

Linking liberation legacies: How the 1976 Soweto Uprising and 2015-2016 #MustFall Uprising inform and shape the pursuit of an LGBTQIA+ inclusive school history curriculum in post-apartheid South Africa

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2026/n36a13>

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2026/n36a13>

Abstract

From the 1976 Soweto Uprising led by Black school learners protesting against the policy of Bantu Education introduced by the apartheid regime to the 2015-2016 student protests under the banner #MustFall led by Black students protesting high fees and colonial-apartheid influences in universities, South African youth have consistently mobilised for epistemic and ontological recognition. This study investigates how these two uprisings and their legacies inform and shape ongoing efforts to develop an inclusive school history curriculum for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual/Aromantic/Agender (LGBTQIA+) in post-apartheid South Africa. Drawing on a decolonial intersectional queer theory and Southern social movements framework as theoretical orientations, and a qualitative case study design underpinned by a critical paradigm, with critical discourse analysis as tools of analysis, I contend that the uprisings' demands for rehumanisation, visibility, decolonised knowledge, and dismantling oppressive structures offer vital, yet underexplored strategies for advancing a school history curriculum that is LGBTQIA+ inclusive. I also argue that developing such a curriculum represents the essential next phase in post-apartheid South Africa's continued pursuit of epistemic and ontological liberation. Thus, truly honouring the revolutionary spirit of the 1976 and #MustFall youths requires confronting the erasure of LGBTQIA+ histories in official historical narratives and building a school history curriculum that reflects the full diversity and richness of all South Africans.

Keywords: CAPS; Decolonisation; Fees Must Fall; LGBTQIA+; Rhodes Must Fall; School history; Social movement theory; Soweto Uprising; South Africa.

Introduction

South Africa's journey towards achieving epistemic and ontological liberation, especially for the colonised Other, remains unfinished. Engraved in the banners and slogans of the 1976 Soweto Uprising and the 2015-2016 #MustFall student protests, the youth of South Africa have persistently and consistently challenged the violent architectures of exclusion. These two uprisings, 40 years apart, not only speak to the rich history of a liberation struggle in the country; they also highlight a continuum of South African youth agency.

Yet, as post-1994 school history curricula such as the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) claim epistemic and ontological inclusivity (Department of Basic Education, 2011); they continue to perpetuate erasures – most glaringly, the absence of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual/Aromantic/Agender (LGBTQIA+) experiences, voices, histories, and ontologies in their knowledge base (Maluleka & Ramoupi, 2022; Maluleka & Soldaat, 2025).

In this article, how the legacies of the 1976 Soweto Uprising and the 2015-2016 #MustFall student protests inform and shape contemporary pushes for an epistemic and ontologically just post-apartheid school history curriculum are investigated. The article begins by outlining preferred theoretical orientations which is followed by a discussion on the preferred methodological approach. Thereafter, three literature reviews are carried out focusing on (a) the convergences and divergences between the 1976 Soweto Uprising and the 2015-2016 #MustFall student protests, (b) LGBTQIA+ epistemic and ontological realities in South Africa and its schools, and (c) post-apartheid school history curricula reform. Lastly, the article concludes by making a case for an LGBTQIA+ inclusive school history curriculum in post-apartheid South Africa.

Theoretical orientations

This article is anchored by two interconnected theoretical frameworks. The first aspect of this is what I call a decolonial intersectional queer theory, which merges decolonial theory, intersectionality, and queer theory. This merger is understood within and through Said's (2014) understanding of a 'travelling theory', which provides a framework for understanding how theories and ideas, irrespective of where they originate, move across varied contexts and transform in the process.

Decolonial theory, characterised by its core ideas of coloniality of power, knowledge, and being, emerged in Global South contexts (Mignolo, 2007; Walsh, 2014), and must not be conflated with postmodernism and postcolonialism that originate from dominant Euro-North American academic institutions and the influences of the South Asian Subaltern Studies collective (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Therefore, decolonial theory is interested in understanding, as well as in challenging, the lasting impacts of colonialism and coloniality that have continuously reinforced and sustained colonial power structures, as well as epistemic and ontological hierarchies that continue to marginalise Othered ways of knowing, being, and becoming.

