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The historical significance of African liberation – the views of South African History Education students

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Abstract

This study drew on the views of South African first-year history education students who are studying to become teachers. In an open-ended survey they were asked to, by means of intellectual imagination, to express their views on what topics they would like to see as part of the school history curriculum. The purpose of this was to determine what they regarded as historically significant enough to study in history at school. The responses were analysed by means of open coding and read through Counsell's conceptualisation of historical significance. What emerged was that the struggle against apartheid was viewed by only handful as an actual struggle for liberation against internal colonialism. The African liberation struggles against European colonialism fared even worse and was only imagined by a small number of students as worthy of inclusion in an imagined school history curriculum. At the same time at no stage were the struggled against apartheid linked to the broader African liberation struggle. What this speaks of is no only a South African exceptionalism but a view that the African liberation struggle are not really historically significant enough to be include in a imagined history curriculum.

Keywords

African liberation; historical significance; intellectual imagination; history curriculum; history education students

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El significado histórico de la liberación africana - las opiniones de los estudiantes sudafricanos de historia de la educación

Resumen

Este estudio se basó en las opiniones de estudiantes sudafricanos de historia de la educación del primer año quienes estudian para convertirse en profesores. En una encuesta abierta, se les pidió que usando su imaginación intelectual, expresen sus opiniones sobre los temas que les gustaría ver como parte del currículo de historia en la escuela. El propósito de esto fue determinar lo que los estudiantes consideraban como históricamente significativo para ser estudiado en historia en la escuela. Las respuestas fueron analizadas mediante codificación abierta y leídas a través de la conceptualización de Counsell de significación histórica. Lo que surgió fue que la lucha contra el apartheid fue considerada sólo por unos pocos como una lucha actual por la liberación contra la colonización interna. Las luchas de liberación africana contra el colonialismo europeo resultaron aún peores y ello sólo fue imaginado por un pequeño número de estudiantes como digno de ser incluido en un currículo de historia escolar. Al mismo tiempo, en ningún momento se relacionó la lucha contra el apartheid a la lucha más amplia de la liberación africana. Esto habla no sólo de la unicidad sudafricana, sino también acerca de la opinión que la lucha de liberación africana no es históricamente significativa como para ser incluida en un currículo de historia imaginado.

Palabras clave

Liberación africana; significado histórico; imaginación intelectual; currículo de historia; estudiantes de historia

Introduction

This article deals with the views of prospective history teachers, who are first-year history education students, on the historical significance of African liberation. These views were investigated by means of an open-ended survey in which they had to use their intellectual imagination to list and explain topics they would include in a make-believe school history curriculum. To understand the imagined views expressed by the history education students a short historical background was needed. This was followed by the rationale and motivation and focus and purpose of the article. Next, the theoretical framing used to understand the imagined views expressed, historical significance, were unpacked. This was followed by an explanation of the research methodology used. Thereafter the data analysis and discussion was engaged with. The article was drawn to a close by bringing the theoretical conceptualisation and the findings based on the data analysis and discussion into conversation.

Background and Context

The European colonisation of Africa, either by means of economic exploitation or settlement or both was a process that lasted for centuries. The process of colonisation was speeded-up by the so-called Scramble for Africa started by the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885. The conference heralded in a new era in imperialism and as a consequence the division of Africa was formalised amongst the major European powers of the day: Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, Italy and Spain. During colonisation African countries and their peoples were economically and politically exploited and culturally decimated. This manifested itself in the actual physical colonisation of a country as well as well as the colonisation of the mind of its inhabitants.

Colonialism in Africa was, after World War II, seriously challenged for several reasons. These include: the new post-World War II world to which Africans contributed by fighting against Nazi Germany; the economic impact of World War II on colonial powers such as Britain, France and Belgium; the political impact on how to think about freedom and the rise of African liberation movements, many a times under the leadership of Africans educated under colonialism. These and other causes lead to an agitation for independence by African countries. The consequence of this was attempts by different African countries to achieve independence and liberty, including by means of a violent struggle or peaceful negotiations. Physical violence invariably took place in settler colonies with European colonisers such as Algeria and Kenya. As a result of the resistance to colonialism, from the late 1950s onwards, African countries started achieving independence: five in the 1950s, 32 in the 1960s and nine in the 1970s.

