In search of historical consciousness: An investigation into young South Africans' knowledge and understanding of 'their' national histories

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Abstract

This study reports the findings of an investigation into young South Africans' knowledge and understanding of their national past derived from narrative accounts of South African history written by 27 university students who had recently completed the national school history curriculum. Analysis of these narratives indicates two fundamental differences in the way the history of South Africa is told, in terms of *emphasis* (the relative weight assigned to different periods and people) and of *agency* (who 'did' and who was 'done to'). These differences point to the continued importance of racial identity as a factor in the formation of a national historical consciousness in post-apartheid South Africa. The highly selective emplotment of South Africa's past by the students highlights the importance of sociocultural factors in the development of young people's historical consciousness, a conclusion that has implications for classroom pedagogy. These findings suggest that unless the historical understanding with which students come to the classroom is engaged and is complicated through evidence-based historical enquiry then neither the 'disciplinary' nor 'social justice' aims of the intended curriculum will be realized.

Keywords: historical consciousness; historical understanding; national identities; post-apartheid South Africa; school history

Introduction

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.
>
> <div align="right">(T.S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton'. In Eliot, 1955 [1936]: 7)</div>

> I see South African History as a revolution that is brewing. I feel that we are currently living in a Historical period for South Africa and that the revolution is coming.
>
> <div align="right">(South African student narrative)</div>

Historians have long argued that history and education play an important role in the construction of a shared identity within the 'imagined community' of the nation (Hobsbawm, 1995; Anderson, 1983). More recently, scholars have examined the ambiguous interplay of 'official' and 'unofficial' versions of the past in the construction of national identities (for example Carretero *et al.*, 2012; Wertsch and Rozin, 1998), to demonstrate how contexts beyond the classroom and school

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curriculum shape young people's historical understanding. This appears particularly tangible in ethnically diverse or post-conflict societies, where multiple, complex and often competing versions of the past coexist (for example Létourneau, 2006; Epstein, 2009; Barton and McCully, 2005). By surfacing the sociocultural factors implicit in the teaching and learning of history, this body of literature has added an important dimension to the more individualistic and cognitive explanations of the development of historical understanding, exemplified by Counsell (2011) and Lee *et al.* (2006) in Britain and by Wineburg (2001) in North America. It has also revealed that historical consciousness, defined by Ahonen as 'an interaction between making sense of the past and constructing expectations for the future' (Ahonen, 2005: 699), varies greatly across generations and between ethnic groups within nation states. These findings have particular relevance for post-apartheid South Africa, the context of this study.

Despite the publication over the last twenty years of a body of literature on the South African school history curriculum, which has chronicled its construction (Siebörger, 2012), critiqued its content (Kallaway, 2012) and analysed its delivery in classrooms (Hues, 2011; Teeger, 2015), to date we know very little about the historical knowledge, understanding and consciousness with which learners leave school. This paper presents a preliminary analysis of 27 narrative accounts of South Africa's history 'from the beginning', written by young South Africans, which reveals the continued importance of racial identity as a factor in the formation of a national historical consciousness in post-apartheid South Africa.

The students in this study are the so-called 'born-frees'; they were all born after the end of apartheid. They, like approximately 25 per cent of all learners in South African public schools, selected history as an optional subject until the end of high school; they subsequently enrolled in a first-year university history course. Central to my research is an interest in how these young people choose to construct the story of South Africa's past: When do they start and finish? Who, what and which places do they include? What themes, concepts or questions provide a framework for their accounts? How do they position themselves in relation to the narratives of the nation? In answering these questions, the paper identifies important areas for future research on identity formation in post-apartheid South Africa and presents findings that have implications for classroom pedagogy.

The South African condition

Whether designed to instil collective memory or cultivate disciplinary thinking, to promote values or encourage different forms of citizenship, all school history curricula are riddled with ideological choices. In many countries the very purpose of school history remains contested terrain, where very public 'History Wars' are fought over the substantive 'what' that should be taught to children and academics adding to the fray with disagreement over the procedural 'how' (Nakou and Barca, 2010; Létourneau and Moisan, 2006). Similar debates have been fought over the last twenty years in South Africa since the official end of apartheid in 1994. In this so-called 'post'-conflict society (Weldon, 2009), the realities of coloniality (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) in the school system are palpable: in 2016 protests erupted in a number of previously white and now racially diverse schools which prevented black learners from speaking their home languages on school grounds or wearing their hair in natural styles. The school history curriculum has, in this context, been a site of both struggle and high hopes.

No immediate re-writing of the school history curriculum took place after the end of apartheid in 1994. Instead an interim revision of school syllabuses, to 'remove inaccuracies, outdated and contentious content' (Sieborger, 2000), 'cleansed' the curriculum of the most

offensive bits of racism, buying time for a more radical process of re-curriculation to be enacted. The details of the South African post-apartheid curriculum reform process have been well documented elsewhere (Jansen, 1999; Chisholm, 2004; Hoadley, 2011). For almost a decade, however, the school subject 'History' was lost in a cul-de-sac of integrated studies and outcomes-based education, which privileged form over substance and marked the triumph of forgetting over memory.

It was not until 2003 that a new national history curriculum for a 'new' South Africa was launched, the year that the majority of students in this study entered the formal school system in Grade 1. This curriculum replaced the Afrikaner nationalist meta-narrative to which, with few exceptions, all South Africans had previously been exposed through a national curriculum and system of public examinations (Sieborger, 2000). This official 'mythistory' (Letourneau, 2006), which traced the nation's origins from the arrival of European colonists, had in essence encouraged school students to see the central theme of South African history as the 'struggle of "Western" civilization to establish itself in a barbarous land' (Cape of Good Hope Department of Public Education, 1923: 133). Mildly re-curriculated throughout the twentieth century, the official school curriculum continued, however, to emplot the progressive establishment of a white supremacist nation and celebrate the tenacity of the Afrikaner *volk* in the face of adversity (from British and African opponents). By way of contrast, as the Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko recalled of his own school days in the 1960s, 'the history of the black man in South Africa is most disappointing to read. It is presented merely as a long succession of defeats' (quoted in Walker, 1990: 303). This was school history deployed in the service of an ideology which, after 1994, was 'never again' to be repeated (Minister of Education Kadar Asmal, in Asmal, 2004: x).