Intersectionality, on the other hand, is believed to have been coined first by Crenshaw (1989) to make sense of the problems that Black women in the Global North experienced with the law. However, Gouws (2017) has since argued that other persons such as Sojourner Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell were also writing about and through intersectionality the same time as Crenshaw. Since then, intersectionality has been embraced throughout varied contexts globally for its flexibility, breadth, and complexity (hooks, 1994; Gqola, 2011; Atewologun, 2018), as well as its ability to enable one to try to understand the “relation between systems of oppression that shape our multiple identities and our positions within hierarchies of power and privilege” (Carastathis, 2014:304). Hence, I (the author) am in agreement with the argument that suggests that intersectionality rejects single-category analysis in favour of multifaceted approaches to examining the world (Mazibuko, 2020)—in line with what decolonial theory advocates for as well. In essence, intersectionality acknowledges multiple forms of oppression and opens spaces (Crenshaw, 1989), “to move beyond conceptualising oppressions as separate analytical categories and classifications and to create a multidimensional framework to look at the different oppressions on one’s complex identities” (Hlatshwayo, 2020:168).

To understand queer theory, it is important to first understand the origins of the term ‘queer’ (Maluleka & Soldaat, 2025). Queer as a term/concept first emerged in the Global North as a slur for those who were labelled as outcasts, abnormal, and nonhuman. It was then reclaimed by scholars from the 1980s onwards to theorise about the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990). These scholars repurposed the term as a theoretical tool to challenge entrenched heterosexual norms of kinship, gender, and sexuality (Butler, 1990; McCormick, 2013). However, the conceptualisation of the term into a theory from the Global North did not initially find universal acceptance.

For instance, Global South scholars, especially those from Africa, have critiqued its postmodern and poststructuralist underpinnings, which they argued that they often overlooked the lived experiences and epistemologies of the colonised Other (Ombagi, 2019, 2021). Some of these scholars contend that while this version of queer theory merits recognition, it should not dominate Global South research agendas, as it risks further sidelining and undermining indigenous efforts to define queer lives, reclaim their humanity and forge identities and epistemic communities based on localised terms or realities (Woubshet, 2003; Macharia, 2015, 2016). Out of this critique, a vibrant scholarly movement was born. Instead of outright dismissal of queer theorisation from the Global North; scholars from the Global South proposed expanding and fortifying queer theory as a 'traveling theory' (Said, 2014), that is able to evolve, adapt, and embed itself in other global contexts outside the Global North. However, such a move demanded keen awareness of its shortcomings amid an enduring and persuasive coloniality (Otu & Van Klinken, 2023).

It was through these intricate theoretical journeys that queer theory engaged productively and meaningfully with decolonial theory and intersectionality, and from this careful process and engagement emerged decolonial intersectional queer theory. This framework draws attention to the geopolitics of knowledge production, wherein the Global South is frequently positioned as a source of raw experience, while the Global North is cast as the producer and exporter of theory to be implemented elsewhere (Pereira, 2019).

Hence, a decolonial intersectional queer theory was employed as one aspect of the theoretical framework, as it addresses the rich diversity, complexity, and historical formation of gendered and sexualised subjectivities in the Global South (Otu & Van Klinken, 2023). From a decolonial standpoint, the term queer is employed as an anti-essentialist umbrella concept that affirms plurality and seeks to challenge and transcend oppressive systems, rather than assimilate into them (Ubisi, 2021). More specifically, this framework offers the epistemic and ontological resources to interrogate *why* the post-apartheid school history curricula continues to omit, within its knowledge base, the contributions, experiences, and narratives of LGBTQIA+ individuals, and *how* this situation can be transcended. This framework was also used to guide my engagement with of post-apartheid school history curricula literature to demonstrate this said exclusion and marginalisation, as well as highlight opportunities to reimagine a post-apartheid school history curriculum that includes, rehistoricises and recentres LGBTQIA+ humanities.

The second aspect of the study's theoretical framing draws from Southern social movements framework, which was developed and conceptualised in the Global South as a counter to the old social movement theory and the new social movement theory of the Global North. Despite the fact that the Southern social movements framework and the old and new social movement theories are all concerned with *how* and *why* groups of people collectively mobilise to question and challenge deepening crises that confront them (Tilly, 1978, 1985, 2004). The latter two frameworks were developed in the Global North, primarily Europe, as a response to the industrial-era struggles, 1960s student protests, anti-war campaigns, and environmental activism (Ballard et al., 2006), and this means that they did not and continue to not have the ability in them to fully make sense of the world in its entirety (Mamdani et al., 1988; Burawoy, 2005a, 2005b; De Sousa Santos, 2007; Escobar, 2008; Chakrabarty, 2009; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012; Mentan, 2015).

That is why Burawoy (2005a) and many others (Ballard et al., 2006; Habib, 2008; Gaventa, 2010; Thompson & Tapscott, 2010; Motta & Nilsen, 2011) have called for the provincialisation of the social sciences and the humanities. Similarly, Comaroff and Comaroff (2012) have argued for 'inverting the order of things' by conceptualising and developing theories grounded in empirical studies from the Global South. In terms of social movements theory specifically, Fadaee (2017:45) has called for "Bringing in the South", so that social movement theories can respond to the localised realities of the Global South. All of these calls made by Burawoy et al. (2005ab) align with Said's (2014) notion of a traveling theory.

