

The pros and cons of history as a compulsory subject in South Africa from the lens of history teachers in the Frances Baard District

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Abstract

The recommendation by the Basic Education Ministerial Task Team to phase in history as a compulsory school subject from Grades 10 to 12 in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase has been one of the most controversial curriculum topics in South Africa in recent years. This uproar can be connected to the fact that the importance of history as a school subject has been topical at local and international levels including certain countries phasing out the subject. This study aimed to establish the views of history teachers from the Frances Baard District on the effectiveness of the call to make history a compulsory subject in South Africa particularly during the FET phase. This study used a qualitative research approach that employed an interpretive paradigm. Semi-structured interviews were employed for data collection and a thematic analysis technique was used to distinguish different themes. Social constructivism was adopted as the theoretical framework to

nuance the findings and determine what influenced the teachers' perspectives. The findings indicated that history is still full of great worth in the social and academic fabric of South Africa and for this reason it should be made a compulsory subject in school. The study also assumes that implementing history in the FET band will give more dignity to the discipline leading to improved teaching slots and times.

Keywords: CAPS; Compulsory school subject; Frances Baard; History; Ministerial Task Team; Social constructivism

Introduction

History studies past local and global human events that have shaped the present world (Carr, 2018). In the South African context, following the end of apartheid in 1994, significant reforms were introduced to address the injustices of the past. These reforms spanned various sectors, including economics, housing, and education. In the realm of education, policy and curriculum planners implemented several curriculum models: Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) in 1997, Curriculum 2005 in 1998, the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) in 2002, and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in 2012. While history played various roles in these educational frameworks, at no point during these phases was there a concerted effort to make history a compulsory subject in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase.

Jansen and Taylor (2003:7) argue that, “Post-Apartheid South Africa has experienced a sequence of policies, regulations, and laws aimed at improving the state and quality of education more than any other transitional democracies.” However, despite these extensive educational reforms, the specific question of making history a compulsory subject in the FET phase remained unaddressed. Davids (2016) points out that even after more than two decades of democracy, South Africa continues to struggle with issues such as social cohesion, nationhood, racism, and xenophobia. These social challenges informed the formation of a Ministerial Task Team in 2015 whose job according to Oteng, Mensah, Babah, and Swanzy-Impraim (2023), was to establish the possibility of the implementation of history as a compulsory subject in the FET phase and to engage in comparative analysis internationally in case of implementation.

While debate and discussion continue surrounding the ministerial decision, the voices of history teachers themselves have not often been heard. This omission is significant, given that teachers are the ones who will be expected to enforce any curriculum changes that may result from this debate (Woods *et al.*, 2019). This paper aims to fill this gap by investigating the perspectives that history teachers have on the likelihood of making history a compulsory subject in South African schools, particularly at the FET level because as Sleeter and Carmona (2017) submit, curriculum implementation essentially depends on teachers.

Review of the literature

Status of history in the basic education CAPS

In the intermediate phase consisting of Grades 4, 5, and 6 and the Senior Phase made up of Grades 7, 8, and 9 as prescribed in CAPS, history is compulsory. In these phases, history is combined with geography under the umbrella of social sciences. However, in the FET phase (Grades 10–12), learners have a choice of dropping history and choosing other subject possibilities. Polakow-Suransky (2002) demonstrated that Curriculum 2005 emphasised marketable skills and developments in the area of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) to be critical for South Africa's economy. Since history was not consistent with these market requirements, it was downplayed as a compulsory subject.

Making history an optional subject from the FET phase has raised some concerns (Becher and Maclure, 2024). Many think that the exclusion of history from the list of mandatory subjects has a negative impact on society. Some have opposed the recent changes recommended by the Ministerial Task Team (MTT) such as making history a compulsory subject in the FET phase starting from 2023. Curriculum specialists have expressed concerns that history could be used as a political tool to promote specific agendas. Wahlström (2018:33) argues that “national school systems are political projects”, indicating that history might serve the interests of curriculum designers rather than promoting critical thinking. Liz (2015) adds that history does not have practical applications in everyday life and suggests a greater focus on science and technology.

Contrary to these counterarguments, history has a core function of orienting citizens to be informed, empathetic, and tolerant. According to Ramphele (2018), “history is about understanding and accepting one another”, and states that it is vital that learners be taken through a historical overview of the South Africa experience. Fru (2015) further stresses that the teaching of history cultivates responsibility and cognitive skills necessary for decision-making on issues of society. The CAPS document (2012) subscribes to this view by asserting that history in a democratic state empowers the people to practice, contest, and uphold constitutional rights; confront bigotry; and embrace stewardship of social and natural resources.