In contrast to the apartheid-era curriculum, the 2003 national curriculum statement affirmed the rhetoric of democratic principles and human rights values embodied in South Africa's 1996 constitution. School history was to play a role in promoting social justice by developing a new understanding of civic responsibility in a non-racial South Africa (DoE, 2003: 9). It had the potential to 'liberate' minds (Asmal, 2004). Furthermore, the history curriculum would 'give space to the silent voices of history and marginalised communities' (DoE, 2003: 6), while avoiding the 'denunciation of the past' (Chisholm: 2004). This overtly 'civic stance' (Barton and Levstik, 2006) within the curriculum was held in tension with a clearly 'disciplinary' orientation to epistemology (Seixas, 2000), or an 'analytic stance' (Barton and Levstik, 2006). By encouraging 'constructive debate through careful evaluation of a broad range of evidence and diverse points of view' (DoE, 2003: 9), school history could nurture a spirit of critical enquiry (DoE, 2002). Disciplinary skills and historical concepts, including 'multi-perspectivity' rather than a 'single story' of the nation's past, were foregrounded in the new curriculum, with 'enquiry, interpretation, knowledge and understanding' identified as key outcomes (DBE, 2011: 10). As one of the history curriculum writers stated:

> In developing skills and processes associated with historical enquiry and engaging with the issue of interpretation and bias, it was hoped that no historical narrative could again become hegemonic, dominating to the exclusion of other narratives.
>
> (Weldon, 2009: 177–8)

In keeping with these aims, the new curriculum was constructed around themes and questions that connect South Africa to the region and wider world, rather than a chronological narrative of the nation. However, underpinning the themes and key questions selected for inclusion, the curriculum does emplot a new celebratory story of the nation: progressing from the study of first peoples, the long-ago hunter-gatherers and African farmers, to European colonization,

slavery and apartheid, through struggle and resistance, to liberation and reconciliation. Although this is not taught as a coherent narrative, key 'turning points' are identified in the content framework which align to post-apartheid public holidays and act as milestones along the 'Long Walk to Freedom' (to borrow the title of former president Nelson Mandela's autobiography, published in 1995). Teachers are encouraged to 'demonstrate current relevance of events studied' (DBE, 2011: 10). The curriculum has culmination points in both Grade 9 (the final year in which history is a compulsory school subject) and Grade 12 (where learners exit the school system), ending with a study of the multi-party elections in 1994 and the public catharsis of the Truth and Reconciliation hearings, which made South Africa the international poster child for negotiated settlement and restorative justice. Curriculum revisions implemented after the 2009 review have added content specifications to the history curriculum and foregrounded historical skills and concepts.

Alongside curriculum reform, fundamental changes have taken place in the governance and composition of public schools since the end of apartheid. Prior to 1991, South African public schools were segregated on the basis of racial classification. Thereafter a process of racial integration began. Due to the unequal funding models under apartheid, schools that were previously reserved for white children were significantly better resourced. In the post-apartheid era, schools have been allowed to determine the fees charged, and as a result a pattern of high-fee former white schools, primarily situated in suburban areas, have attracted a more or less racially diverse middle-class student body. Students from these schools, together with those who have attended non-racial independent schools, account for the vast majority of school leavers who achieve the necessary scores in the National Senior Certificate to gain entry to the country's tertiary institutions. This paper goes in search of the historical consciousness of these 'born-free' South Africans: schooled in racially diverse classrooms and taught from a history curriculum whose intention is to promote social justice and inculcate disciplinary thinking and multi-perspectivity rather than the memorization of a single story of the nation.

Methodology

Participants in this project were enrolled in compulsory first-year, first-semester courses in one of two majors (history and economic history) at an English-medium university for the academic year 2016. Towards the end of their first semester, the entire cohort of 386 students was introduced to the research project in broad outline and invited to attend one of three narrative writing sessions. All participants were rewarded with ZAR35-00 (c. £2.00) credit loaded onto their student card and redeemable via the university printing system.

Participants were asked to complete a brief biographical survey detailing gender, race, school attended, the level at which history had been taken at school and the year in which they undertook the History National Senior Certificate examination ('matric'). Using the narrative methodology devised by Létourneau in his study of young Québécois (Létourneau, 2006), participants were then asked to 'Write a history of "South Africa" since the beginning, in the way you see, remember or understand it'. They were given one hour to complete the task.

The initial response to this call for volunteers was very poor, with only six students attending the sessions, probably a result of the sessions' timing near the end of the semester, when students were busy completing assessment tasks. As a result, I decided to make the task available to students online via the university's intranet. A site was created to which all students registered for the two compulsory first-year, first-semester courses were added as

participants, and the task was then made available as a timed online assignment. Students were again invited to participate in the research and to complete the same task online at a time of their convenience within a three-week period; they received regular email reminders to encourage participation. Having students submit online made the process of textual analysis easier, and allowed all submissions to be screened for plagiarism via an internet-based anti-plagiarism application, 'Turnitin' (none was detected). In total, 33 students completed the task online, but 10 responses were unusable for the purposes of this study: these either omitted biographical detail or the narrative account, or came from students who had completed their schooling outside South Africa or who had not studied history at school to Grade 12.

The decision to ask students to identify themselves according to school, gender and the racial classification schema used by the previous apartheid government was taken to facilitate the data analysis. Although the Population Registration Act was repealed in 1991, the terms 'Black', 'White', 'Coloured' and 'Indian' are still widely used in public- and private-sector data collection in South Africa, as well as being common forms of self-identification. I was, therefore, particularly interested in examining the effects of these identities on students' historical knowledge and understanding. Students were given the option to skip the biographical questions, or select 'other', but none chose to do so and participants self-defined as Black (9), White (9) or Coloured (9). The absence of 'Indian' students among the participants reflects this group's minority status in the wider history class. Female participants (18) outnumbered males (9) in a ratio of 2:1, reflecting the gender ratio in both the courses and the department's undergraduate enrolment as a whole.