Therefore, Southern social movements framework is made up of four characteristics, which are not entirely exclusive to it, but are "defining features of many Southern movements and they need to be taken seriously" (Fadaee, 2017:47). With this in mind, it should also be noted that social movements in the Global South are not homogeneous (Fadaee, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c), because no single social movement studies framework exists in and for the Global South (Cox, 2017). Nevertheless, the four characteristics that underpin the Southern social movements include: first, that many of these movements in the Global South were constructed and developed within colonial, apartheid, and postcolonial contexts which have, in turn, informed and shaped both their emergence and deployment of specific forms of mobilisation (Fadaee, 2017). Second, these social movements came to be under diverse political systems and regime types that, in turn, influenced and shaped how they organised themselves and acted on what confronted them (Fadaee, 2017). Third, the continuous reconfiguration of state-civil society relations in some Global South

contexts influence the potential for the emergence and expansion of social movements (Fadaee, 2017). Lastly, social movements in these contexts are best understood through their multiple intersections that typically link democratisation processes, ontological, epistemic, identity and material concerns, as well as (in)formal politics (Fadaee, 2017).

Given this and for the purposes of the current study, the Southern social movements framework was used to investigate the implicit connections between the 1976 Soweto Uprising and the 2015-2016 #MustFall Uprisings. This framework was also used to theorise the link between the legacies of the 1976 Soweto Uprising and the 2015-2016 #MustFall Uprisings to calls made concerning an inclusive LGBTQIA+ inclusive school history curriculum in post-apartheid South Africa. Lastly, this framework was employed in conjunction with a decolonial intersectional queer theory and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to reflect on and analyse discourses on how 1976 Soweto Uprising and the 2015-2016 #MustFall protests intersect LGBTQIA+ with class, race, and gender under post-apartheid democratising processes.

Methodological insights

For the purposes of the current study, a qualitative case study design approach was used (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011) to investigate how the legacies of the 1976 Soweto Uprising and the 2015-2016 #MustFall student protests inform and shape contemporary efforts to conceptualise and develop an epistemically and ontologically just post-apartheid school history curriculum. This design was chosen, since it provided a focused approach to understand the continued erasures of LGBTQIA+ experiences, voices, histories, and ontologies in the post-apartheid school curriculum in South Africa, as well as explore how this situation could be transcended. Additionally, this design also enabled me (the author) to immerse myself in these two specific case studies to uncover rich insights about them (Cohen et al., 2011).

To support the abovementioned research design, a critical paradigm (CP) was employed due to its activist-oriented approach to research that foregrounds the analysis of power, inequality and knowledge production in educational research (Asghar, 2013). CP enabled me (the author) to move beyond neutral description in my analysis and towards interrogating the structures and practices that perpetuate the marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ experiences, voices, histories, and ontologies in the post-apartheid schools and school history curriculum in South Africa, despite the legacies of the 1976 Soweto Uprising and the recent 2015-2016 #MustFall student protests. CP was also adopted, since

it aligns with the study's preferred theoretical orientations, as well as the qualitative case study design adopted.

Furthermore, CP was employed because it guided the use of CDA to interrogate curriculum documents, literature, and narratives concerning the 1976 Soweto Uprising, the 2015-2016 #MustFall student protests, as well as the post-apartheid school history curriculum—enabling the study to identify the silences, erasures, and reproductions of oppressive structures (Fairclough, 1993, 1995).

To operationalise CDA, I (the author) analysed purposively selected official school history curricula documents that trace the trajectory of post-apartheid curriculum reform in South African dating back to the transitional period to the present. Because of this, I was then able to use CDA in a particular way that included the precise analysis of text, to read the varied and layered meanings contained therein (Maluleka & Godsell, 2024). However, my reading also involved reading for absence: looking for what is not there and to an extent, imagining what could be there. This enabled me to better understand ways in which exclusionary hegemonic historical narratives and representations are situated, maintained, reproduced, and transmitted in post-apartheid school curricula. All of this was possible to achieve because CDA is “fundamentally interested in analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language” (Martin & Wodak, 2003:6).

Furthermore, CDA also proved useful to this study, because of its three processes of analysis, that is, (1) the object of analysis (verbal, visual, or verbal and visual texts); (2) the process by which the object is produced and received (writing/speaking and reading/listening/viewing) by human subjects; and (3) the socio-cultural conditions which govern these processes (see Fairclough, 1989). These processes are not only interrelated but are dialectical and intersectional too; they also are governed by different types of analysis which are: text analysis (description), processing analysis (interpretation), and social analysis (explanation) (Fairclough, 1989).

