

# TEACHERS VOICE / HANDS-ON ARTICLES

## Strengthening the history curriculum by reimagining what we teach in the classroom: scaffolding through the FET phase, using the work of historians from a decolonised perspective

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### Positionality

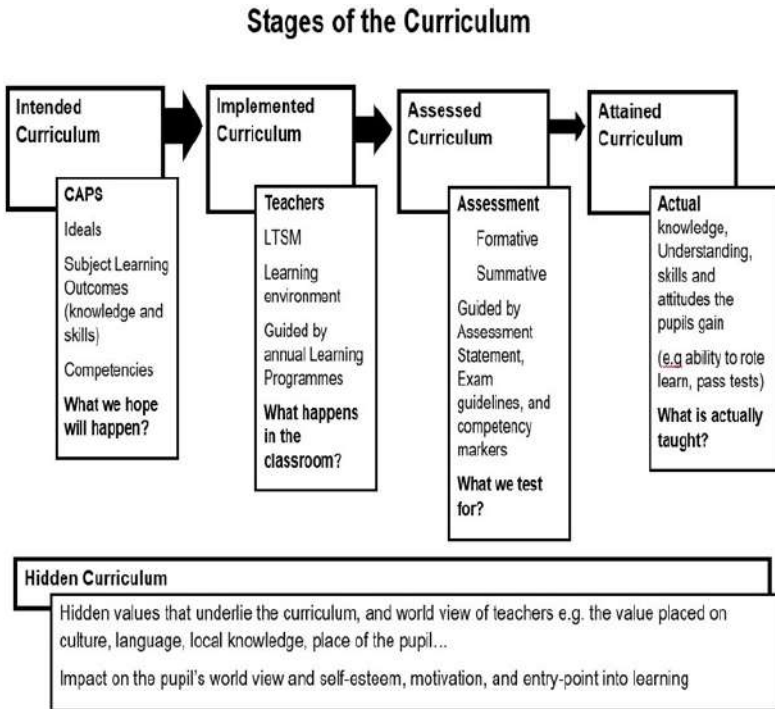
In foregrounding our positionality, we teach history through Grades 8 to 12. We teach the CAPS curriculum at a Quintile 5 co-educational government high school in Cape Town, where our candidates write the National Senior Certificate (NSC). It is a fee-paying school, and we acknowledge the privilege associated with the space. We are fortunate to have developed a constructive and open relationship with the Western Cape Education Department, particularly our Subject Advisor (History) of the Central District which we fall under. As a result, we provide everything we do to our Subject Advisor.

It is also important to acknowledge that we issue a textbook to all history pupils in the FET phase, Grades 10 to 12, at the start of every academic year. But we seldom, if at all, use them in the classroom. We intentionally read historians' work and infuse it into the narrative and storytelling in our history classrooms. Where relevant, chapters of the historians' work are provided as readings to our class via Google Classroom, which we often read together in school. Extracts of the work of the historians are also used as written sources in assessments to determine the learners' understanding. Both written and visual sources are included in our teaching PowerPoints, with explicit questions and marking allocations, to complement

the teaching of the topic (content) with the development of history skills.

## From a national discussion to a local application—unpacking ‘strengthening the curriculum’

The term ‘*strengthening the curriculum*’ requires contextualisation before we explain what we are doing in the classroom. In 2019, the Department of Basic Education began strengthening the CAPS curriculum. It is assumed that this process may have been delayed due to COVID-19. Over the weekend of 9-10 September 2023, a DBE-hosted Consultative Conference was held to focus on the *curriculum strengthening* of the CAPS. It was emphasised to all present that the CAPS was not being rewritten and would remain content-based. *Curriculum strengthening*, it was explained, involved a deliberate and systematic infusion of competencies into the CAPS curriculum. In other words, as distinct from competency-based, curriculum strengthening advocates for competency-infused curricula where content remains core; the competencies are developed through content, and, in turn, the content is strengthened via competency infusion.



Source: Adaptation, by the authors, of an infographic provided at the DBE-hosted Consultative Conference, 9-10 September 2023, on ‘Strengthening the Curriculum’.

We are reminded that in teaching the CAPS curriculum in our respective schools and classrooms, the intended curriculum of CAPS is very different from that of the implemented curriculum. Using the Grade 12 History curriculum as an example, before the impact of COVID-19, which resulted in revised teaching programmes (RTPs), many schools did not teach all the topics (content) of the entire Grade 12 History curriculum. This approach directly affected what they assessed and prepared their history classes for—that is, the NSC Final Examination. In addition, when marking the NSC Grade 12 Final History Examination, it is evident that a significant number of schools which offer history as an elective subject only teach three of the six topics of Grade 12 Paper 1, and similarly, three of the six topics of Paper 2—the minimum number of topics which candidates are required to respond to in the Grade 12 NSC History examination(s).