With liberation from European colonialism being achieved African countries had to start the process of decolonisation. Life in liberated Africa was difficult and challenging as the euphoria of independence had to be reconciled with the societal transformations that were needed to function as self-governing countries. The outcome ended-up being a mixture of success and failure.

The process of South Africa achieving independence and liberation happened very differently from that of the rest of Africa. Attaining independence was a gradual process underpinned by several key constitutional moments. In 1910, South Africa became a unitary self-governing state within the British Empire. Two decades later, in 1931, Britain granted South African, by means of the Statute of Westminster, dominion status. This was followed by South Africa becoming, in 1961, a Republic outside of the British Commonwealth. However for many, especially black South Africans who suffered under white minority rule and apartheid, the aforementioned constitutional events are challenged as actual liberation moments. Although especially becoming a republic in 1961, might have signalled independence for many liberation for South Africa was only achieved in 1994 when apartheid was replaced, after a violent struggle followed by negotiations, by a multi-party democracy in which all South Africans had an equal vote. Support for this kind of thinking comes from Said (1978) and McClintock (1993) who argues that apartheid was a form of internal colonialism. That is the majority black South Africans were, within the same country, politically and economically oppressed by the dominant white minority. In line with this thinking South Africa only achieved true liberation in 1994, roughly 30-years after most of Africa have done so. Statutory this is also officially how the first post-1994 South African

government thought about liberation when they declared 27 April, the day of the first fully democratic election, a public holiday called Freedom Day. This article, in line with this thinking, therefore treats 1994 as the temporal marker when liberation beyond constitutional independence was achieved by South Africa and when the process of European colonialism that started in 1652 ended. This achievement brought South Africa, in a liberatory sense, in line with the rest of post-colonial Africa who started achieving liberation roughly 30-years earlier. The resultant free, democratic and post-colonial world is the one that the history education students who have participated in this study were born into.

Considering the afore-mentioned historical background, the origins of this article are rooted in several critical incidents. The first lies in a comment made, at a conference a number of years ago, by a leading South African history education official. This was in response to my proposal that history learners should be asked to sit on the Department of Basic Education and Training panel that evaluate history textbooks before they are recommended for use in schools. She dismissed the idea as ludicrous. The second critical incident comes from the literature on curriculum transformation in South Africa. As part of the post-apartheid reconstruction process, continuing political and educational transformation are taking place and in the process South Africa moved through Curriculum 2005, the National Curriculum Statement to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) currently in use. The literature confirms that consulting teachers about the curriculum change is not necessarily an accepted part of the educational democratic process (Siebörger, 2000). This action, which went against the post-apartheid promises of inclusive democratic participation, helps to contextualise the comment by the leading South African history education official referred to above. In short, if history teachers are not necessarily consulted about curriculum change then learners' would definitely not be afforded an opportunity to state what and how they want to learn. The third critical incident relates to the youth rebellion which had been taking place across South African university campuses for the past number of years and which came to a head under the broad #Feesmustfall movement. One of the key demands of this broad umbrella movement, driven by students who in the recent past had also studied history at school, was a call for the decolonisation of university curricula.

These three incidents have several things in common. The most important are that young people want to be part of the democratic decision making process on education and would, more than two decades after the fall of apartheid, challenge the authorities, including government structures, if that did not happen. Additionally, they wanted a decolonised curriculum. What this meant was not necessarily clear but it did speak to fact that, amongst others, the content studied was being challenged.

The above critical incidents pricked my attention and left me wondering what would happen if prospective history teachers, in line with the idea of self-directed learning and in the spirit of democracy and critical pedagogy as embodied in South African educational policy, were to be asked about their views about what should be studied in a school history curriculum. The focus of this article is therefore to, considering the background and context as outlined, understand what prospective history teachers, in their first year of study, viewed as historically significant enough to be included in an imagined history curriculum. More specifically the purpose is to understand where African liberation will feature in their

imagined curriculum In the process the hope is to contribute to the emerging literature on how students imagine curriculum (Barton & McCully, 2005; Wakefield & Pumfrey, 2009; Stears, 2010) and view colonialism and liberation in history (Schoeman, 2007).