From the 1976 Soweto Uprising to the 2015-2016 #MustFall Moment

In June 1976, exactly 50 years ago, hundreds of Black high school learners across South Africa took to the streets to protest the apartheid government's mandate that Afrikaans be the compulsory medium of instruction in schools (Nieftagodien, 2014). Decades later, in October 2015, thousands of Black university students mobilised to challenge the

rising tuition fees, commodification of education, the continued colonisation of university curricula and culture, and the exploitation of outsourced workers (Luescher et al., 2022). Therefore, both uprisings emerged in different political moments of South Africa, the former during apartheid and the latter in post-apartheid. Yet, they are connected by a common thread, that is, Black youth at the forefront of leading the challenge against sociopolitical, economic and education systems (Naidoo, 2016), that continue to construct and portray them as nonhuman in the land of their birth (Kumalo, 2018, 2020).

However, it is also important to recognise that student/learner activism in Africa, particularly South Africa, did not begin with the 1976 Soweto Uprising, nor did it end with the 2015-2016 #MustFall movement. Across the African continent, student activism has historically been intertwined with the broader political liberation struggles, spanning from the 1940s through the 1980s, marked by waves of university protests throughout West and Central Africa. In South Africa, in 1955, the African National Congress responded to the adoption and introduction of the Bantu Education Act by organising school boycotts aimed at creating an alternative education system for Black learners (Hyslop, 1987). These efforts can be viewed as the foundation for the 1976 Soweto Uprising, as well as precursors to the 'People's Education' campaigns of the 1980s (Mkatshwa, 1985), as well as 2015-2016 #MustFall protests for a decolonised education that is to people centred. In the late 1960s, Bantu Biko and his fellow comrades conceptualised and established the South African Student Organisation (SASO), a radical Black student body that developed the philosophy of Black Consciousness (BC) (Tleane, 2024). Both SASO and BC played a foundational role in informing and shaping the struggles of 1976 (Lekgoathi, 2016; Moloi, 2016), and 2015-2016 youths (Naidoo, 2016), as well as the 'People's Education' campaigns of the 1980s (Mkatshwa, 1985).

Therefore, it is within these complex and nuanced historical realities that I sought to make sense of and theorise about the convergences and divergences between the 1976 Soweto Uprising and the 2015-2016 #MustFall student protests, while also highlighting how both movements pursued the epistemic and ontological recognition of all individuals, irrespective of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The 2015-2016 #MustFall student protests should be viewed as a contemporary continuation of the tradition of Black student/learner activism seen in 1976 during the Soweto Uprising and other uprisings before that (Heffernan & Nieftagodien, 2016; Naidoo, 2016). This is because while the 1976 Soweto Uprising was against apartheid and its specific policies, the 2015-2016 #MustFall student protests was challenging post-

apartheid systemic inequalities by demonstrating that the legacies of racialised oppression in education and society persists. Both movements or uprisings reveal the ongoing struggle of Black students and learners to confront structural inequities that are racialised, as well epistemic and ontological violence they continue to encounter (De Beer, 2008; More, 2012)—in their ‘quest for true humanity’ (Biko, 1979).

In critiquing colonial-apartheid education and society, these movements also incorporated principles from BC, Pan-Africanism, and intersectionality to advocate for the epistemic and ontological rehumanisation of the oppressed. While the 1976 learners did not explicitly include LGBTQIA+ communities in their calls for their rehumanisation, it can be argued that their demand for restoring dignity and humanity to the oppressed implicitly encompassed LGBTQIA+ people as well, given the theoretical and philosophical frameworks they drew on. This claim is made, based on a pool of scholarly literature that argues that some of those who were part of the 1976 Uprising did, in fact, conceptualise oppression through and within complex lenses of gender and sexuality (Lorenz, 2002; Johnson, 2010; Boswell, 2013; Matebeni & Kiguwa, 2024). This scholarship also recognises that while the theoretical and philosophical frameworks mentioned above were often androcentric; the lived experiences and narratives of some of the participants in the Uprising such as Simon Tseko Nkoli¹ did, in fact, challenge patriarchal and heteronormative frameworks that characterised and underpinned the protest itself, as well as the formal ideologies relied on.

For instance, Lorenz (2002) argues that while some BC writers romanticised traditional gender relations and roles in their writing, the movement’s focus on ‘the power of self-definition’ provided both Black women and LGBTQIA+ persons with a psychological framework that enabled them to challenge all forms of internal and external subjugation. This argument is supported by Matebeni and Kiguwa (2024), who call for a ‘queering’ lens to be adopted in our engagement with South Africa’s past in order to challenge the heteronormative perspectives or understandings embedded in that very past. This is because the matrix of oppression faced by those who were oppressed under apartheid included not only race, ethnicity, and class; but sexual orientations and gender too. This then compels one to conceptualise, understand, and engage histories of the liberation struggles and movements as a tapestry of these overlapping struggles (Maluleka & Soldaat, 2025).