Table 1: The profile of research participants and Total first-year history class (excluding non-South African citizens) in terms of race and gender

	Student research participants			Total first-year history class		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Black	2	7	9	17	46	63
White	3	6	9	40	53	93
Coloured	4	5	9	21	39	60
Indian	0	0	0	2	7	9
Unknown[1]	0	0	0	34	62	96
Total	9	18	**27**	114	207	**321**

Note: since 'race' is no longer a criteria for selection process at this institution students may choose not to provide this information.

The majority of participants (21) had finished school in the previous two years, taking their National Senior Certificate Examination in 2014 (6) or 2015 (15). Of the rest, two finished in 2010, one in 2011 and three completed school in 2013. All participants sat the History National Senior Certificate Examination in their Grade 12 year. Thus, in theory at least, the participants had all covered the same 'intended' history curriculum in the course of their school careers.

The overwhelming majority of participants in this study (81.4 per cent) were educated in the racially integrated classrooms of middle-/high-fee schools: either former white government (public) (n=11) or independent (private) (n=11) schools. This has two implications for the study. First, it is an indicator of class position: in a national context where 80 per cent of schools are 'no-fee' schools, the middle or high fees charged by formerly white and independent schools

suggest that the student participants are, broadly, middle class. Second, the former white and independent schools are the most racially integrated within the South African school system – in terms of learners, although not in terms of teaching staff. In contrast, the vast majority of black children in rural and peri-urban areas are educated in racially homogeneous classrooms.

Having tabulated the biographical details, I embarked on a close reading of the narrative accounts. Initial calculations of text length were followed by searches to uncover the patterns of emplotment in the narratives constructed by the students: When did South African History start and end? What happened when? Which events were included? Who were the actors? Initially, I searched for dates, names, events and concepts mentioned in the curriculum document; I then broadened the searches to tally the usage of all dates, names and 'race'/ethnic categories appearing at least twice and other concepts appearing more than ten times across the total 12,000 words of student text. These were subsequently tabulated and graphed by gender and race.

What emerged from this largely inductive process were clear patterns, where the overwhelming fault-line for similarity and difference was 'race'.

Emplotting the history of South Africa from the beginning

Although it is not organized as a 'story' in the curriculum, all participants wrote the history of South Africa in a narrative, chronological form. None attempted to organize their writing thematically in terms of political, economic or social changes over time, according to the curriculum's 'topics' or in answer to its 'key questions'. Furthermore, there was little indication that students had been exposed to the robust debates within South African historiography, or understood that the events, processes and concepts they chronicled were the subject of contestation by historians. The majority selectively emplotted simple, linear and progressive narratives, similar in form to those identified by Létourneau among Québécois youth, where 'ambiguity, dissonance or paradox' are left unexplored (Létourneau, 2006: 74).

All students were given an hour to complete their biographical details and narratives. The narratives were on average 416 words long, with only four students writing more than a thousand words. There were marked differences in the average length of text by race and gender: black students (average 200 words) wrote on average half as many words as whites (average 599 words), while coloured students wrote an average of 448 words. Male students wrote more on average (average 584 words) than female students (average 390 words).

As mentioned previously, the post-apartheid history curriculum writers consciously avoided emplotting a new national meta-narrative, so in asking students to tell South Africa's history the task required them to make choices that reveal not only epistemological orientation to the discipline but also ideological and political concerns. The students were given no temporal frame for the task but simply instructed to start 'at the beginning'. Territorially and constitutionally 'South Africa' came into being as a nation state in 1910, but none of the narratives started here – a notable similarity. Most students included the twentieth century in their narratives, but the specifics of which events were distanced and which brought to the fore differed markedly across the distinct race categories.
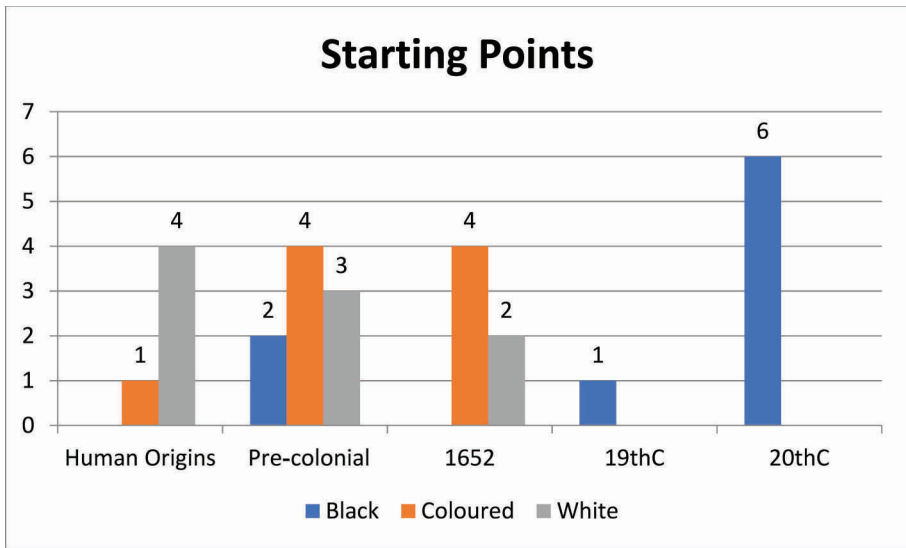
Figure 1: Starting points selected by students for their narratives of South Africa, by race