With reference to historical significance this paper drew on the conceptualisation of Counsell (2004). Counsell's conceptualization includes: whether an event, African liberation in the case of this article, was remarkable and impressionable enough for people at the time or since then, in the case of this study the history education students, to comment on it; if the event is remembered and important to a large group of people; whether the event resulted in some form of change that had effects on the future; if people can resonate with the event and are able to connect to it in some way; and lastly whether the event reveals some aspect of the past that is vital to historical study (Counsell 2004). This outlined conceptualization of historical significance was used to understand history education students' views on African liberation as expressed in the imagined school history curriculum they had constructed.

Research Methodology

This study took place against the contextual backdrop as outlined. The history education students who participated were purposively selected and consisted of 70 individuals in their first year of study to become history teachers. All the participating students were so-called "born frees" – that is they were born at the time of or just after apartheid had ended in 1994. The criteria on which the purposive selection was based included: that the students had done history at school up to Grade 12; were enrolled at a large South African university for the introductory, first semester of the first year, module in history education; had experienced curriculum changes in history at school level and were willing to participate voluntarily in the research. Patton (1990, p.170) refers to the choice of a research participants in this manner as "Criterion Based Purposive Sampling." However, it must be made clear that this is not a representative sample that could be used to come to some generalised conclusions about how all South African history education students studying to become history teachers imagined a curriculum. Rather, it is but a small-scale qualitative study which provided a window into the views of the participating history education students on school history.

Data for this study was generated by means of an open-ended survey consisting of a single question. The history education students were asked to list, with reasons, the topics they deemed significant enough to be included in an imagined school history curriculum. The question read as follows: "Imagine you had the power to decide what learners should study in history at school! List 5 topics you think learners should study and next to each provide a brief reason for including it on your list!" The question was phrased in simple English so as not to confuse the history education students.

The history students were given one blank page of which they could use both sides. They were encouraged to express their imagination in whatever written format they were comfortable with - be it sentences, paragraphs or whatever other genre. The participating students were given 45 minutes during lecture time to complete the "pencil-and-paper"

open-ended survey. The participants were instructed to remain anonymous. It was hoped that the anonymity the open-ended survey offered would serve to yield rich research data.

The justification for selecting the research method as outlined was that it had the potential to allow the history students to reveal their imagined history curriculum in an uninhibited and unconstrained manner. This is possible because reflective writing lends itself to that. Furthermore, open-ended surveys also allow abundant room for freedom of expression and permit the qualification of answers. This was likely because such surveys seek understanding by exploring, in a qualitative manner, a topic in-depth. Additionally, allowing enough time to complete the open-ended survey served to enhance the trustworthiness of the research. The point of departure was therefore to allow the history education students the chance to think and reflect before committing to a response. This is in line with the view of that open-ended surveys permit nuanced and divergent answers; allow participants to answer in detail and to qualify and clarify responses; make space for unanticipated views and permit self-expression and richness of detail. Furthermore, by allowing the history education students to approach the research question in an indirect manner by using intellectual imagination little need existed for them to pretend. It was therefore hoped that authentic responses, rich in detail and multi-perspective in nature, on what they as inexperienced prospective history teachers viewed as historically significant enough to study in history at school would be revealed.

The data generated by the open-ended survey were turned into a single document, then read as text, and analysed by means of open coding. Open coding, while procedurally guided, is fundamentally interpretive in nature. Strauss and Corbin (1994) therefore argue that the voices and outlooks of the people being studied must be included. Bearing this in mind, the views of the first-year history education students were carefully read line-by-line, while at the same time questions were asked about their imaginings. The reasoning for this was to keep the focus on the views expressed (Charmaz, 1990). In a nutshell, open coding was used so as to attempt to bring themes to the surface from deep inside the history education students' imagined views while continually watching against the fact that ideas and theories associated with the research already existed (Neuman, 2003). The imagined views were broken down, examined, compared, conceptualised and categorised. Once turned into manageable chunks, codes which served to anchor the key points of the data, were allocated. Next, codes of similar content were grouped together to form themes. This process was repeated until a point of saturation was reached and no more new themes were being identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The identified themes were ultimately used to come to an understanding of the views of the historical significance of African liberation among South African history education students.