Ministerial task team recommendations report

The feasibility of making history a compulsory subject during the FET phase was examined

by the Minister of Basic Education by a Ministerial Task Team since 2015. According to Van Eeden and Warnich (2018), the MTT's report issued in May 2018 highlighted that history should be taught as an essential subject for Grades 10, 11, and 12 instead of life orientation, starting from 2023. This was the result of a cross-national study. This report also recommended an increase in the teaching time from 27.5 to 31.5 hours per week so that learners could have a minimum of eight instead of the previous seven subjects (Department of Basic Education, 2018).

Some of the MTT's suggestions were predicated on the notion that making history compulsory could address nation-building issues and lack of social cohesion. Nevertheless, these changes present different problems (Sibanda and Blignaut, 2020). For instance, increasing teaching hours would require teacher retraining and adjustments to the school timetable. Moreover, curriculum specialists have raised concerns about the potential political manipulation of the content. It is essential to analyse the report regarding its focus, content, and assumptions to understand the full scope of its recommendations and their impact on teaching history.

The status of history as a school subject in selected countries outside South Africa

To provide a broader perspective on how other countries approach history education, this section examines the cases of the United States of America, Rwanda, and India. These countries were selected because they represent educational systems and socio-political histories relevant to post-colonial and democratic contexts, similar to South Africa (Koopman, 2017).

The United States of America

The educational system in the United States is highly decentralised, and each state has its own curriculum standards that reflect its concerns (Lee, 2002). Due to this, the place of history as a school subject is not fixed, but it differs from one state to the other. Some states have set history as obligatory throughout the elementary, junior, and higher grades while in other states history is recommended for the elementary and junior grades but optional in the higher grades (VanSledright, 2002).

As noted with the decentralised education system in the USA, history has not been immune from controversy regarding its teaching in the country. The Republican/Democrats' ideological differences have informed changes in learning policies regarding

controversies such as racism, gay rights, and climate change. For example, in Michigan, the Board of Education purged texts from any references to democratic values or gay rights (Fink, Furrer, and Gautschi 2023). This perfectly explains why it is hard to maintain a non-politically charged history syllabus in a polarised society. The USA has learned some lessons that could help South Africa, especially regarding the issues of civic education and political polarisation.

Rwanda

In Rwanda, history is taught from lower primary to lower secondary level, with lower primary being from Grades one to seven, and lower secondary from Grades eight to nine (Department of Education, 2010). In these grades, history is offered with social and religious studies making the learners learn the association between history and social practices. At the upper secondary level, history appears as an individual content area and may or may not be taken together with other contents (Moshman, 2015).

Rwanda's perspective of teaching history emphasised the approach to nation-building and reconciliation. After the 1994 genocide, the government realised that history education has the potential of fostering unity, reconciliation, and peace. The efforts to promote history-citizenry synergy in secondary grades are intended to prepare citizens for functioning in the Rwandan socio-political context (Moshman, 2015). This constitutes a useful lesson for South Africa where history could also be employed to unify the nation and compensate for problematic aspects of social segmentation.

India

In India, history is a part of the curriculum for social study starting from Grades six to nine (Moshman, 2015). In the humanities stream, history is offered as an elective course in Grades 10 to 12. Due to the focus on STEM areas in the Indian educational curriculum, history is given little importance as the government has relegated subjects considered less relevant to the economic potential of the country (Clarke, 2018). The case of India highlights the tension that exists between economic gains and cultural and historical knowledge retention.

History as a compulsory subject: International lessons and implications

South Africa can learn important lessons from the United States, Rwanda, and India about the implications of making history a compulsory course. In the USA, history has been used to support the principle of civil tolerance alongside supporting civic values albeit with controversy. Analysing the Rwandan history curriculum after the genocide has shown that reconciliation and unity can be important outcomes of promoting history education (Fried, 2017). The case of India where the history course takes a subordinate role to STEM subjects indicates how the subject can struggle to remain relevant as the economy advances.