For most white and coloured students 'South African' history can be dated to the long-ago past (as reflected in Figure 1), for white students as far back as the origins of human culture (estimated to be 100,000 years ago) and for the majority of coloured students in the pre-colonial period/mid-seventeenth century. In stark contrast, two-thirds (66.7 per cent) of black respondents started their histories in the twentieth century. Only two (22.2 per cent) started in the pre-colonial period, i.e. more than 350 years ago.
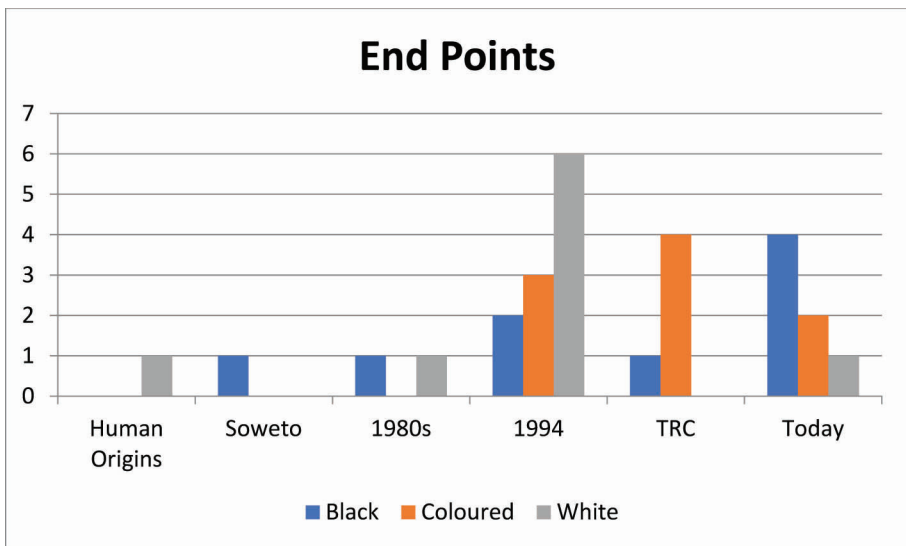

Figure 2: End points selected by students for their narratives of South Africa, by race

There is a similar difference in the end point chosen for the student narratives. Two-thirds of white students (66.7 per cent) end their narratives in 1994, only one choosing the present as a

terminal point. Only a third (33.3 per cent) of coloured correspondents chose to end in 1994, the majority (44.4 per cent) choosing the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), while a minority (22.2 per cent) ended in the present. Again in contrast to the other two groups, more black students (44.4 per cent) chose to end with the present. The number of black students ending their narratives in 1994 was the lowest of the three groups (22.2 per cent).

For most white students, South African history is distanced: It 'stretches back to the origin of the Human species' (#19), to 'the cradle of humankind' (#16), to a place of common ancestry; history ends, for most, before they were born. By contrast, for black students, South African history is the more recent past: 'I don't know the beginning' (#9), says one; another is 'not sure how it was before colonialism', and for most history is present in today's South Africa: 'Many of the country's social and economic structures are highly if not completely influenced by the past of colonialism, apartheid and modern day imperialism' (#13).

The varying temporal range of the narratives is also reflected in where the emphasis is placed within this range. In general students seem to recall very little South African history learned before Grade 10, the point at which history becomes an elective subject. Their stories of South Africa are pegged with 'mid-range', largely political events (Wertsch, 2006). Again mirroring the variance in choice of start and end point, the specific narrative of the nation was elaborated differently by different students. In Table 2, the top five dates and events cited have been tabulated by race. For example, seven of the nine coloured students mentioned the South African War in their narratives, whereas this event was not mentioned in significant proportions by either black or white students.

The data was also analysed by gender but no significant patterns emerged.

Table 2: Top five events mentioned in students' narratives (with or without use of a specific date), by race. The figure indicates the number of students who included this event in their narratives

EVENT	DATE	Black	Coloured	White
Long-ago past/origins of human culture – archaeological evidence	c. 300,000 years BP			5
Arrival of Dutch East India Company (Van Riebeeck) at the Cape/Colonization	1652		6	5
British take control of Cape and incorporate Cape Colony into British Empire	1795–1814			5
South African War	1899–1902		7	
Act of Union of South Africa	1910			5
Formation of African National Congress	1912	3		
National Party elected to power by white minority/Apartheid era begins.	1948	3	6	
The Sharpeville Massacre (remembered as a public holiday 'Human Rights Day' since 1994)	1960	3		
The Soweto Uprising (remembered as a public holiday 'Youth Day' since 1994)	1976	4		
1st Democratic Election (remembered as a public holiday 'Freedom Day' since 1994)	1994	3	6	6
Public hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)	1996–98		5	

As was suggested by their choice of start and end points, the evidence suggests that white student historical narratives 'distance' the past, the majority starting more than 350 years ago and leapfrogging the twentieth century, from Union in 1910 to the first democratic election in 1994. This most obviously de-emphasizes the era of segregation and apartheid, the 'short twentieth century' on which black historical narratives place the greatest emphasis. For black students, South African history is the history of apartheid in the near present. Coloured student narratives do not place an emphasis on any particular period, with the single most frequent date mentioned being that of the South African War, but significant mention is made of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which barely featured in black or white narratives.

So far the patterns of emplotment reveal differences in emphasis which suggest that students who have spent 12 years sitting with each other in similar classrooms have taken a different understanding of the past from their history lessons. The narratives also reveal a difference in actors and their agency.

In general all the narratives are thin on empirical detail. Of the 27 accounts, 9 included no date at all and, across nearly 12,000 words of student narrative, reference to the specific names and dates identified in the curriculum documents was sparse, as illustrated in Figures 3 and 4.
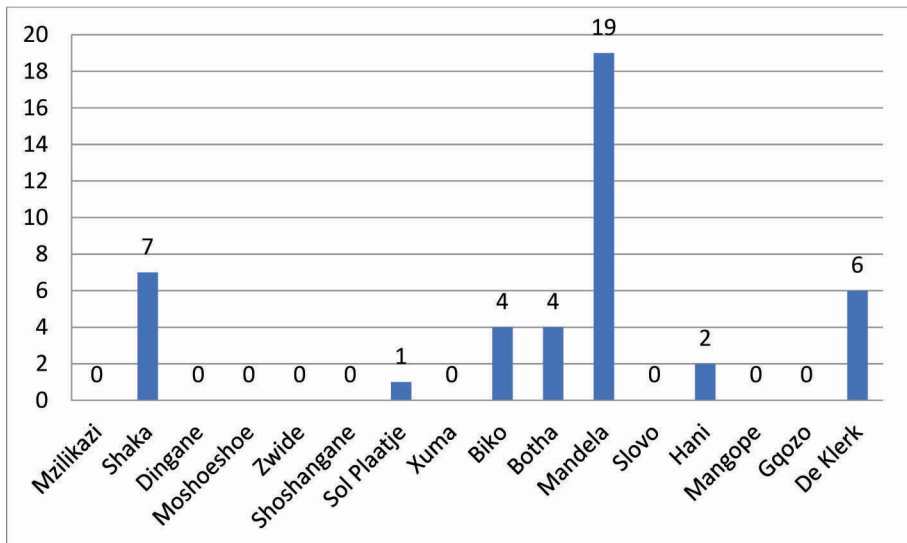