Where this happens in schools, it is impossible to teach the intended curriculum with the scaffolding of knowledge and skills through the FET phases of Grades 10, 11, and 12. There is, therefore, a total disjuncture between the intended curriculum and the curriculum that our learners have attained.

There is a desperate need to consciously strengthen the intended curriculum of CAPS.

As colleagues in our own school's History Department, we deliberated over this. We agreed on core values and attitudes which we wanted to infuse into all that we do in our classrooms from the first academic day of 2024. The five values and what we mean in terms of the values are:

- **Respect** (for one another in the classroom; for the importance of the subject that contributes to one's understanding of our local and global community)
- **Accountability** (for one's views, ideas, and actions)
- **Academic excellence** (believing in the potential of all pupils to develop a deep understanding of history, both its content and skills)
- **Compassion** (for both the voiceless and marginalised in society, and seeing and recognising the humanity in others, underpinned by *Ubuntu*)
- **Inclusivity** (conscious of accepting and celebrating diversity in our society, underpinned by *Ubuntu*)

The attitudes we want to have in our history classroom, which will inform all that we do in the process of teaching and learning, are:

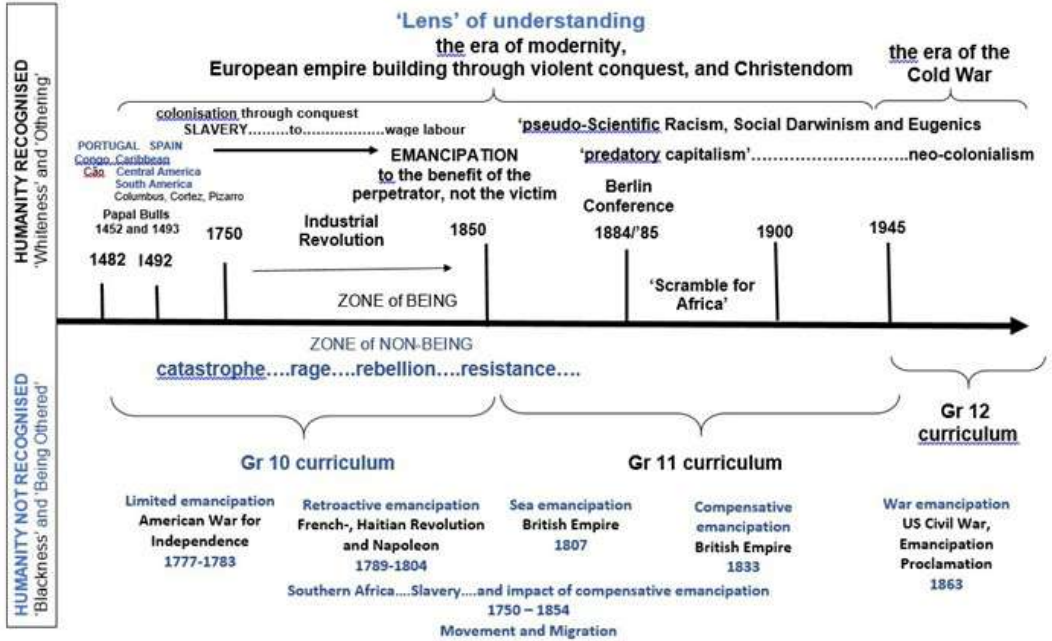
- **Social conscience** (a sense of responsibility and concern for the problems and

injustices of/in society)

- **Occupational consciousness** (an ongoing awareness of the dynamics of hegemony and recognition that dominant practices are sustained through what people do every day)
- **Advocating for human dignity**
- Intentionally working towards the **achievement of both equality and equity in society**
- **Advocating for the advancement of human rights and freedoms**

## **The lens of understanding as we scaffold the FET phase of the history curriculum**

The scaffolding of Grade 10, 11, and 12 curricula is reflected in the *'lens of understanding'*, which is informed by the values and attitudes we intend to infuse into the learning and teaching within our classrooms and WHY and WHAT we teach in 2024 as we scaffold the curriculum through the FET phase. The period covered in the Grade 10 and 11 curricula, from +1450 to 1950 (basically the end of WWII), is the era of modernity. This is followed, in terms of the Grade 12 curriculum, by the era of the Cold War. Siddharth Kara (2023:12) reminds us in *Cobalt Red, How the Blood of the Congo powers our lives*: "So much time has passed, so little has changed." The era of modernity is the period of European empire building through violent conquest and colonialism, establishing what Franz Fanon refers to as the 'zone of being'.



