise, but also an emotional one. The fear of backlash from learners, parents and management, combined with the lack of specific training, creates a profound sense of insecurity. In many cases, this environment forces teachers to choose between avoiding discomfort altogether or addressing it with extreme caution, carefully weighing every word they say in the lesson.

However, as Boler (1999) suggests, this discomfort can also be seen as an opportunity. Teachers who decide to openly embrace it openly may discover that the most uncomfortable lessons can become the most transformative. Perhaps the goal is not to eliminate discomfort, rather to learn how to navigate it and turn it into a powerful pedagogical tool. After all, teaching history is not only about looking at the past, but also about confronting who we are and reflecting on the role we play in building the future we wish to create.

References

Boler, M 1999. *Feeling power: Emotions and education*. New York: Routledge.