History as a compulsory school subject to promote social cohesion and nation-building

In recent times South Africa experienced numerous racial and xenophobic incidents that have threatened social cohesion and nation-building. Nussey (2018) states that the common occurrence of xenophobia in South Africa is clear evidence of the youth's lack of historical knowledge and appreciation for humanity and diversity. In Nussey's argument, this would mean that if history is made a compulsory subject, a sense of multiracial, multicultural, and diversity appreciation will be instilled in the youth. In Nussey's study, there is much emphasis on the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which is regarded as one of the important human traits in African people. Social cohesion, nation-building, and *Ubuntu* can be enhanced if history becomes compulsory. Masooa and Twala (2014) state that as much as society is dominated by the demand for science and technology, the place and role of history should not be underestimated as it plays an important role in shaping and moulding people and society. The authors make this statement by looking at how history contributes to build conscious citizens who can value the history of society. Some teachers argue that mandatory history would elevate their personal and professional status and that of the subject (Wassermann, *et al*, 2023). This can be achieved by emphasising a memory-style, politically orientated history which would turn learners into good citizens knowledgeable about South African history. At the same time, the perceived generic value of the subject would be shared with parents, teachers, and learners alike.

Therefore, a viable way to build and establish well-rounded, responsible citizens is by emphasising the study of history at school, which can be achieved by making the discipline compulsory.

Arguments against history being a compulsory school subject

There is also literature that opposes the decision of history as a compulsory school subject. For instance, Legodi (2001) argues that history education will be used as an instrument of propaganda to justify or legitimise a particular interpretation of the past. Because education is the foundation of every country, this is the way that a country builds its desired citizens. Therefore, history as a school subject may imprint biased political ideas. Mosooa and Twala (2014) also allude to the fact that teaching compulsory history in many parts of the world has been and still is well aligned with promoting political ideologies and political exigencies. Drawing from South Africa's difficult past, teachers in a similar study conducted by Wasserman, *et al* (2023) were concerned that history as an analytical discipline need not become compulsory because in the process it will be devalued and become a political tool in a manner reminiscent of the apartheid era.

Social constructivism theoretical framework

Social constructivism is the process through which individuals construct knowledge based on their subjective experiences, ideas, and social interactions (Haryadi and Nofriansyah, 2016). According to constructivist theory, knowledge is constructed and therefore people who are learning make their construction based on their existing experiences and ideas (Mogashoa, 2014). This study utilised social constructivist theory because the history teachers' perceptions developed from their teaching practice and concern for mandatory history education. The aim is to uncover the complexities of making history a compulsory subject through the lens of those who will ultimately be tasked with its delivery: the teachers themselves. Based on the argument of Haryadi and Nofriansyah (2016), two major concepts are associated with social constructivism, namely, knowledge construction and cognition-accommodated concepts. This research adopted the constructivist research paradigm by engaging history teachers in the co-construction of knowledge regarding the proposed subject becoming compulsory. Haryadi and Nofriansyah (2016) also second the view that knowledge and ideas are constructed by the social context. The social context was considered in this study through the recruitment of history teachers from three different demographic backgrounds. Consequently, the views expressed by those teachers were shaped by the different social contexts of their lives. Moreover, as supported by Barak (2017), in line with social constructivism, it was found that raw knowledge is constructed in social practice and then individually appropriated.

Methodology

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), qualitative research is especially suitable when a researcher has the intention to establish the participants' perceptions, views, and experiences. As was mentioned earlier, the objective of this study was to identify the attitudes of history teachers to the option of making history a core subject; therefore, a qualitative research approach was most suitable. This paper also employed an interpretive paradigm, which according to Given (2020), enables the study of interpretive rather than determinative paradigms. This paradigm was chosen to facilitate an understanding and explanation of the findings from the participants' perspective.

The target group for the study was the history teachers in the Frances Baard District. Six teachers from the FET phase were purposively sampled from this population. Employing purposive sampling, which does not involve random selection of individuals, participants appropriate for the research problem were selected (Allwood, 2012). Particular attention was paid to ensuring that the selected teachers have experience teaching history in the FET phase. The teachers in this study are referred to as Participants A, B, C, D, E, and F for anonymity (Van den Berg and Struwig, 2017).

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data because they provide the freedom of an unstructured interview while they have a structure that guides the interaction between the participants (Easwaramoorthy and Zarinpoush, 2006). This process allowed the participants to give more elaborate information regarding observed tendencies and ideas and expand the list of topics that might be important during the discussions. Face-to-face interviews were also used to afford every opportunity to get to know one's respondent and to guarantee specificity and confidentiality. The technique used in the data analysis was thematic analysis. Alhojailan (2012) defines thematic analysis as analysing data by identifying themes that emerged from the coded data. As with all the participants in the study, their responses were systematically coded to identify similarities. These commonalities were then sorted into related themes that provided the essence and voices of the teachers regarding the concepts.

Findings and discussions

The data collected through interviews were analysed, coded, and grouped into different themes based on the research objectives. The findings were categorised into pros and cons, as promised in the title and the aim of the study.

Content overload

The first theme that emerged was content overload, reflecting teachers' concerns about the amount of material in the current history curriculum. Participants A, B, D, E, and F expressed similar views on this issue.

