

The importance of Teaching History as a Compulsory Subject

“Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter” Chinua Achebe (*Things Fall Apart, 1958*)

These words of one of our African son could not have been more relevant in the context of our society than at this present South Africa we find ourselves. We find a country of lost identity, whose history is contested by anyone who wishes to write their opinions on social media and personal researches about where we come from, and where we are heading. It is on the basis of our history written by foreign minds who glorify colonialists and not the real heroes of the South African struggle against both the colonial and apartheid regime that SADTU believes it is about time our history is told by South Africans. We want to write it to ourselves in order to map a way forward in advancing a developmental state. SADTU wants the real South African history to be part of the curriculum as a compulsory subject in basic education.

After the attainment of democracy in 1994, the ANC-led government demanded an overhaul of the education system; the idea was to replace it with a more representative one. This change was widely supported within academia. The claim advanced was for schools to reflect the demography of the South African society (Hall (2006), Moja, Muller and Cloete (1996) Kulati (2000), Cloete, 2002; Hall et al, (2000), Badat and Wolpe, (1993). Along this line of thought, many argued that optimal transformation in schools must include change of curriculum. The thinking was to address social transformation, high quality teaching and learning based on the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. However, there seems to be very limited understanding about the best way to address the question of social transformation through education based on the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Such an understanding is central to ensuring that effective strategies are put in place to achieve the objectives of the *Education and the spirit of the Constitution*. It is this particular aspect that this to paper sets out to address.

South Africa lags behind other countries in terms of robust teaching of History as a subject that can help celebrate the heritage, culture and values that made South Africa as known today. Instead it has to rely in fragmented teaching of History at primary level, optional teaching of History at secondary level and history as a choice discipline that is but quickly fading at tertiary level. Ultimately the future preservation of our culture and heritage lies in the preservation of our heritage, culture and values through education, and that means teaching History as a compulsory subject at school level to provide a foundation of much needed celebration of our past. Education is a feature that is commonly used by societies to transmit what society deems important. History is a valuable instrument through which such a goal could be achieved. Failure to recognize this would be a colossal mistake that could be felt for decades to come. History is what makes people see in themselves, as different, as similar and yet as bound by more than their distinguished tribes or races. This strikes at the core of and is related to issues of individual, personal and group identity.

Although History is a contentious and at times controversial aspect of education, it has shaped so much of education today. At times it raises highly charged issues that have the potential to open up deep wounds for some but it also allows a process of healing, acceptance of the past as it was and the possibility of even embracing the past and using it as a lesson well learnt for the future. History introduces learners to the critical dimensions of the life of the society and further inducts them into educational, historical and cultural discourses underpinning the society, how it evolved and things that contributed to this evolution and offers preliminary understanding of the roles of all these discourses in how society is today as it relates to their current circumstances. By so doing, it emphasizes what is at the core of what made a particular society and how it was constructed including what if any, is at the centre of this construction. It is envisaged that through History learners will come to appreciate different related and inter-related factors that makes the South African society more meaningful in terms of how it

developed, its practical experiences all of which manifest in the way society constructs itself even to this day.

History is a discovery project. It is a process that learners undergo that cognitively adds to them knowing what happened in the past with regards to their present lives. It helps shape learners world views and also assists in making them take positions informed by their past. It helps learners to evaluate and re-evaluate how their past contributed to their present and how it might help shape their future. Through History it may be possible for learners to connect the dots of their current lives and how it came to be. Connecting these dots could help them understand how the past evolved and just how it shaped the present. All these connections could eventually have meaning to learners. History is informative in a way that is interesting and important especially if it is taught in unbiased way that presents all the facts as they happened. It can free learners to move on with their lives if they better understand how it impacted the present since it present opportunities for lessons learnt in order to avoid repetition of the mistakes made. It helps detail the failures of the past and could serve as guidance on how to avoid these failures. It could lead to an appreciation and celebration of those who made sacrifices and helped shape the present. It provides the much needed contexts to questions that so many have and also adds some contexts to the answers that may be provided for such questions in a way that may prove empowering for learners.

History introduces learners to traditions, practices, values and norms of the group. It initiates learners into these and helps them to recognize and accept them as part of who they truly are. It would help learners to acquire new dispositions, which they do not have that are different from what they see, and the circumstances within which they are growing up. Dispositions that could help connect them with those who came before them and what they stood for as a society. This could serve two purposes:

1. It could help strengthen the beliefs, values and dispositions they already have, especially if they are positive ones.
2. It could also serve to weaken, reduce or eliminate already existing beliefs, values and dispositions, especially if they are negative.

History help learners conform to past ideals, and understand the present better. It could help awaken their conscious and help emancipate learners and give them the freedom to make choices informed by what they belief to have shaped their present. They are to experience realities of the present based of the context under which it was shaped. Learning different factors that contributed to a country's history embodies varying beliefs that people held about their society and how it functioned. The hope is that through the teachings of History South Africa can develop learners that are open-minded, self-aware, self-corrective, reflective and appreciative of the journey that culminated into who they are today.

