

Learning About Controversial Issues in School History: The Experiences of Learners in KwaZulu-Natal Schools

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Introduction and background

Under Apartheid, History was taught according to a positivist model in which it was claimed that “objective truthful History” was passed on to learners. Consequently, since both learners and teachers were expected to subscribe to History in an uncritical manner, educational engagement with controversial issues hardly ever occurred and multiple perspectives to topics were not explored. At face value at least, the idea was created that History was taught in a neutral manner. In reality, school History was dominated by an Apartheid paradigm, an Afrikaner Nationalist framework and content to support this. As a result History was used as a tool to legitimise Apartheid.¹ Since 1994, the Apartheid educational legacy has been dismantled and a new curriculum, the National Curriculum Statement (NCS), and a new educational philosophy, Outcomes Based Education (OBE), have been implemented.

A fundamental cornerstone of the “new” intended curriculum, and specifically the NCS, History is the teaching of controversial issues through critical enquiry – outcome 1 of the NCS-History statement.² To achieve this learners are expected to work independently “in formulating enquiry questions and gathering, analysing, interpreting and evaluating relevant evidence”.³ In the process learners are expected by the NCS-History

¹ For a critical take on History teaching under Apartheid see: M. Walker, “History and history teaching in Apartheid South Africa”, *Radical History Review*, 46/47, 1990, 268-276.

² For an overview on how the post-1994 History Curriculum in South Africa came about see: R. Siebörger, “History and the emerging nation: the South African experience”, *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research* 1(1), 2000, no page numbers; J. Dean and R. Siebörger, “After Apartheid: the outlook for history”, *Teaching History* 79, April 1995, 32-38.

³ Department of Education, *National Curriculum Statement Grades 10-12 (General History)* (Pretoria,

to engage with “a broad range of evidence and diverse points of view” and understand “that historical truth consists of a multiplicity of voices expressing varying and often contradictory versions of the same history”.⁴ The controversial and contentious nature of History is therefore at the heart of the intended curriculum that learners must study and teachers must teach. Although educationally and ideologically this is a quantum leap from what school History was about under Apartheid it must be borne in mind that any curriculum has a strong political agenda and that the current History curriculum in South Africa is no different.⁵

Learners born at the beginning of the 1990s, as the children of the Apartheid regime, the so-called “born frees”, have no personal memory of Apartheid, and were schooled under the History curriculum as outlined above. These learners are now entering the labour market and universities – including university courses in History including my own. My educational interactions with students around ‘hot’ and divisive topics during these courses have left me wondering how controversial issues are dealt with in schools and have prompted this research project. The purpose of this study is therefore to investigate a decade and a half into the rapid political and educational transition endured by South Africa, the experiences of the learning of controversial issues in History by learners who have recently completed their schooling in KwaZulu-Natal. In itself this research topic transcends my own research interests and courses since learners with similar experiences are also populating tertiary History courses elsewhere in the region. Hence my motivation to publish this paper in the *Journal of Natal and Zulu History* for after all what happens in History Education in this region is the concern of all involved in the subject.

Review of the literature on teaching controversial issues

Defining what constitutes a controversial issue in History is difficult because there is no universally accepted agreement on what is controversial to whom. Invariably

Government Printer, 2003), 11.

⁴ Department of Education, *National Curriculum Statement Grades 10-12 (General History)*, 9.

⁵ M. Ndlovu, “History Curriculum, Nation-building and the promotion of common values in Africa: A comparative analysis of Zimbabwe and South Africa”, *Yesterday & Today* 4, October 2009, 67-76; E.S. van Eeden, “Curriculum transformations in History: driven by political trends or a result of empirical outcomes and educational progress? A debate with South Africa as a sample”, *Yearbook of the International Society for History Didactics 2010*, 2010, 25-52.

controversial issues are complex, have no fixed point of view and have competing interpretations which will challenge personal beliefs and values. Therefore, what is viewed as acceptable by one individual or community might be deemed controversial by another.⁶ By implication it would be fair to argue that any historical issue will be controversial to some individual or group while certain issues have the potential to polarise people on a large scale.⁷ Furthermore, controversial issues in History do not remain constant and depend on context, time and circumstance. This means that what was a controversial issue 40 years ago need not be so in the current context, and vice versa. The Historical Association, in its publication on teaching controversial and emotive issues, neatly encapsulates the complex nature of controversial issues: “The study of history can be emotive and controversial where there is actual or perceived unfairness to people by another individual or group in the past”.⁸ Invariably such issues are underpinned by factors such as race, gender, class, politics, ethics, culture, language and economics – in other words, issues of moral complexity.

Polarisation will, therefore, in the light of the above, come about when historical events and the related evidence elicit disagreement, arouse anger, raise emotions and cause bias to arise. However, emotional engagement is necessary and important for an issue to be controversial for it signifies that learners care enough to be curious and are willing to think about and engage with it.⁹ Personal constructive engagement is therefore more likely if learners, through the learning of History, have a sense that their own identities, loyalties, interests and places in the world are at stake.¹⁰

The importance of learning about controversial issues in History lies first and foremost within the subject as a body and form of knowledge which by its very nature is based on different interpretations and perspectives and, as a result, provides but a mere provisional understanding. History teaching and learning is therefore rooted in controversy, and dealing constructively with controversial issues cannot be avoided as it is

⁶ J.M. Wassermann, D. Francis, and L. Ndou, “The teaching of controversial issues in Social Science Education”, *Journal of Educational Studies* 6(4), 2008, 37-57.