Participant A mentioned that:

“My wish is that some content should be removed because it’s way too much, and here at our school, we have countless problems which affect teaching and learning, eventually making learners lose interest in the subject.”

Participant B shared similar thoughts, stating:

“Most learners are lazy to read; history requires a lot of reading and understanding because the topics are many and interrelated.”

While these responses highlight the challenge of content overload, it is essential to relate them to the issue of making history a compulsory subject. Teachers are concerned that with the current curriculum already demanding extensive content coverage, making history compulsory may exacerbate these challenges, leading to potential disengagement among learners. This sentiment aligns with findings by De Sousa and Van Eeden (2009), who argue that the comprehensive nature of history makes it challenging for students to grasp. Robinson (2019) further supports this by stating that overloaded curricula lead to surface learning rather than deep understanding, a potential issue if history is made compulsory without addressing the current content structure.

However, it is important to emphasise how making history compulsory could either solve or worsen these issues. The concern is that if history becomes mandatory for all students in the FET phase without content adjustments, teachers may continue to prioritise curriculum coverage over in-depth learning.

Participant D also remained within the borders of content overload by stating that:

“History is a content-driven subject... It requires a lot of reading. Learners end up getting discouraged and only study for assessment purposes and not to learn really”.

Participant D further explained the complexity of history as a subject and of misconceptions

that might occur as a result of the overloaded content. Furthermore, Participant E shared the same opinion as other participants by stating that “the only hiccup can maybe be that the contents are far stretched and too much”. Participant E implied that the contents of the subject are overloaded, which according to Davidson (2018), is perceived by learners as a barrier. Participant E also stated:

“But Yoh! . . ., the time given for us to complete the syllabus is not equivalent to the contents that need to be taught. Sometimes we end up teaching for assessment purposes and suffocate intensive teaching and learning”.

This means that the academic year allows too little time to cover the contents of the subject. Participant F argued that content overload leads to teachers emphasising coverage at the expense of in-depth teaching and learning. The perspectives shared by the participants in this theme are supported by Schmidt and Houang (2012) who state that priority is often allocated to the coverage of wider content which leads to more surface learning rather than deep learning. This is also supported by Robinson (2019) who argues that lately schools are characterised by overcrowded classes which results in teachers being overwhelmed by marking; they end up teaching for assessment instead of understanding. To further support and elaborate his argument, Robinson (2019) continues to argue that school management teams rely a lot on numerical targets with the priority being on examination results instead of qualitative targets which is in-depth teaching or learning. This pressurises the teachers to meet expected targets by management and the teachers end up pushing for curriculum coverage and assessment-based teaching to satisfy targets set by management instead of teaching for understanding (Lund and Kirk, 2019). These perspectives shared by teachers under this theme are also parallel to the social constructivist theory by Brau (2020) who adds that individuals draw conclusions to a certain social phenomenon based on their social and contextual experiences. Taking into account the responses received from participants, it is evident that their perspectives are influenced by their social and contextual experiences as most of their responses are drawn from their experiences in teaching the subject.

History as an easier option

The second theme that derived from the analysed data was history as an easier option. The responses of participants C, D, and F made it clear that history is used as an easier option by learners. Participant C responded by stating that:

“I have also realised how learners tend to see history as a subject they can run to when the going gets tough with their other subjects, apart from learners escaping to history from math and science, they also do not seem to have much interest in history and fully learning it, and that becomes a defect in the subject because they only do it to pass”.

Participant C touched on the trend that some learners choose history only as a subject to avoid the challenges and difficulties of maths and science. These perspectives from participants are in line with claims made by Wassermann *et al.* (2018), who state that in the majority of schools, history is mostly reserved for learners who can't cope with science and mathematics. This implies that history is used as an easier option subject. Participant D concurred by stating that:

“All learners want is a matric certificate, therefore, most learners choose and go for history so that they can have an easier way out of the FET Phase. For example, you will always find a class of physical science having far way fewer learners than in history”.

Participants C and D shared the same sentiments that learners take history as an easy way out to escape maths and science. Participant D mentioned the higher number of learners in a history class than in maths and science classes. The participant responses are in line with the opinion of Kastrup and Mallow (2016), who state that learners have anxiety about maths and science. Participant F also touched on the issue of history being used as an easier option by stating that, “some learners have the perception that history is an easy subject and only choose it to pass”. All the above quotes imply that history is used as an easier option subject.

History must become a compulsory subject.