Problems that are mostly experienced presently could be most definitely be traced to the past. So with History they are surely brought to the fore to underscore their origins. History gives society a sense of belonging, pride of being a member of the collective and truly being part of something worth protecting and preserving. In that regard it helps learners make sense of their present and how they may foresee their future. It is a much needed foundation for the future since it provides ladders through which the future could be build. It is an acknowledgment of what happened in the past.

The democracy that we have is rooted in our past and was in fact crafted in response to and as a reflection of things that happened in the past that called for and contributed to a collective reflection with an eye on the future. History became a determining factor as to how society wanted the future to be like. These democratic values give hope for the future and how it may shape up.

Culture is that set of complex beliefs, values and expectations that some members of the group takes for granted. It helps understand the behaviour of individuals in a group. History teaches learners about their culture, both as a group and as different parts of the group. Culture is what counts with a group. In one sense it shapes the group, in another sense it is most certainly shaped by the group. All these crucial issues need to be explained to learners. If they are not clearly documented and articulated, it becomes difficult to believe them, to embrace them and more importantly to summon the spirit to protect and preserve them for future generations.

We make this call fully aware of the detractors of our real story, who wishes that our brutal past can be swept under the carpet and treated a bygone, but we believe that a disease can only be cured through a proper diagnosis, so as to prescribe the relevant medication. No future can be built without the concrete knowledge and the understanding of the past and it is on this reason that from basic education, the South African youth needs to be taught the real history of our struggle, the route from slavery to apartheid, and into the current context they find themselves. This is the only proper way that young people will get to value and appreciating our democracy, be conscious of their social, economic and political landscapes, so as to build a more just and progressive nation-state.

“If you don't like someone's story, write your own” Chinua Achebe.

As a subject, compulsory one at that, history is the most important tool that can and should be used to heal the wounds of the past in order to build a united South Africa. This history needs to be told by those who value the contributions made by the heroes and heroines who got us this far. Our history needs to tell a correct story that South Africa was not discovered by white settlers in 1652, led by one Jan Van Riebeck, but that our people were already trading in diamond and gold before this land was stolen through bloodbaths. We cannot have a history textbook that glorifies a white man as a messier

who rescued a black man from himself, while it makes no mention of the kings and chiefs fought and murdered in great battles in defence of our land and its minerals.

We understand that those who are against this call are scared of telling the real story of South Africa and of course this story include among others, the stealing of our land and cattle by the white colonizers. The biggest fear is that no one can tell the story of South Africa without mentioning the ANC and its role in the liberation of this country after more than 300 years of colonialism and more than 5 decades of apartheid. They want the people of South Africa to forget everything and just focus on the future as if the future is delinked from the past.

We have seen how the likes of the DA and the main stream media tried very hard to distance Dr Nelson Mandela from his role in the congress movement and yet these are the same people who use to call him a terrorist. . No country will ever go forward if it does not understand where it comes from. Our wounds of the past are still in the process of healing.

It is not surprising that many South Africans cannot even sing the national anthem; they are not very patriotic when it comes to the country. These are some of the results of failing to tell the real story of South Africa but we are too quick to learn about Napoleon and the rest which does not impact a lot on the ordinary South African. Our young cannot tell us about the history of the Khoi San, the battle of Isandlwana, the brutal murder of Dingaan and the history of shaka Zulu, but they can narrate unblinkingly about the history of France's Louis XVI and America' Lincoln and Rooseveltdt. The Americans, Cubans and all other developed nations embraces their histories, it is what informs their patriotism, culture, their future and inheritance.

We are aware that of course that the beneficiaries of the apartheid's system of separate development would come out against this call of making history a compulsory subject in basic education. These detractors would do so in their quest to protect their private

properties and wealth, but history will assist our youth to understand better our current inequalities as a society, and how we should move forward in addressing our social problems. We have young people that learn incorrect history through the media, labelling themselves the 'Born-frees', who are not affected by the past injustices of the apartheid regime. This fallacy prevents them from understanding that the roots of apartheid are systematic, being visible even today in a country rattled by poverty, unemployment and inequality, the challenges themselves troubling most certain races that were marginalised for nearly five decades and hundreds of years even before.

It is on these bases that SADTU believes that the South African history should be made compulsory in our basic education curriculum, told by the lions themselves about the stories they witnessed in the forest of the past South Africa, not through research of settlers to glorify their own. This history should be taught in conjunction with our democratic Constitution that seeks to build a South Africa inclusive of everyone who lives in it, black and white. This history should be taught to advance nation-building, the healing of the wounds, bridging the gap of the South African rich and South African poor, so as to realise a developmental state, able to compete in a globalised world.