Based on the work of Frantz Fanon: Drawing on and adapting the work of Cornel West (2017), Susan Williams (2021), Howard French (2021), Kris Manjappa (2022), Frank Kronenberg (2022), Siddharth Kara (2023), and Patric Tarik Mellet (2024)

Source: Prepared by the authors

Having briefly taught the topic entitled the 'World in 1450', we begin with the topic referred to as Early Spanish Colonisation but from the perspective of the early evolving of European conquest and enslavement of those categorised as heathen by Christendom, in the year of modernity. The Papal Bulls articulated what has come to be described as the 'Doctrine of Discovery', which provided the theological justification for conquest and slavery. The catastrophe of enslavement for those victims whose humanity was not recognised resulted in rage, resistance, and rebellion. At the forefront of most people's contemporary consciousness is the association of the word catastrophe with the 'nakba' in the Palestine mandate of 1947/1948. However, here we refer to a disaster which unfolded over 500 years. We intentionally elevate the voice of rage, resistance, and rebellion to the unfolding catastrophe in the era of modernity and argue that we are teaching and learning from a decolonised perspective. Manjappa (2022) explains that the contradictions which developed in capitalism, confronted by the revolt of those enslaved, resulted in the perpetrators evolving 'emancipation' to their benefit while the victims were negated.

From this perspective, a series of topics are then taught in the Grade 10 curriculum. The subsequent issues speak to different forms of emancipation by the perpetrators—to their benefit: limited emancipation (Britain and its Empire during the American War of Independence), retroactive emancipation (French Revolution, Haitian Revolution, and Napoleon), sea emancipation (Britain and its Empire), compensative emancipation (Britain and its Empire), and war emancipation (in the context of the American Civil War). We conclude the Grade 10 curriculum with Movement and Migration, which we have reframed as ‘Southern Africa, slavery, and the impact of compensative emancipation (1750-1854)’.

## **Reimagining the Grade 10 curriculum, informed by the lens of understanding**

The ‘*lens of understanding*’ was vital for us as teachers of the Grade 10 curriculum to engage with at the start of the 2024 academic year as we reimagined what we were teaching in the Grade 10 classroom.

We had to ensure each history classroom would undertake teaching and learning from a similar decolonised perspective. We, as the four history teachers responsible for teaching Grade 10 history classes, had to be on the same page as we unpacked the topics throughout the year. Each teacher was encouraged to place an A1 image of this ‘*lens of understanding*’ on their classroom wall, which could be referred to regularly as the year unfolded. In addition, at the start of each new topic, this ‘*lens of understanding*’ would start the PowerPoint teaching aid, and where the topic being addressed is located within the era of modernity.

## **Let the learners evaluate the utility of the lens of understanding.**

Towards the end of the third term (2024), we, as a History Department at the school, requested all history learners (from Grades 8 through 12) undertake an evaluation of both their history teachers, the content of the curriculum, and the classroom space in which teaching and learning take place. Completing the assessment was voluntary, and 149 out of a possible 650+ history learners completed it ... a 23% return, which is disappointing. We can also gauge the relative percentage of the returns to the respective history teacher in 2024.

We posed a question to learners in the FET phase about the utility of the ‘lens of

understanding' that we had adopted in 2024. The question posed was as follows:

*"Has providing a 'lens of understanding' for the era of Modernity at the start of the year assisted your understanding of how topics are linked through the year and how the curricula are scaffolded through the years of the FET Phase?"* The question required a YES or NO response. Sixty per cent responded YES to the question. They then had to explain their response to the question.

Included here are a few explanations for the YES response:

- "Yes, it lays out a clear route the history department wants to go down through the year."
- "It gives a good overview of all the topics we will be learning and following, and learning context before the next topic."
- "It makes sense how everything is connected, which was something I struggled to do."
- "The 'lens of understanding' perfectly maps out the different history topics that will be covered and illustrates their relation to each other as we gradually progress through them all. The order of the topics and way of teaching them have created a clear illustration of how certain events in history influence the ones to come, and how history can often repeat itself."
- "At first, it's quite a lot to look at, I will admit, but after we've learnt all the information, it makes a lot of sense and is like a map of what we've learnt. But I think it also conveys an essential message that not many people get to see."

Those who responded NO indicated they could not understand it or found it too complex.

## **Where to from here?**

We would suggest the following:

First, the teaching aids and the assessments we have used this year are freely available through our zero-rated drive. All the topics we engage within the classroom are available in the form of a PowerPoint, an elaboration in the text form of each slide, and the entire topic is recorded as an MP4 video lesson. Each topic begins with a slide of the lens of understanding. We make the three teaching aids available to our classes via Google Classroom in addition to the hardcopy of the PowerPoint we provide in note form to each

pupil at the start of each topic. These aids assist the pupils in consolidating their learning before an assessment at the end of the topic to determine their understanding of both the contents and related history skills.

Second, as history teachers, we should be encouraged to share what we do in the classroom with colleagues, on both high school and tertiary levels. We make available all our teaching aids to the Western Cape Education Department through the District Subject Advisors and (on request) to any history teaching colleague.

Third, it is hoped the Department of Basic Education (DBE), its 'Learning Recovery and Curriculum Strengthening' Directorate, will take note of what is happening in some history classrooms around the country.

Fourth, where reimaging the teaching and learning of the FET phase of history from a decolonised perspective is unfolding, such sites would be helpful to the academy in undertaking further research.

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