Figure 3: Total mentions in student narratives of the 16 individuals (all men) named in the Grade 10–12 History CAPS (DBE: 2011)

Some additional men found their way into more than one narrative: Tambo (2), Sisulu (2), Van Riebeeck (2), Smuts (6) and Rhodes (3). However, with the exception of one reference to the controversial nineteenth-century teenage prophetess Nongqawuse, whose prophecies are often blamed for the chaos caused by Xhosa cattle-killing and crop destruction, the students mentioned no women by name in their narratives.

Similarly, students rarely included the specific dates of events, even those that are detailed in the curriculum documents.
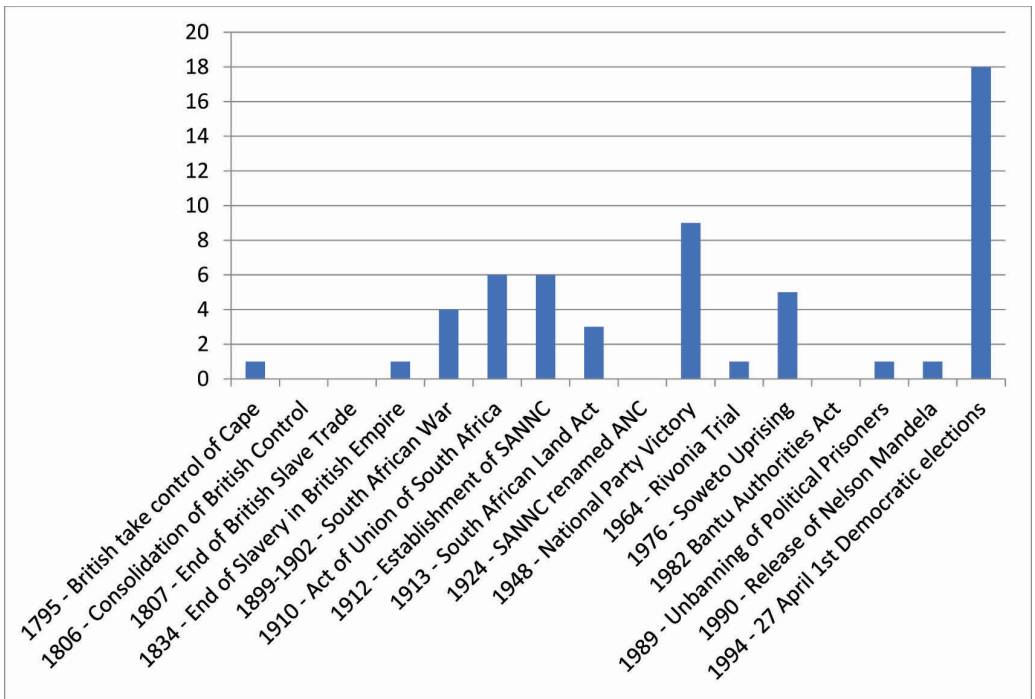
Figure 4: Total mentions in student narratives of all 16 specific dates mentioned in the Grade 10–12 History CAPS (DBE: 2011)

Two additional dates outside the curriculum were mentioned in more than two narratives: ten students included 1652 (the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck at the Cape and the date from which European colonization is conventionally dated); and five students mentioned 1960 (the Sharpeville Massacre).

What can we conclude from this paucity of empirical detail? Certainly it is not unique to South Africa. Whether in the United States (Ravitch and Finn, 1987), United Kingdom (Lee and Howson, 2009) or the former Soviet Union (Wertsch, 2006), it is widely held that 'kids don't know history' (Wineberg, 2001) – at least, not the specific historical detail that politicians and other concerned adults seem to expect of them: 'Our young cannot tell us about the history of the Khoi-San, the Battles of Isandlwana, the brutal murder of Dingaan and the history of Shaka Zulu' (SADTU, 2014), lamented the South African Democratic Teachers Union when calling for history to be made compulsory for all senior-grade students (Phakathi, 2015). While only a small sample, these narratives give weight to SADTU's concern: not one of the students gave more than the most cursory nod to the topics mentioned, despite the presence of all of them in the post-2003 history curriculum.

One explanation is that knowledge of dates and details has not been prioritized in the new curriculum, as the mere 16 names and dates in the Grade 10–12 curriculum document indicate. Similarly, history assessment no longer includes the multiple-choice tests of de-contextualized historical 'facts' that school children of the past were required to memorize. Instead, in keeping with both the 'civic' and 'disciplinary' stances of the curriculum, emphasis has been placed, albeit with questionable success (Bertram, 2008), on developing procedural 'skills' and 'doing history' through source work. To echo Wertsch's work on inter-generational narratives in post-soviet

Russia, the absence of specific historical detail recollected by South African students may also be interpreted as the state having 'lost control of collective memory' (Wertsch, 2006: 55), arguably an intended outcome of post-apartheid curriculum writers.

Although their narratives are thin on specific detail, however, an interesting similarity among this cohort is reflected most clearly in the 'schematic' narrative (Wertsch, 2006) form that students overwhelmingly shared regardless of race, gender or schooling. Constructed around the concepts of colonialism, segregation/apartheid, and democracy, the underlying schema is one depicting a struggle for control of 'South Africa': a story of dispossession and (ambiguous) restitution, exemplified in its most simplistic form by the statement, 'Colonialism, apartheid then our current state of sometimes-much-unrealized democracy is what I know' (Student #9).