Another theme that was discovered from the analysed data was a clear call from history teachers that history must be converted into a compulsory school subject in the FET band. History is currently a selective subject in the FET band whilst other subjects such as life orientation and mathematics are compulsory subjects across the FET curriculum. History as a compulsory subject would imply it is no longer an optional subject but a subject that is taught to all learners in Grades 10-12. All participants interviewed in this study submitted that history should become a compulsory subject in the FET Band. There was a high level of support for history to become compulsory, as can be seen from the participants' responses.

Participant A agreed by stating that:

"I think it is good. History is a dying breed, and it should be made compulsory because it helps us all to become more sympathetic and understanding towards what happened in the past".

Participant A agreed by referring to how it can assist the nation and individuals in understanding our past. However, participant B agreed on the basis that the subject might be taken seriously by learners if it became a compulsory subject, stating that:

"The importance and significance of the subject can and will only be visible to the learners if it becomes a compulsory subject".

On the other hand, Participant C condoned history becoming a compulsory subject and supported the idea by touching on issues of nation-building. Participant C stated that:

"The recommendation that history should become a compulsory subject across all South African schools, allows for the present generation to better confront nation-building issues because we will understand where we come from as a nation. Therefore, I condone the proposal that history should become a compulsory subject".

Participant C believed that for nation-building to take place, history needs to be made compulsory so that as a nation we understand where we come from. These claims are supported by Ramphele (2018), who states that:

"We all know that history teaches us about empathy and tolerance. We think that it is important that all our learners are exposed to the struggle and our history".

Participant D specifically touched on compulsory history as a healing mechanism by stating:

"I think I fully agree with that. What is wrong with it being taught across all grades? My reasons are history brings healing, closure, and discipline. I quote Desmond Tutu, there is a need to confront the past deal with it and healing will take place."

Participant E also condoned history becoming a compulsory subject by stating, “yes, it will help learners avoid repeating the mistakes of the past”. Participant E’s view was that history as a compulsory subject would be able to assist learners and the nation at large to learn from past mistakes and avoid making them again. Last, participant F also agreed that history should become a compulsory subject by stating:

“It is about time our learners know where they come from to truly know where they are heading systematically, academically and socially.”

The views of the participants are supported by Fru (2015), who states that the teaching of history allows learners to become responsible, reflective, and active citizens who can make relevant and informed decisions regarding societal issues.

History as a compulsory subject will help South Africa promote nation-building and social cohesion.

The fourth theme in this study was that compulsory history will promote nation-building and social cohesion. All participants believed that history as a compulsory subject could help South Africa in nation-building and social cohesion. Participant A believed that history as a compulsory subject can promote nation-building and social cohesion by stating:

“I think good history education if taught well to the student may teach them not to repeat the past which in many ways will motivate learners to work together and create a better- future for everyone.”

Participant B also agreed that history as a compulsory subject will condone unity and harmony amongst South Africans by stating:

“Yes, it will make us understand and appreciate our different cultures, religions, and traditional practices. Such will make us come together as one nation.”

In support of this response, Nussey (2018) states that the common occurrence of xenophobia in South Africa is clear evidence of the youth’s lack of historical knowledge and appreciation for humanity and diversity. Participant C agreed that history can promote nation-building and social cohesion by touching on the current state of South Africa’s

societal and economic differences, and how history as a compulsory subject can end it. This was evident from participants C's response, who stated:

"South Africans still look at each other differently because of societal and economic statuses, and this gives rise to social cohesion as a challenge in South Africa, whereas the discussion and teaching of history would work against dividing and uniting the nation based on their historical background."

Participant D stated:

"Yes. As history is revisiting the past, it will teach us about mistakes of the past and rectify them, for example, whites would learn what has happened and rectify their mistakes and blacks will also learn and rectify their mistakes as well. To add on that, nationalism was achieved with gruesome measures done by whites and blacks, especially in our country, such measures need to be taught at the school level and to take account of their action, this will enhance social cohesion and nation-building without anyone being blamed for what has happened in the past".

Participant D reflected on critical historical events which could serve as a reminder of where we come from as a nation and how such events can encourage nation-building and social cohesion. Participant E also believed that history as a compulsory subject could promote nation-building and social cohesion by stating:

"Yes, it will help learners avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. By understanding how our history informs our current attitudes towards each other, we can begin to understand each other and to come together to build the nation".

Last, participant F joined all other participants in agreement with the view that history as a compulsory subject can promote nation-building and social cohesion. Participant F reasoned:

"In my capacity, history as a compulsory subject will help us as South Africans to form a socially cohesive and united nation because disparities, or rather problems, that we presently face as a society could most definitely be traced to the past."