¹ Nkoli Tseko Simon (1957-1998) was the founding member and leader of the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW)—South Africa’s LGBTQIA+ movement that embodied its link with the anti-apartheid struggle.

On the other hand, the 2015-2016 #MustFall movement explicitly incorporated the call for the rehumanisation of LGBTQIA+ communities in its messaging. This is because their conceptualisation and understanding of what constitutes humanity was not singular; instead, it was an intersectional understanding of humanity that was underpinned by multiple identities and experiences (Du Plessis, 2021). However, this was not an easy task, as tensions arose over prioritising issues such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, leading to ideological conflicts within the movement (Oxfam South Africa, 2016; Ramaru, 2017; Xaba, 2017; Andrews, 2020; Daniel, 2021; Wang, 2025).

Therefore, both the 1976 Soweto Uprising and the 2015-2016 #MustFall protests were, as Kilani (2025) suggests from a curriculum theory perspective, a 'Black radical protest' that functioned as a form of knowledge production in its own right. A function that confronted, head on, disciplinary frameworks of colonial-apartheid education from beyond its institutional boundaries.

LGBTQIA+ epistemic and ontological realities in South Africa and its schools

Prior to colonial contact, indigenous African societies, including those found in the southern tip of the continent, did not condemn sexual minorities such as the LGBTQIA+. This is highlighted in Epprecht's (2013) historical research that shows that many indigenous African societies across the continent acknowledged and recognised diverse sexual orientations and gender identities before their contact with the colonisers. Tamale's (2013) comprehensive analysis, on the other hand, supports Epprecht's research findings by highlighting how colonial-apartheid's legal and educational systems rooted in European laws, Calvinist ideology and heteronormativity demonised and criminalised diverse indigenous African sexual gender practices. These legal and educational systems also transitioned indigenous African people's attitudes from acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ to outright disapproval (McNamara, 2018).

That is why the apartheid regime in South Africa enacted multiple laws listing sodomy within key schedules or provisions, including the Criminal Procedure Act 52 of 1977 and sections of the Sexual Offences Act of 1957 (Reddy, 2006; Wells & Polders, 2006; Botes, 2023; Mchunu, 2023). At the level of schooling generally, and within and through the school history curriculum in particular, this meant that LGBTQIA+ learners were denied epistemic and ontological self-recognition (Godsell, 2019), stemming from multiple forms of violence (Giroux, 2025), including curricular scholasticide (Rossouw, 2025) or

epistemicide (De Sousa Santos, 2014), which is the deliberate and systematic exclusion of certain forms of knowledge within curriculum design (Francis, 2017). This exclusion often contributed to hostile school climates (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019) that, in turn, intensified vulnerabilities for LGBTQIA+ learners while support systems weakened (Zembylas, 2021).

The 1994 democratic transition promised a new South African society with legal and education systems that were inclusive and recognised diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (Maluleka & Godsell, 2024). In 1996, a Democratic Constitution and its Bills of Rights (Chapter 2 of the Constitution) that was meant to concretise this promise, were adopted. This was then followed by the introduction of sexuality education, which was necessitated, partly, by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Despite this, research has revealed that there are still persistent gaps between policy intentions and classroom implementation concerning LGBTQIA+ community (Francis, 2019; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019), as well as their lived experiences and histories especially where the school history curriculum is a concern (Maluleka & Godsell, 2024; Maluleka & Soldaat, 2025). These realities also reveal how homophobia and heteronormativity continue to inform and shape educational practice, despite constitutional protections (Francis, 2017).

Msibi's (2014) study with LGBTQIA+ learners in a township school in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal reveals how these learners often experience discrimination, harassment, and exclusion at the hands of school administrators and teachers, despite these constitutional guarantees and protections. In the study, one learner who identifies as lesbian was quoted describing the victimisation they suffered at the hands of one of her homophobic teachers:

... called me to the staffroom. She started shouting at me and was telling me to stop acting like a boy. She said I need to stop this lesbian thing because I will start making other learners like me. (Msibi 2012: 524).

More recently, Adewoye and Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2026) revealed how LGBTQIA+-based school bullying continues to persist. One of the learners they interviewed remarked how reluctant teachers are to intervene when they experience bullying due to their sexuality, and this has perpetuated their victimisation:

Sometimes, we do report, but even at that, most teachers take it for a joke and never punish or call the learners who bully us to order. (Adewoye & Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2026:23).