In the following extracts, written by a black student, a coloured student and a white student respectively, the narrative is elaborated, but it follows the common schematic template:

> South Africa has a long history of **racial segregation**, this was called **apartheid**. Black South Africans were denied land ownership, told where to live, needed to provide identity documents to move around in the city (those who did not work for a particular white family were not allowed to be in cities). Black South Africans were denied the right to vote. They were sent to villages to live in 'homelands' and denied economic participation. Police men could arrest black people, especially black men, at will without any concrete evidence of illegal activity. Black prisoners were brutalized, tortured and sometimes murdered in these cells. It was not until 1994 that the work of the several liberation organizations (the ANC, PAC) paid off and South Africa became a **democratic state**. The first **democratic elections** were held on 27 April 1994. (Black student)

> South Africa was **colonized** by Dutch people. First inhabitants of South Africa were the Khoi-San people. Blacks and Whites migrated from other parts of the world or Africa to South Africa. South Africa was **colonized** once more by the British people. Once free from **Colonization**, the White people in the country felt that they were superior to other races therefore they should lead. This was called **Apartheid**. **Apartheid** lasted until 1994. Prior to this there were many uprisings from other races as well as whites, such as the students' march in 1976, the women's march in 1956. South Africa held its first **democratic** election in 1994 and the first black president was Nelson Mandela. The ANC was the ruling party. (Coloured student)

> The earliest peoples of indigenous South Africa were the Khoisan. They lived in the country for many years before European settlers reached the Cape. Settlers from the Dutch East India company arrived at the Cape in 1652. They built a fort and some gardens so that ships travelling to Eastern routes could benefit from the port. Conflict and animosity existed between the indigenous peoples and the European settlers. At a later stage the English took over the Cape Colony in 1795. When SA finally became a union, a series of oppressive laws were put in place. They discriminated against and oppressed non-whites and were collectively known as the '**Apartheid**' laws. Important resistance groups were formed, the ANC being the most important of these. After many years of **racial segregation**, pressure by the majority of SA and the international community, FW de Klerk abolished the Apartheid government and a new democracy was born. Nelson Mandela, leader of the ANC, was released from prison in 1994 and after a fair and **democratic election**, became the President of SA. SA was as of then a **democratic state** with an inclusive and fair Constitution … (White student)

Another similarity that emerges from these texts is the lack of any identification with the nation. Unlike their North American counterparts (Barton, 2012), the South African students rarely positioned themselves explicitly in their narrative accounts. 'We', 'our' and 'us' were extremely

infrequent, occurring in only five of the students' narratives. However, when they are used, 'race' again proves an illuminating differential, as illustrated below:

> I do know that **we** had a sustained system of interaction, an established non-monetary currency, sustainable livelihood, intellectual interest and prowess and a sense of who **we** are. Unfortunately, **we** are largely whitewashed. (Black student)

> … the schooling system does not bother to teach **us our** own history. (Black student)

> 1600s **we** had Jan van Riebeeck and the rest of the Dutch (East Indian Company?) come and set shop at the Cape of Good Hope … **We** transitioned peacefully without a civil war ... I feel that **we** are currently living in a Historical period for South Africa and that the revolution is coming. **We** have the Bill of Rights and the Constitution to protect us all – it's inclusive of all, gives everybody rights – all those face-value-cool-things, but **we're** a far cry from a country that's abolished racism, rectified the wrongs and **we** still have a lot of growing and learning to do. (Coloured student)

> A social history of South Africa begins before the borders were drawn: when **our** hominid ancestors, uninfluenced by showmanship and ego, inhabited the lands … (White student)

> South-African History stretches back to the origin of the Human species. One such area is the Cradle of Humankind in Witwatersrand where the remains of **our** early hominid ancestors have been found … (White student)

Identification for the black students is with the 'us/we' present in the here and now and, despite the curriculum changes, they continue to feel excluded from South Africa's history as presented in the official school curriculum. The single coloured student who used a personal pronoun does so to embrace an inclusive South African identity, albeit within a deeply flawed post-apartheid dispensation. Again we see the white students reaching back to the origins of human culture to find their place in 'our' South Africa.

If not 'we', then who are the actors and agents in these students' narratives? One final set of data provides us with a clue. As we have already seen, a feature that the student narratives have in common is that they are not driven forward by individuals. The 'Great White Men' who propelled the 'old story' told in the apartheid school curriculum have not been replaced by 'Great Black Men' or women in the student narratives, with the possible exception of Nelson Mandela. Nor have individuals been replaced with 'we', 'us' or 'South Africans'.