Analysis of the Data

In total the 70 participating history education students listed 374 "topics with reasons attached" what they wanted to see studied in school. In seeking common ground amongst the multitude of views expressed the following dominant views appeared. Firstly, school history must be known and not contested or interrogated. Alongside this the curriculum imagined by the history students had a clear nationalistic slant and the majority made it clear that the history of South Africa, and more specifically its political history, should form

the backbone of the imagined curriculum. This tied in with the strong sentiment expressed that the "leaders and heroes" of the liberation struggle in South Africa should be studied. These leaders and heroes included big black men such as Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko and Mahatma Gandhi which appeared with regular refrain. Alongside the afore-mentioned the history students also placed a very strong emphasis on what can be called sociological, political and economic knowledge. That is they included aspects such as how society works, how does politics work and how can access be gained to the economy as key features of their imagined history curriculum. Against this backdrop the question needs to be asked, in terms of the focus of this article, where and how does African liberation feature?

Apartheid featured very prominently as a topic to be included in the imagined history curriculum of the history education students. In fact, it was listed on 54 occasions which means that only 16 of the participants did not include it in their imagined curricula. But how was apartheid to feature in their history curriculum?

The majority of history education students who imagined apartheid as part of their history curriculum foregrounded the idea of historical knowledge about it. A typical comment in this regard was: "The learners must know what happened from the whole South Africa in order to survive in Apartheid." The history education students thus wanted the concept of apartheid to be understood, the origins of apartheid to be studied, laws such as the group areas and mixed-marriages acts to be known, and the impact of apartheid on especially black lives to be grasped and remembered. Additionally, knowing the racial segregation, inequality and injustices apartheid caused up to 1994 was also foregrounded. Apartheid was thus seen as a cardinal aspect of South Africa's past that needed primarily to be known and then understood. However, alongside knowing the history of the apartheid past the history education students also wanted the continuing contemporary consequences the apartheid past is having on South African society to be part of their imagined curriculum. Thus, the history education students linked, in terms of their imagined curriculum, the apartheid past to the present and the future. The above understanding was explained as being necessary for the students' imagined school history curriculum as it was deemed necessary to prevent apartheid or apartheid-like events from happening again. Knowing about the apartheid past was also deemed necessary, in a triumphalist manner, to celebrate how far South Africa has come as a country, to understand that the country is now in a better place and to celebrate the heroes, like Nelson Mandela, who made this all possible. Knowing the apartheid past, it was argued, was also necessary for future peaceful coexistence as a nation and to heal the deep wounds of the past. In other words knowledge about apartheid and its consequences will aid the nation building project. This was articulated as follows by one of the history education students: "This may help learners to think deeply, and then working co-operatively on preventing issues like Apartheid in the near future."

Apartheid in the imagined history curriculum of the majority of the history education students was thus a past political system to be studied so as to live better lives in the present as well as the future. In many ways apartheid was portrayed as an exceptional South African story. Consequently the views of the majority of history students revealed little about liberation form apartheid as a form of internal colonialism as argued by Said (1978) and McClintock (1993). Exceptions did, however, exist. Five research participants challenged the idea of apartheid being exceptional to South Africa and pointed to similarities to other historical events such as Nazism and segregation in the United States south.