All participant responses are substantiated by Masooa and Twala (2014) who state that as much as society is dominated by the demand for science and technology, the place and role of history should not be underrated as it plays an important role in shaping and moulding people and society. All perspectives shared by teachers under this theme are in line with the recommendations made by the Ministerial Task Team which was appointed to do a study on the feasibility of history becoming a compulsory school subject in South Africa. After a series of research and comparative studies, the Ministerial Task Team recommended that history become a compulsory school subject in South Africa.

Teacher empowerment

All participants responded by stating that there is a need for teachers to be trained hence the theme of teacher empowerment. All participants highlighted different reasons why they think it is important to train teachers. Participant A touched on the need for both in-service and preservice teachers to be trained in alignment with the new content, by stating:

“Preservice - these teachers need to be well-trained. The content which is introduced will be new to them, and they need to be taught the right skills. In service - these teachers will need to be taught about the new content.”

Participant B believed that teachers need to be trained so that they can gain sufficient subject knowledge and master history as a subject. This is evident in Participant B's response, which stated that:

“The teacher should gain enough knowledge on history as a subject matter, as he or she will be the one who has to help learners to comprehend difficult social and political issues.”

This is supported by the literature drawn from Nolgård et al. (2020), who state that history becoming a compulsory subject needs a great change pedagogically and methodologically in how the subject is taught. Participant C also condoned teacher training and stated that:

“Pre-service teachers at higher education levels will need to be trained in line with the revised and modified history curriculum. In-service teachers will also need to be trained by the Department of Basic Education through normal programs like workshops and

clinics.”

Participant C considered how teacher training should be executed in the two education sectors. Participant C highlighted the role of higher education in pre-service teacher training and also emphasised the role of the Department of Basic Education in in-service teacher training.

Participant D stated that “the other thing now is that as teachers, we are lifelong learners, we have to upgrade our understanding with regards to what is our core role”. Participant D pointed out that the role of the teacher changes with time, therefore teachers need to be trained to match the current expectations of the curriculum and their roles in teaching. Participant E also agreed that teachers need to be trained suggesting that all teachers need to be trained to avoid a shortage of history teachers. Participant E stated that “all teachers should be trained in teaching history to ensure that we do not have a shortage of history teachers”. Participant F highlighted the significance of teacher training by stating:

“It is also important to note that such a reasonable academic standard for history will also increase. It is about time that we realise that supplementary training for compulsory history teaching will create a major interest for our people to embark on historical programs, subjects, and career paths.”

Participant F looked deeper into how teacher training for compulsory history would raise the level of teacher employment. Participant F also implied that there would be more prospective learners and students embarking on history-related careers. McCully (2012) shares this sentiment by stating that there should be a shift from focussing on lesson plans to developing a historical, inquiry-based methodology. Schellnack-Kelly (2019) also states that if history is taught for two hours per week by people who are not true historians (because there are not enough history teachers), then history may become watered down. This implies that teacher training and empowerment are important elements in the implementation of history as a compulsory school subject.

History as a compulsory subject will prolong the timetable and working hours.

Should history become a compulsory school subject across the FET band, an additional subject will be added to the seven subjects that learners are already studying. According to the views of the teachers, an eighth fundamental subject in the FET band has the potential

to prolong the timetable and working hours. Participants A, B, C, and F believed that history as a compulsory subject would mean that the timetable would be prolonged and working hours would increase. Participant A stated that:

“Teachers will work longer and harder. More history pupils mean that the history educator will do more assessments and have more marking to complete.”

Participant A implied that history as a compulsory subject would mean more learners and more learners would mean an increased workload for teachers. This would directly impact the school hours and timetable by prolonging them. Participant B also believed that the working hours and timetable would be prolonged, stating that, “it will affect the timetable and the working hours. Teachers will work longer and harder”. These perspectives shared by the above-mentioned participants are supported by the Ministerial task team (2015) which states in one of their scenarios that the teaching time would be increased from 27.5 hours per week to 31.5 hours. The learners would be offered a minimum of eight subjects per week instead of seven.

Participant C also believed that the working hours and timetable would be prolonged. Participant C touched on the current hours allocated to history as an elective subject and how the hours might increase if history became compulsory. This is evident from participant C’s response:

“Currently, history in the FET phase is allocated four periods per week. Compulsory history means that all learners across the FET band will need to be taught history. This means that classes will increase, and this directly affects the timetable implying that more hours should be added to the timetable making working hours longer.”