The studies above and many others, both locally (Msibi, 2011, 2014; Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Ganga-Limando, 2014; Reygan, 2016; Francis, 2017, 2022; Francis & Kuhl,

2020; Mayeza, 2023; Francis & McEwen, 2024) and globally (UNESCO, 2016; Crothers et al., 2017;; Earnshaw et al., 2019; Mishna et al., 2019; Jugović & Bezinović, 2019), highlight the embeddedness and pervasiveness of bullying faced by LGBTQIA+ learners in schools around the world, despite laws put in place to protect them from such violence.

Post-apartheid school history curricula reform: 1990-2018

From 1990-1996, what is considered the transitional period in South Africa, liberation movements and civic organisations that were tasked with negotiating with the apartheid regime made educational and curriculum one of their key negotiation priorities. This is because, under apartheid education, particularly its school history syllabi, Eurocentrism and Afrikaner nationalism were promoted as part of the broader phenomenon of white supremacy (Du Preez & Du Preez, 1983).

Immediately after the democratic elections of 1994, an Interim Core Syllabus (ICS) document was adopted in place of apartheid education and syllabi (Kros, 1996; Seleti, 1997), as part of the process of *Ukuhlambulula* or cleansing of education and curriculum from their colonial-apartheid past (Jansen, 2001; Maluleka, 2021). According to Bertram (2020), the ICS served as a temporary measure while plans for a comprehensive education and curriculum reform were being conceptualised and developed. Bertram's understanding of the ICS might also excuse why LGBTQIA+ experiences, voices, histories, and ontologies did not form part of the ICS' knowledge base.

However, other reasons for the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ experiences and histories in the knowledge base of all post-apartheid school history curricula, and not just the ICS document might, because LGBTQIA+ histories, contributions and experiences were in fact, considered difficult knowledge² (Simon, 2011; Jonker 2012; Zembylas, 2014) to be historicised and included because Christian apartheid legacy that helped institutionalise and normalise heteronormativity and heterosexuality. Because of this, history education in general was co-opted to serve the apartheid state's Christian-nationalist ideology, which ultimately found expression in post-apartheid South Africa too. In addition, this exclusion of LGBTQIA+ histories, contributions and experiences can also be read as a deliberate, sustained and deeply ideological process that continues to construct LGBTQIA+ bodies

² Difficult knowledge as a concept has been theorised in many different ways. However, in this study, difficult knowledge is understood to refer to historical knowledge and/or past realities that feel alien or unintelligible that forces one to confront the very boundaries of their own intellectual tolerance and/or capacity.

and their lived experiences as historically insignificant³ (Partington, 1980; Phillips, 2002; Lévesque, 2005; Bradshaw, 2006). This situation is then exacerbated by arguments around the over-crowdedness of the curriculum which in turn, leaves little room for other specialised historical exploration (Bertram, 2020; Teeger, 2023), as well resistance from teachers, parents, religious organisations, and others for the historicisation and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ histories in the curriculum with is not unique to post-apartheid South Africa (Goetz & Mayer, 2023; Francis, 2024).

In 1997, an outcomes-based curriculum known as Curriculum 2005 (C2005) was adopted for primary school up to Grade 9 (Department of Education, 1997). It was presented as ‘inclusive’, with the hope of creating a school history curriculum based on alternative interpretations and representations of the past that diverged from colonial-apartheid narratives (Mthethwa & Maluleka, 2025). Hence, de-emphasise content knowledge in favour of learning outcomes, robust knowledge integration and generic skills—all of which were strongly informed and shaped by the markets and labour (Hoadley, 2017). Moreover, school history was no longer taught and learnt as a standalone subject in the Foundation and General Education phases; instead, it was merged with geography into Human and Social Sciences (HSS) (Weldon, 2005). The history component of the HSS consisted of broad sets of concepts which were labelled ‘range statements’ that indicated to History teachers what to teach, as well as ‘performance’ indicators which described what learners should be able to do and how they should be assessed (Department of Education, 1997). This meant that there were no clear lists of content topics provided in the C2005 document. Thus, the lack of content clarity could be the reason why the LGBTQIA+ experiences, voices, histories, and ontologies were marginalised and erased in C2005.

In 2000, another curriculum review was carried out, which resulted in the adoption of Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) in 2002 (Department of Education, 2002). Within the RNCS, history and geography were again divided into two distinct subjects, each with their own learning outcomes and content, though they remained within the Social Sciences learning area (Department of Education, 2002). Like NCS, the RNCS also remained outcomes based through the specification of outcomes and assessment standards to be met while promoting learner-centred pedagogies and activity-based approaches to education (Bertram, 2020). For history, this meant an acquiring of enquiry and interpretation skills for investigating about the past were encouraged (Department

³ Historical (in)significance is concerned with exploring and understanding why certain historical events, people and their lived experiences, or artifacts are considered important enough by historians to study and remember today, and why others are not.

of Education, 2002). Despite these improvements, the LGBTQIA+ experiences, voices, histories, and ontologies continued to also be sidelined in the RNCS.