The process of coding and quantifying the specific details within the text revealed that to a large extent all the narratives are driven forward by abstractions, which range from ideologies (such as colonialism, apartheid and democracy) to the effects of these (resistance, oppression and struggle) and their political embodiments, primarily the African National Congress (82 mentions across all narratives; the next-most frequently cited political organization, the National Party, had 6 mentions; the Pan-African Congress 3 mentions). People, overwhelmingly, exist only as essentialized racial and ethnic groupings; again, the most significant variations in specific detail are found between students self-identified as black, coloured and white. The following graphs provide a useful indicator of the frequency of reference to racial groups in the historical narratives and again clear patterns emerge (see Figures 5, 6 and 7).
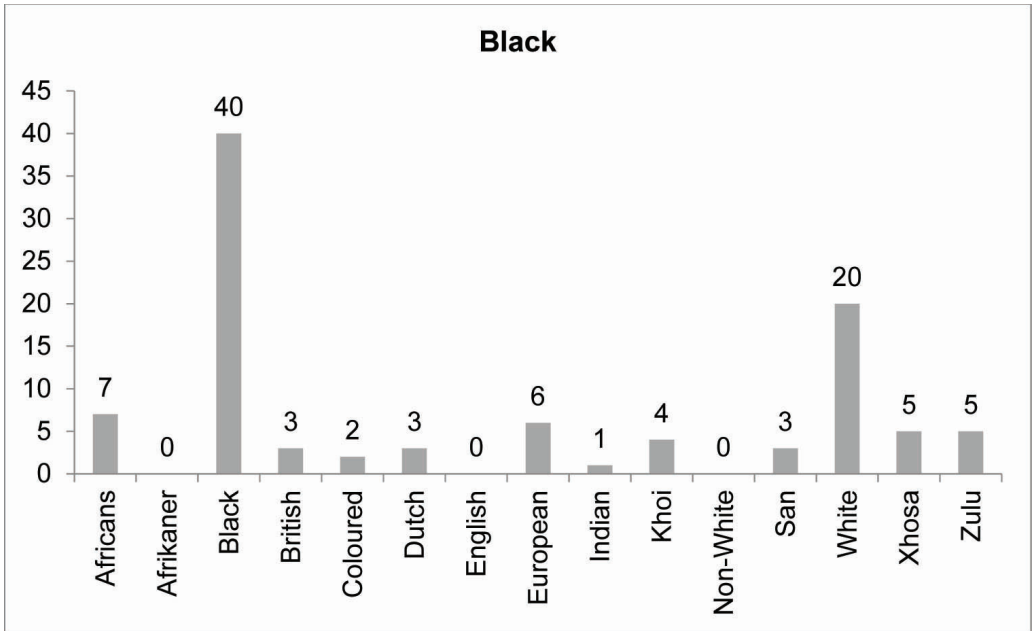
Figure 5: Races/ethnic groups mentioned more than ten times in black students' narrative accounts
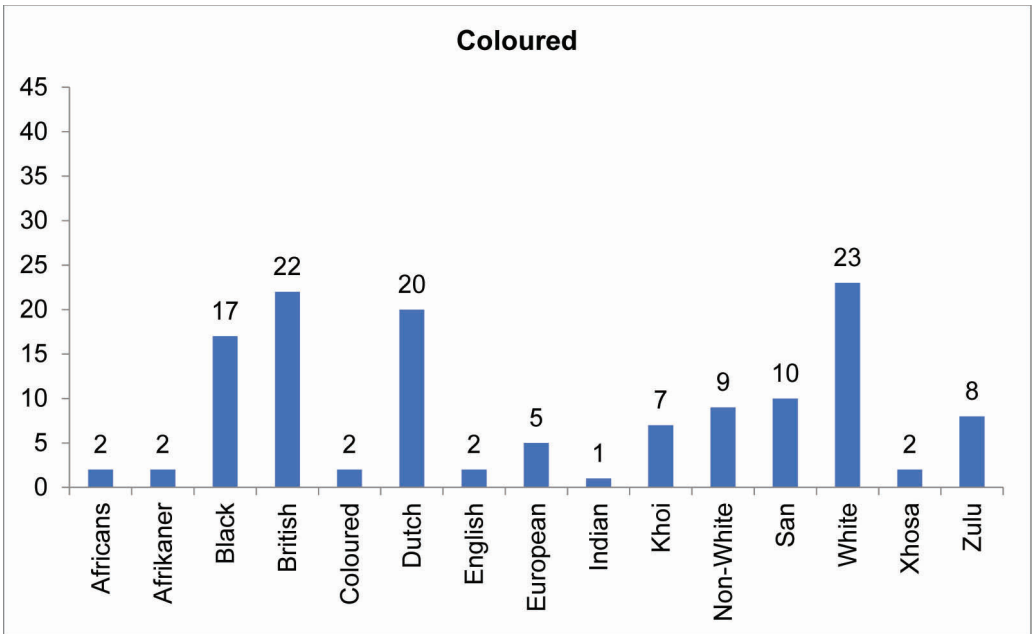

Figure 6: Races/ethnic groups mentioned more than ten times in coloured students' narrative accounts

White

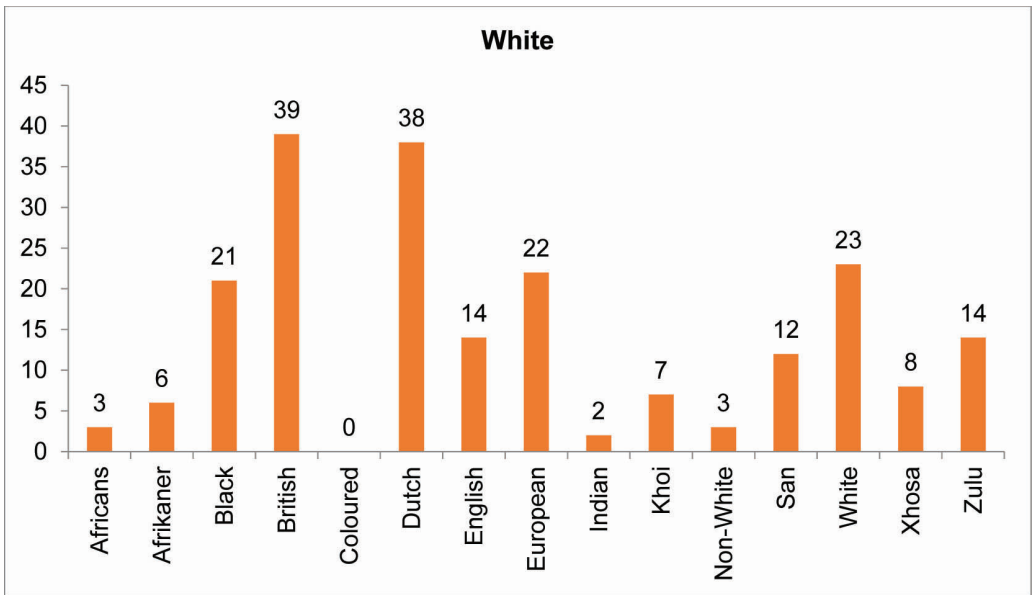| Group	Value
Africans	3
Afrikaner	6
Black	21
British	39
Coloured	0
Dutch	38
English	14
European	22
Indian	2
Khoi	7
Non-White	3
San	12
White	23
Xhosa	8
Zulu	14

Figure 7: Races/ethnic groups mentioned more than ten times in white students' narrative accounts

The varying word counts of the student narratives preclude direct comparison between groups, but, as Figures 5, 6 and 7 clearly show, each group vests historical agency in different race/ethnic groups. In the black student narratives the primary presence is 'black' (40.4 per cent) and the secondary presence is 'whites' (20.2 per cent), with little nuance between these two polarities. In coloured student narratives there is almost no mention (1.5 per cent) of the coloured identity claimed by students in their biographical questionnaires. The strongest race group presence is a generic 'white' (56.1 per cent). White student narratives have by far the strongest own-identity signal (74 per cent), to the virtual exclusion of all others. The frequency with which 'black' is mentioned in the white narratives is a negligible 10.9 per cent.