Participant F considered the prolonged timetable and working hours as an advantage to teaching and learning by alluding that increased working hours and a prolonged timetable will mean more teacher-learner contact time, which would assist in building effective teacher-learner relationships. This was evident in Participant F’s response:

“I believe that adding history as a compulsory subject will mean longer learning hours for the student and additional working hours for the teacher. As such this will provide a much more way to effectively enhance teacher-to-learner relationship and contribute to the quality of teaching and learning, not only for history but for other school subjects

as well.”

The possibility of a prolonged timetable and working hours means that the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement should be reviewed as it serves as a policy document that also guides the number of periods that history as an elective subject is given in a cycle.

However, participants D and E believed that the working hours and timetable would not be affected if history became a compulsory subject. This is evident as Participant D stated:

“I do not think the impact will be that much because like I said, everything needs to be planned properly to fit in the timetable and school hours without impacting on working hours. If we want this to work, then proper planning needs to be in place.”

Participant E stated that:

“If we restructure other subjects and re-evaluate the relevance of some of the other compulsory subjects, then this does not have to affect the timetable too much.”

Participants D and E believed that if proper planning were to be employed and executed, there would not be a need for the working hours and timetable to be adjusted.

History and life orientation are equally valuable subjects.

This theme was derived as a result of antagonistic views by teachers on the prospects of history replacing life orientation (L.O.) as a fundamental subject in the FET band. Participants A, B, and F did not agree with the suggestion that L.O. should be replaced by history. Participant A believed that L.O. is an important subject as it prepares learners for life after school. This was evident from Participant A's response, who stated:

“I don't think L.O. should be replaced because it serves its purpose. It in many ways prepares the learners for the realities they will face out of school.”

Participant B stated:

“My view is that they should not completely throw out life orientation but rather instil

history as another compulsory subject in schools. Life orientation equips our learners with other skills such as teaching them how to apply for jobs and prepare them for life after school, I am thus stating that life orientation is equally important.”

From Participant B’s response, it is clear that Participant B also agreed that L.O. is an important subject as it equips learners with the necessary skills to tackle life after school. In agreement with the reasons provided by participants A and B, participant F also defended the value of L.O. as a subject. Participant F stated that:

“I do not support and subscribe to those suggestions, history as a subject should not take the place of life orientation as a compulsory subject since life orientation plays a significant influence on the daily lives of our learners.”

Participants A, B, and F all believed that L.O. should not be replaced, as it plays a critical role in equipping and preparing learners with the life skills needed to survive.

However, participants C, D, and E took the stance that history should replace L.O. The responses from participants C, D, and E were in line with the suggestion from the Ministerial Task Team (Department of Basic Education, 2018:33), that: “History should become a compulsory [stand-alone] subject in 2023 by replacing Life Orientation with it.”

The participants gave different reasons why L.O. should be replaced by history as a compulsory subject. Participant C stated:

“To a certain extent, I agree. How about the tables be turned in such a way this same life orientation is only taught in the intermediate phase and senior phase? It will make sense in that way. Then history will be compulsory for all learners in the FET Phase without impacting the timetable and so forth.”

Participant C’s suggestion implied that L.O. taught until Grade 9 would be sufficient for learners to gain the necessary life skills. Therefore, history could then become compulsory in Grades 10-12 without impacting the timetable. Participant D also agreed that L.O. should be replaced by history by arguing the significance and value of L.O. at the Higher Education level, by stating that:

“Already L.O. is doomed, especially with our higher institutions, as it is not counted in the scores of institutions, so why not replace it with history? And L.O., by the way,

is integrated towards a lot of subjects, which means learners can still get L.O. in their other subjects as it will be integrated with other subjects.”

Participant E joined the same line of reasoning as Participant C. Participant E also agreed that L.O. taught until Grade 9 would be sufficient, by stating that:

“I agree with this suggestion. Life orientation is largely repetitive. Everything that needs to be taught in Life orientation can be covered by the end of Grade 9, leaving that time open for history in the FET phase.”

History is a subject and not a political tool

The final theme that derived from this study was that history is a subject, not a political tool. All participants interviewed in this study opposed the claims made by Legodi (2001), who argues that history education could be used as an instrument of propaganda to justify or legitimise a particular interpretation of the past. Participant A placed the responsibility on the teacher by stating:

“No, I do not agree with the claims. It can be used as a tool to achieve political agendas, but teachers should not use it in such a way.”

Participant B also agreed that history is not used as a political tool by stating that:

“I do not concur with this statement, I have always thought about history teaching being a platform for learners to see why things are perceived as it is in the present, for them to clear up misunderstandings on social and political issues rather than history being used as a means to pursue political agendas.”