In 2011, yet another curriculum known as CAPS was adopted after a curriculum review process that was started in 2009 (Department of Basic Education, 2011). CAPS provided history teachers and their learners with a clear, term-by-term specification of content to be taught and learnt (Department of Basic Education, 2011). At level of knowledge, CAPS aimed to balance coverage of South African, African, and world history (Department of Basic Education, 2011). However, even with this balance in historical knowledge offering, CAPS like its predecessors failed to include in its knowledge base the experiences, voices, histories, and ontologies of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Finally, in 2015, during the height of the #MustFall student protests, the then Minister of Basic Education, Mrs Matsie Angelina 'Angie' Motshekga, appointed the History Ministerial Task Team (HMTT) to investigate, advise on, and oversee the implementation of school history as a compulsory subject in schools, particularly in the Further Education and Training (FET) band (Grades 10-12) (Department of Basic Education, 2015). Interestingly, the appointment of the HMTT coincided with the student protest in South African public universities, which were demanding a fee-free decolonised university education and curricula under the banner of #MustFall. In 2018, the HMTT released their report in 2018 (Department of Basic Education, 2018), in which several suggestions were made, including, but not limited to strengthening the CAPS school history curriculum in the interim, with the hope that the Department of Basic Education would completely overhaul the CAPS curriculum and content in future. The HMTT also argued that this would depend, among other things, on whether history becomes a compulsory subject in the FET phase (Department of Basic Education, 2018). Another interesting suggestion that the report made, which relates to this study, was the suggestion that the gender lens of understanding the past needed to be integrated more into the curriculum which would, in turn, address the CAPS 'masculinist' biases (Wills, 2016), which marginalise women's experiences and reinforce oppressive gender ideas. However, progressive as this suggestion is, it was also a missed opportunity, because the report makes no mention of the need to recentre LGBTQIA+ histories, experiences, and voices in the school history curriculum (Maluleka & Ramoupi, 2022; Maluleka & Ledwaba, 2023).

All of the above not only highlight the embeddedness of continued mutually reinforcing convergence between two processes that construct LGBTQIA+ bodies and their lived experiences as difficult knowledge and their simultaneous consignment to historical

insignificance. Furthermore, this situation also signals an urgent need to champion an LGBTQIA+ inclusive school history curriculum in post-apartheid South Africa.

Towards an LGBTQIA+ inclusive school history curriculum in post-apartheid South Africa

There was (apartheid) and still (post-apartheid) is a deliberate institutionalisation of compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity in South African schools at the level of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and school culture (Francis and Kuhl, 2020). This institutionalisation often assumes and then constructs all learners as heterosexual and cisgender. This is best experienced in school history curricula that continue to completely erase LGBTQIA+ experiences, voices, histories and ontologies. To counter this, there is a need to work towards an LGBTQIA+ inclusive school history curriculum that confronts and challenges epistemic and ontological erasures, heterosexuality, and heteronormativity, while drawing from human rights and socio-epistemic and ontological mandates of the 1996 Constitution. Furthermore, this confrontational approach should be done in light of the HMTT report, its recommendations (Department of Basic Education, 2018), its shortcomings concerning its proposed gender history approach (Maluleka & Ledwaba, 2023), as well as calls made by the 1976 and 2015-2016 youth for the rehumanisation of all.

Maluleka and Soldaat (2025) recently argued for the need to weave together historical knowledge into a tapestry within the knowledge base of the post-apartheid school history curriculum. This essentially means deliberately rehistoricising and recentring LGBTQIA+ struggles and everyday lives within the core narratives of colonialism, apartheid, and democracy, rather than isolating them as marginal or add-on topics. This approach also aligns with the proposal by Maluleka and Ledwaba (2023) for a need to broaden the gender history approach recommended by the HMTT report (Department of Basic Education, 2018). It further aligns with the argument made by the HMTT itself that it is “against the exercise of wholesale changes or a complete overhaul of the CAPS syllabus and content at this present time”, suggesting that such changes would be “too soon” (Department of Basic Education, 2018:84). Instead, it advocated using the existing CAPS curricula as the “basis of strengthening the content in the interim”, with the expectation that the Ministry of Basic Education might in future consider more substantive revisions (Department of Basic Education, 2018:84). In this sense, weaving LGBTQIA+ histories, experiences, and ontologies into existing topics within the CAPS school history curriculum would represent a practical and policy-aligned strategy for curriculum enrichment rather than structural overhaul.