Strikingly absent from the narratives are references to alternative collectives which have been the focus of a large body of scholarship by a generation of revisionist historians. Across the 12,000 words of the narratives there were almost no references to class (2 instances), gender (0), age/youth (0), region (0), citizen/subject (0), urban/ization (0) or industrial/ization (1). Despite the lip-service paid to giving 'space to the silent voices of history and to marginalised communities' (DoE, 2003), these remain largely unheard in the curriculum and silent in the student narratives. Nor does the curriculum explicitly unpack the racial identities inherited from colonialism and apartheid, and while there are opportunities to do so in particular grades (such as the topic of pseudo-scientific racism in Grade 11), whether these opportunities are used and whether the concept of race is historicized or essentialized depends entirely on the teacher. The continued salience of these racial terms in the sample student narratives should not, therefore, surprise us.

Overall, despite their similarities in terms of class and education, the differences in the narrative histories of South Africa told by the three groups are more striking than are their similarities. Similarities are, to be sure, evidenced in the shared schematic narrative template, the construction of their histories around the same substantive concepts – 'colonialism', 'segregation/apartheid', 'democracy' – and a bias against individual men or women, 'great' and

'small', in favour of historical actors essentialized by ethnicity and race. The differences, however, are sufficiently substantial to suggest at least three separate national historical narratives of South Africa. In the black narrative, history is imminent, and agency is ascendant and stands in a strongly polarized relationship with a white presence. The coloured narrative has no own agency but shows a strong twentieth-century emphasis that extends beyond 1994 to restitution for the wrongs of apartheid (through the TRC). Lastly, the white narrative is characterized by a marked distancing of the past and a strong sense of own agency to the exclusion of all others. These findings raise interesting questions for future research.

Conclusions

That such a superficially homogeneous group of students in terms of their class and education can produce national histories with such diverse emphases and agency, despite exposure to a standard national curriculum taught under optimal conditions, suggests that sociocultural factors beyond the classroom and curriculum play an important role in shaping historical understanding and consciousness, a conclusion that is supported by international studies.

Research into how people learn has shown that learners come to our history classrooms not as empty vessels but with preconceptions and understandings. If not engaged, then they may appropriate new concepts for official purposes (a test or exam) but revert to their prior understanding once outside the school context (NRC, 2005). Such a 'double historical consciousness' has been well documented in African-American students in the United States (Epstein, 2009), for whom official textbook accounts of progressively won civil liberties were held in tension with an understanding of the past informed by community and personal experience, which told a more credible version of the ongoing victimization and marginalization of African-American people. A similar resistance to adopting a narrative of the past that clashed with community-based knowledge was found among Estonian adults who had grown up in the former Soviet Union, where they learned an 'official' school version of the Russian Revolution and the 'unofficial' version at home (Wertsch, 2000). This too was the experience of black students schooled under apartheid, as Blake Modisane remembered in his 1963 autobiography (not published until 1990):

> South African history was amusing, we sat motionless and listened attentively … The ancestral heroes of our fathers, the great chiefs which our parents told stories about, were in class described as blood-thirsty animal brutes; Shaka, the brilliant general who welded the Nguni tribulets into a unified and powerful Zulu nation, the greatest war machine in South African history, was described as a psychopath …
>
> (Modisane, 1990)

The intention of the post-apartheid school history curriculum was not to replace one 'single story' of South Africa's past with another, but rather to teach history as a 'process of enquiry' (DBE, 2011: 8) wherein learners might be exposed to 'multi-perspectivity', which would add nuance and complexity to their historical understanding. The narrative accounts collected for this study suggest, however, that curriculum reform has delivered neither the complex disciplinary thinking nor the social justice intended by its creators and that, despite radical changes to the intended curriculum, young people's knowledge of South African history remains largely essentialized around racial classifications.

In 2015, South Africa's Minister of Basic Education established a Task Team to investigate how best to implement the introduction of history as a compulsory school subject. In explaining the motivation for her decision, she expressed the view that due to the low numbers of learners who elected to take history after Grade 9 in a 12-year school system, school history was

currently failing in its role to promote a sense of 'nationalism, patriotism and national unity' (pers. comm.). If, as Hans Kohn argued back in 1944, nationalism or the nation is a 'cultural identity, lodged above all in consciousness' (Kohn quoted in Vanaik, 2016: 97) then this study suggests that using the school history curriculum as a vehicle for promoting a shared national identity may not be as straightforward a project as the minister hopes.

While we should guard against any simplistic notion of the relationship between historically grounded identities and formal studies at school (Barton and McCully, 2005: 86), as one of the main architects of the current national curriculum, Gail Weldon, noted, 'there is a powerful social curriculum operating in South Africa' (Weldon, 2009: 180). The findings of this study suggest that young people's lived experience is at least as powerful as the official curriculum in shaping historical consciousness. This raises important questions for future research and for policymakers, but also has implications for classroom pedagogy and for how we conduct pre- and in-service teacher education.

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Notes on the contributor

After being awarded a doctorate in South African history from the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London University, Kate Angier taught History at a Cape Town high school for 15 years. She spent three years as the Senior Curriculum Planner for History in the Western Cape Education Department before taking up a position in 2015 as senior lecturer in the School of Education, University of Cape Town.

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