However, what was missing from the history curriculum as imagined above was a clear concrete link between the resistance to, the end of apartheid, and achieving liberation. Only ten of the history education students view this to be, in some way or another, a necessary part of their envisaged school history curriculum. To them a conceptual link existed between the end of apartheid as a form of colonialism and achieving liberation. One participant expressed this as follows: "It is important for us South Africans to know about our country and what contributes to what we live in today and also about important events that took place in the past in South Africa e.g. colonisation, what is it? How has it changed SA? Was it necessary?" and "Learners should know how they got their freedom from apartheid." A tangible link was thus created between colonialism, apartheid, freedom and democracy. This handful of students thus understood apartheid as colonial, oppressive and that freedom from it needed to be obtained by means of resistance. This resistance was attributed to men such as Mandela who ensured "freedom". Imagining a curriculum with such content was in stark contrast to the views of the rest of the students who did not use words such as liberation and freedom at all. To the history education students who made the conceptual link between apartheid and colonialism it was necessary for learners to also understand it: "Freedom. It is important because people should know especially the "born-free" how it happened that today that they can go anywhere together they like or do whatever they like." But adopting such thinking in relation to the imagined curriculum, which challenged the master narrative of nation building, was not easy to pursue as one student explained: "When was South Africa get Independence. South African history is complicated."

How then was the liberation of the rest of Africa from colonialism viewed? Only 17 (4.5%) of the views expressed by the history education students directly or indirectly related to the liberation of African. These views fell into four broad categories: Firstly, a broad general understanding of colonialism, post colonialism and liberation, not necessarily related to Africa, were foregrounded by four history education students to be part of an imagined history curriculum. In other words, a conceptual and intellectual understanding of colonialism was called for. Secondly, six history students viewed an understanding of the historical processes that allowed for Africa to be colonised, the "scramble for Africa" as one research participant put, as worthy of being part of the imagined curriculum. Alongside this the impact colonisation had on African society in terms of trade, education, socialization also needed to be understood. Thirdly, four history students foregrounded how "Uhuru" or liberation was obtained as part of an imagined curriculum. This was underpinned by a neat motivation: "It is important to all children in Africa to understand how the continent gained its independence." Finally, three respondents called for the decolonisation of Africa to be part of the imagined curriculum because learners needed to understand that "most countries faced civil wars after independence" because of the "mistakes that were made due to political issues."

Discussion of the Data

One of the striking aspects that emerged from the data analysis was how liberation from apartheid appeared in the imagined history curriculum of the history education students.

Apartheid was seen by the vast majority of participating students as an oppressive and racist political system that needed to be studied so as to know about it. Once understanding had taken place, apartheid needed to be used for the process of nation building so as to ensure peaceful co-existence and that it never happened again. This was for, for the most part, how apartheid is presented in the CAPS curriculum the history education students studied at secondary school. Consequently, only a few history education students imagined the inclusion of apartheid as a liberation struggle against internal colonialism as a topic in their imagined curriculum. And not a single history education student linked, in whatever manner, the struggle against apartheid to the liberation struggle in the rest of Africa. The struggle against apartheid was thus generally seen as different, apart and unique from that which happened in other parts of Africa. Mamdani (1999, p.132) refers to this as "South African exceptionalism" whereby the country is not viewed by its inhabitants as being an integral part of Africa. Consequently its dissimilarity from the rest of the Africa continent is emphasised.

The idea of South African exceptionalism was further enforced in other ways. Prominent in this regard is the fact that South Africa is one of the most economically advanced countries in Africa with. Economic success, alongside its liberal democracy, makes it easy to feel apart and superior from the rest of Africa. The idea of exceptionalism is also exacerbated by other factors, including statements like that made by President Zuma who, with reference to the toll road contestation, argued that South Africans should not "think like Africans" (*Mail & Guardian*, 22 October 2013). Such comments, alongside what the history education students hear from friends and family, see on television and in films, read in magazines and experience in interacting with refugees and migrants from other parts of Africa are powerful means to shape views on Africa. Such unofficial histories have a major impact on determining historical significance (Phillips, 1979) and in the case of this study the consequence was little sentiment towards earlier African liberation struggles as South Africa was imagined as being exceptional and different. As a result the history education students' views did not ooze with ideas on pan-Africanist solidarity but was closer to what I would term African apathy.