Moreover, such curricula rehistoricisation and recentring resonates with the calls that emerged from the 2015-2016 #MustFall student protests, which demanded the decolonisation of education and the transformation of how knowledge is produced within South African public universities and schools. These movements highlighted the need to challenge and transcend colonial, apartheid, patriarchal, and heteronormative knowledge frameworks or systems and ontologies, while advocating for the inclusion of marginalised and peripheralised knowledge forms and ontologies—including those like the LGBTQIA+ communities.

Therefore, there are ways within the current CAPS Social Sciences (Grades 7-9) and History (Grade 10-12) curricula in which this rehistoricisation and recentring can be undertaken in an academically rigorous, knowledge-informed, and pedagogically effective manner. For instance, in the CAPS Grades 7-9 curricula, learners in Grade 9 are meant to engage with themes such as *Turning points in South African history: 1948 and the 1950s* and *Turning points in South African history: 1960s, 1976, and 1994*. In Grade 10-12 curricula, learners in Grade 11 are expected to engage with the theme of *Apartheid in South Africa 1940s to 1960s*; and in Grade 12 they then engage with themes of *Civil Society protests 1950s to 1990s*, *Civil resistance 1970s to 1980s in South Africa*; and *The coming of democracy in South Africa, and coming to terms with the past*.

These themes provide opportunities to integrate LGBTQIA+ histories and activism into broader liberation narratives of South Africa. The emergence of organisations such as the Gay Association of South Africa (GASA) in 1980 and the later formation of the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW) illustrate the development of organised LGBTQIA+ activism during apartheid and the democratic transition period (Bilchitz, 2015; Bhardwaj, 2023; Pakade, 2024). Moreover, the life and activism of Simon Tseko Nkoli (1957-1998) would further demonstrate the intersections between anti-apartheid struggles and LGBTQIA+ organising, because Nkoli participated in the Soweto Uprising of 1976 as a Black gay man and was later arrested and charged in the Delmas Treason Trial (Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action [GALA], 2020; Botes, 2023). From this, Nkoli became a prominent figure linking the liberation movement with LGBTQIA+ rights activism, including his role in GLOW (GALA, 2020; Mchunu, 2023). Similarly, activists such as Beverley Palesa Ditsie represent the emergence of a new generation of openly LGBTQIA+ activists during the democratic transition, notably as a founding member of GLOW alongside Nkoli, and as the first openly Black lesbian speaker at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China (South African History Online, 2017a, 2017b; Martin, 2020).

Thus, integrating the abovementioned histories and lived experiences, alongside the contributions of many other LGBTQIA+ activists and movements, would enable both history teachers and learners to recognise and appreciate that LGBTQIA+ individuals were not peripheral observers, but active participants in South Africa's broader liberation struggles. Equally, it would also enable them to appreciate that South Africa's struggles for freedom were never monolithic; they encompassed different, yet intersectional visions of freedom that insisted that racial, classed, and ethicised oppression could not be separated from the fight against gender and sexual oppression. In this way, the CAPS history curriculum can be taught and learnt in ways that foreground the entangled histories of race, gender, sexuality, and political resistance in South Africa.

Conclusion

Post-apartheid South Africa is among the first nations in the world to constitutionally protect LGBTQIA+ communities. Yet, its school history curricula since the 1990s and to date, as well as the HMTT report (Department of Basic Education, 2018) that called for a compulsory and African centred school history curriculum, have remained stubbornly exclusory toward LGBTQIA+ histories, identities, and ontologies. This has resulted in a sanitised version of the past where, for instance, the history of the liberation struggle that only speaks of heterosexual and cisgender men and women fighting racial oppression culminating the 1994 democracy is presented. However, for a learner sitting in that history classroom who identifies as LGBTQIA+, this version of the past feels oddly silent to them, because they cannot see nor feel themselves in that version (Godsell, 2019). It is as if LGBTQIA+ South Africans did not exist, or worse, did not contribute to the liberation struggles that ultimately resulted in the freedoms and democracy that we now enjoy.

Thus, to contribute to correcting this silence, the current article has argued for the weaving of LGBTQIA+ histories, experiences, and ontologies into the knowledge base of the post-apartheid school history curriculum. This argument was presented drawing from the struggles advanced by the 1976 Soweto Uprising, as well as the 2015-2016 student protests. A decolonial intersectional queer theory and Southern social movements framework were used as theoretical orientations, and a qualitative case study design underpinned by a critical paradigm, with critical discourse analysis as tools of analysis.

Funding

This work was supported by the National Research Foundation (NRF) Thuthuka Post PhD Track under Grant TTK240515218754. The findings and conclusions expressed herein are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NRF.

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