Participant C believed that politics have no space in history teaching, as teachers are not politicians. Participant C stated:

“History is taught by teachers and not politicians. So how can it be used as a political tool? Maybe the curriculum planners want to achieve political agendas. However, myself is the teacher and executor of the curriculum I teach history and not politics.”

Participant D stated:

“I disagree with that, history is about what happened in the past and we cannot change that, hence I said the past can be addressed and be rectified, it would be wrong to say that history is used to achieve political agendas, this is a subject that has discipline because we can learn from it.”

Participant D implied that the contents of history did not address politics but taught about what happened in the past. Similar to participant A, participant E disagreed that history was used as a political tool, by placing the responsibility on the teacher. Participant E stated that:

“It would be the teachers’ responsibility to ensure that they teach history in an unbiased way. That way, any political agenda will fail because learners will learn the unbiased truth.”

Lastly, participant F also disagreed with claims that history is used as a political tool, by stating that:

“No, it is not. The reality is that our history is our history. It was written and taught in the way that it transpired. Such claims tend to imply that our history should be modified so that it does not offend anyone and that is highly impossible.”

Participant F implied that the content taught in history was purely based on what transpired in the past and did not address any political agendas. The participants’ responses all contradicted claims made by Liñán (2012), who states that history is one of the most dangerous weapons that can be used to achieve political aims.

Reflections from the findings

According to the MTT’s prioritised list, history was phased in as a compulsory subject from 2023 in Grade 10, from 2024 in Grade 11, and from 2025 in Grade 12. From the participants’ responses, it is suggested that there should be an acceleration of the process. As much as the participants appreciated the recommendations being made, some of them brought up the concern that time had already been wasted in coming up with such recommendations.

According to Hoadley (2017), since history is an endorsed teaching subject that applies critical thinking skills with the ability to address social issues like social inclusion, racism, and xenophobia, among others, fast-tracking is imperative since this could unlock positive changes borne out of the reform.

One of the major concerns was a proposal to address the issue of life orientation by replacing it with history. Most participants were against this notion because life orientation teaches human rights, democracy, and individual transformation. Consequently, the recommendation, in line with Bartelds et al. (2020), is made that life orientation should not be done away with but should instead be timetabled for once in a cycle. This would enable the system to accommodate history alongside the retention of life orientation which empowers learners to face other social/civic and personal challenges.

One of the important questions resulting from the findings was the problem of excess in the use of content in the current history curriculum. In their interviews, participants raised the issue of teachers managing to deliver large amounts of content within a constrained time frame. In light of this, Loewen (2018) recommends that the history curriculum be reviewed comprehensively with the involvement of curriculum designers, history subject specialists, history subject advisors, and teachers. It was stated that the nature of the review should involve the removal of content and its condensation to enable the client to explore critical subjects and not just give cursory attention to several issues (Paraskeva, 2021). This would help teachers to devote adequate time towards effectively and efficiently teaching and learning the content instead of cramming through the content.

In addition, due to current demands added by making history a core subject, it is suggested to increase the amount of time used for teaching. According to Haydn and Stephen (2021), changes to the academic timetables must be done in a way to give history teachers enough time to teach the course effectively and espouse the principles of 'time understanding' rather than 'time coverage'. This would also help prevent the saturation of content and increase substantial interaction with the topic.

Teacher support is another essential factor of this recommendation. Implementing history as a compulsory course will increase the work burden of teachers and make them feel the need to undergo necessary training and other forms of professional development (Crocco and Marino, 2017). The phased-in approach articulated by the MTT should be backed by strong professional development initiatives for teachers to enable them to implement said curriculum in positive ways. Stronge (2018) noted that there will also be a need for sustained professional development to enable the teachers to change and meet the delivery needs of the content.

Lastly, the history learning area should cover a compulsory curriculum that has to foster nation-building and social harmony actively. In the same vein as Fried (2017) and Wassermann, *et al.* (2023), participants in this study believed that history education can promote values such as appreciation, tolerance, and citizenship as well as embracing the multiple histories of South Africa. When history is a curriculum subject of learning learners should be in a position to embrace such values. Hence a positive implication in pulling off an integrated society in as much as issues of inequity, racism, and xenophobia, among others, are of extremely negative implications (Ndihokubwayo and Habiyaremye, 2018).

Conclusion

The debate around the prospects of history becoming compulsory has been a controversial subject within the academic and socio-political space in South Africa. Amid all such debates, it was important to explore the perspectives of history teachers, who through their practices and social experiences have demonstrated with strong convictions the benefits of history becoming a compulsory school subject in the FET band in South African schools. This study concludes that the Department of Basic Education should implement the MTT recommendations.

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