

History curriculum as indoctrination

With the transition to a democratic South Africa and the announcement that the history curriculum at schools would be revised, many history teachers breathed a sigh of relief. Finally we could teach a more balanced history.

The teaching of history more than any other subject at school, lends itself to indoctrination. History is not a neutral subject. It is always written, and taught, from a particular perspective.

During apartheid, history was presented from the perspective of white Afrikaner nationalism. As a result, the focus at schools was on white history. Learners learnt about the role of white prime ministers, the growth of Afrikaner nationalism and the heroic efforts of the Afrikaner people during the Great Trek. If the history of black people was taught, it was presented in the syllabus as 'the African problem' or the 'Indian question'.

Black people were viewed as problems, not as real people with an important history. Teaching history from this perspective encouraged whites to think of themselves as superior, and black people as inferior and worthless. The indoctrination of young minds worked to good effect.

EARLY DEMOCRACY BRINGS CHANGES

After 1994, a revised history curriculum was drawn up. The changes were remarkable. Segregation, apartheid and the resistance struggle were the main focus. But there was also a shift in approach to teaching history. While

The school history curriculum under apartheid was taught from the perspective of white Afrikaner nationalism. As a teacher **Michelle Friedman** welcomed the more balanced history developed after 1994. But in the last few years she sees a new indoctrination – one which promotes a neo-liberal capitalist view of the world and downgrades the significance of class and labour struggles.

the role of leaders was examined, there was an attempt to examine 'history from below'. The role of ordinary people was explored. The hidden history of South African people opened up.

With regard to this, there was an important section in the matric syllabus devoted to the role played by the labour movement. The successes and failures of the Industrial & Commercial Union (ICU), the early trade union movements in the 1930s and 1940s, South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu) in the 1950s, the emerging union movement in the 1970s and the role of unions in 1980s' struggles formed a substantial part of history study.

Debates around the role of unions were encouraged and formed part of assessment procedures in schools. For teachers like myself, school history had finally become relevant and educational, and it

encouraged learners to think critically about their future role in a new developing social context.

CURRICULUM MOVES TO NEO-LIBERALISM

However, the history curriculum underwent changes in the following years. A shift to outcomes based education (OBE) played havoc with the syllabus. Many educators argued that the development of historical skills should be the focus of teaching and the content was not important. For some years, many teachers abandoned content, making history meaningless. The learners' knowledge became patchy without any focus. This was a setback for history teaching.

Heated debates took place about the value of a content-based curriculum and in 2005 the new Revised Curriculum was introduced. Its planning and development had taken place

during Thabo Mbeki's presidency and so there were important shifts in the curriculum which were based on the socio-political context under him

Mbeki shifted the South African economy firmly into the global arena. He and his policy makers adopted a neo-liberal approach. The emphasis was on the reduction of state spending on vital services such as health, education and social services, with a growing stress on privatisation. The de-racialised middle class was encouraged to embrace capitalism. Despite the existence of the tripartite alliance, the labour movement and worker struggles were opposed to these moves towards neo-liberalism.

As an author of history textbooks, I examined the new revised curriculum carefully. A number of disturbing patterns emerged.

Firstly, all traces of socialism had been removed from the curriculum. In grade 11, where we had previously taught the rise of socialist thinking in the context of the rise of the Soviet Union, the emphasis now had shifted. In the curriculum outline, the Russian revolution and Russian history was taught now as a challenge to capitalism, rather than on its own terms. Learners were being directed to view capitalism as the economic and ideological norm and other economic models were seen as challenges to the established order.

While much of the content remained the same, the perspective through which it is taught encourages learners to think of capitalism and socialism in particular ways. Issues of class and class struggle have also been subtly removed.

In grade 11, the study of racism in the United States, Australia and Africa is done through the prism of scientific racism. The core question of this section is: What was scientific racism and what impact did it have on race relations in the 19th and 20th century?

As a result of this focus, learners are directed to view the rise of racism throughout the world as a result of the development of scientific theories about race developed in the Western world in the 19th century. While these beliefs contributed to the growth of racist thinking, factors such as class and the economic exploitation of former slaves and colonised people are excluded from discussion. Learners are not encouraged to engage in debates about class versus race in these emerging nations.

The origins of a racist state in South Africa are also presented without debate. The matric syllabus begins in 1948 with the Nationalist Party coming to power and its implementation of apartheid policies. While this is a welcome change from the past, it raises some concerns.

By beginning the history of apartheid in 1948, learners only see apartheid as a result of Afrikaner racist thinking. It does not examine the origins of segregation by looking at the role played by the mining industry with the discovery of gold long before Afrikaners came to power. Thus learners are encouraged to look at apartheid in a simplistic way and class is again removed from discussion.

In a society which is struggling to deal with its racist past, learners should be encouraged to look beyond a simplified racial explanation and engage more critically in discussions about race, class and economic exploitation.

Resistance to apartheid is dealt with largely through the actions of the African National Congress. In the 1970s, the ideology and role of Black Consciousness is taught, but there are no references to the emerging trade union movement. Previously in 1994, the value of the labour movement was stressed, now learners only engage with the formation of Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) in

1985. The labour movement's achievements are devalued.

We have returned to a top-down approach in teaching history. The syllabus focuses on political achievements of leaders, while the working classes are not dealt with in depth. When teaching the collapse of communism, it stresses the role of Gorbachev, and the end of the Cold War as a triumph for the United States. The impact on the lives of ordinary people is forgotten.

History taught in schools is extremely current. Many teachers are not well-versed in the issues, which often verge into current affairs. For example, globalisation is a large part of the matric syllabus which makes teachers increasingly reliant on textbooks.

As an author of many history textbooks for both the interim and revised curriculum, I feel partially responsible for the kind of history that is taught. However, it is an enormously frustrating task and I have little freedom in this process.

For example, a publisher asked me to write a chapter on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I replied that I was happy to do so, but I had strong opinions about the value of the TRC. I would present the information critically, examining some of the strengths but also the weaknesses. She refused to allow me to write the chapter. Her concern was that if we produced a critical account of the TRC, the submissions committee which screens textbooks would not pass it. These would be government people in education who would ensure that their own vision was put forward.

The history taught in schools is now just as subject to indoctrination as under apartheid. The perspective is through the prism of African nationalism and a world-view that the Mbeki government promoted. That balanced and critical point of view that many history teachers would like to impart to their learners is still out of reach! LB