In light of the above the official history curriculum studied at secondary school by the participating history education students, CAPS, which includes the following topics on Africa: Grade 8 – the Scramble for Africa; Grade 9 – Rwanda as a case study; Grade 10 - Slavery and transformations in southern Africa and in Grade 12 - Independent Africa (Department of Basic Education and Training, 2011), clearly had a limited impact on the imagined views of the students which were strongly shaped by unofficial history. In short, the students did not find what they had learnt about Africa in secondary school convincing enough to foreground African liberation in their imagined history curriculum.

Unsurprisingly then what prominently emerged from the data analysis process is that the liberation struggle that played itself out, between the 1950s and the 1970s, in the rest of Africa were hardly viewed as being worthy of inclusion in the imagined school history curriculum of the history education students. When topics related to African liberation did appear it oscillated between, a desire for an understanding of colonialism, an emotional plea that learners should study the manner in which liberation was obtained and the construction of Africa as a region beset by problems when liberation was eventually

achieved. It must be pointed out that Africa was at no stage considered worth studying by the participants outside of the topics mentioned above.

Apart from the idea of South African exceptionalism, and the limited impact of the official school history curriculum, other ideas can also help to explain this virtual silence on the African liberation struggle by the history students as possible topics to be included in their imagined history curriculum. Gyekye (1995) reminds us that our knowledge of Africa has been constructed and disseminated through generally negative images and theories. This means that the history education students had collectively identified a certain stereotypical Africa which still has Hugh Trevor-Roper's (1965) shadow, which claimed Africa had no history of its own, influencing the history education students who participated in this study. This view can partly be attributed to apartheid under which Africa outside of South Africa were constructed as dark and uncivilized. In many ways, such thinking has been carried over to the post-1994 South Africa. Consequently, statements by President Zuma that, "We believe that as an integral part of the African continent, we must develop together with our neighbours in the continent" (Daily Maverick online, 3 April 2013) and former President Thabo Mbeki's "I am an African" speech (Vale & Maseko, 1998, p.274) did not impact positively on the views of the history education students. As a result, the African liberation struggle was not considered worthy of inclusion in an imagined school history curriculum.

Conclusions

Based on the data analysis and discussion it can thus be concluded that the African liberation struggle, and the struggle against apartheid being a fight against internal colonialism, was viewed as being of limited historical significance to the first-year history education students who participated in this study. At the same time no linkages were seen between the two liberation struggles. As a result these two topics were hardly viewed by the history education students as worthy of inclusion in their imagined history curriculum. Now what does this mean in terms of historical significance as conceptualised by Counsell (2004)? The African and South African liberation struggles were not deemed remarkable and impressionable enough for the vast majority of history education students to foreground it as part of their imagined history curriculum. At the same time these events were not viewed as having significantly changed the lives of the history education students or for that matter the lives of others. Consequently, the majority of history education students could not, via their imagined curriculum, connect to the liberation struggles, as conceptualised, in a deep manner as it was not viewed as revealing something that is worthy of study.

The reasons for the views as outlined are nuanced but related to ideas of South African exceptionalism, the CAPS-History curriculum and the lingering legacy of apartheid era views on Africa. The result was that the history education students who participated in this study generally had a shared perspective on the African and South African liberation struggles. Considering that these were the freely expressed imagined views of future History teachers' further reflection is needed. Although a small scale empirical study, the results of which cannot comfortably be used to make generalisations, it did serve to provide a porthole into the views of the so-called "born-free" generation on the historical significance of the interrelated African and South African liberation struggles. This for a

country seeking an unambiguous commitment to Africa is challenging. Consequently, deep reflection is needed on the place of the African and South African liberation struggles in the CAPS curriculum and South African societal ideas of exceptionalism. And since the research participants are prospective history teachers the call by Grinker and Steiner (2005), who recommends that those who teach and study Africa must learn to problematize the issue of representation in order to locate and unpack the economic, political, personal or other motivations that might underlie any particular image of Africa, needs to needs heeded. Heeding this call would hopefully challenge the existing interpretations and lead to a more Afrocentric shared view of the historical significance of the African and South African liberation struggles.

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