⁷ D.W. Johnson and R.T. Johnson, “Conflict in the classroom: controversy and learning”, *Review of Educational Research* Winter 49(1), 1979, 51-70.

⁸ The Historical Association, *T.E.A.C.H. Teaching emotive and controversial History 3-19* (London, Historical Association, 2007), 3.

⁹ D. Rougvie, “I could change the world if I put my mind to it. Teaching controversial issues and citizenship through a project on heroes and heroines”, *Primary History* 46, 2007, 14-15.

¹⁰ The Historical Association, *T.E.A.C.H. Teaching emotive and controversial History 3-19*, 4.

an integral and inescapable part of the subject. In the view of Burrton, active engagement with controversial issues is “nothing more, and nothing less, than preparing our students for the real world by presenting them with the opportunity to analyse a variety of perspectives – but in a controlled and intellectually honest environment”.¹¹

At the same time, teaching controversial issues in History is necessary for renovation and progress in terms of historical understanding. By thinking critically about issues and by asking contentious questions the pedagogical course will move beyond the mere knowing of History, and consequently complex moral issues that transcend mere historical facts will be engaged with. Furthermore, as the complexity of an issue unfolds, different perspectives and interpretations of the available historical evidence will arise. In an ideal educational context, teachers and learners alike will have to learn to listen to and exhibit respect for different points of view, and accept doubt and uncertainty about their own interpretations, so as to gain a deeper and more critical understanding of historical events.¹² In the process learners and teachers should learn tolerance and respectful behaviour, develop moral and ethical reasoning abilities, build up skills in critical thinking and in cooperative learning, and structured intellectual conflict.¹³

Heimberg, as cited by Cavet, takes this thinking a step further and suggests that teaching controversial issues in History is important as it can serve as a framework or a point of reference to understanding present-day moral complexities.¹⁴ These sentiments are shared by Stradling, Noctor and Baines who maintain that controversial issues need to be taught since they are topical, directly relevant to learners’ lives, and tend to interrogate major social, political, economic and moral problems which they ought to know about.¹⁵ It can therefore be argued that teaching controversial issues in History is necessary for learners to develop skills so as to deal with social, political and economic issues locally,

¹¹ A. Burrton, “Controversial Issues: They belong in the classroom”, Education Policy Center of the Independence Institute, http://www.i2i.org/articles/IB_2006_D_Web.pdf, 2006 (accessed 14 December 2007), 6.

¹² Wassermann, Francis and Ndou, “The teaching of controversial issues in Social Science Education”, 37-57.

¹³ D.W. Johnson, R.T. Johnson and K.A. Smith, “Constructive Controversy: The Educative Power of Intellectual Conflict”, *Change* 32(1), 2000, 36.

¹⁴ A. Cavet, “Teaching ‘controversial issues’: a living, vital link between school and society?”, *Service de Veille scientifique et technologique la lettre d’information* 27 May 2007, www.inrp.fr/vst (accessed on 14 December 2007), 7-8.

¹⁵ R. Stradling, M. Noctor and B. Baines, *Teaching controversial issues* (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), 3-4.

nationally and internationally since these are more often than not embroiled in conflict.¹⁶

From a South African perspective, Manyane argues for the learning about controversial issues in History and states that in a historically divided society it can play a role in creating understanding and equipping learners to make informed judgements. According to him the importance of learning about controversial issues is both process- and product-based. This implies that learning about controversial issues is not the means to an end or an end in itself. Instead, the skills, competencies and processes learned through the analysis and examination of controversial issues are the desired outcomes for learners. It is through the process-based examination of specific issues that learners come to understand theories, concepts and generalisations. For Manyane both product- and process-based approaches are necessary for holistic, democratic and critical education through History.¹⁷

Despite the proclaimed value of teaching controversial issues, as gleaned from the literature, teachers in many instances still prefer to teach History either in a neutral manner, or by uncritically promoting official History as embodied in curricula and textbooks. In so doing they are hoping to side-step teaching controversial issues.¹⁸ Tutiaux-Guillon, as cited by Cavet, concurs with this and claims that the subject remains “unnameable to socially controversial issues” because teachers see little educational value in dealing with them.¹⁹ Cherrin provides another perspective and asserts that although teachers realise the importance of teaching controversial issues as historical events central to the lives of learners, they opt not to.²⁰ Reasons for avoiding controversial issues are numerous. Teachers might feel learners lack the necessary emotional intelligence to deal with such issues while they also do not want to cause offence or be regarded as being insensitive. At the same time few incentives exist for taking risks when an already crowded curriculum needs completing and where the authority of teachers are under

¹⁶ M.F. Berry, “How to Teach Controversial Constitutional Issues Facing Women”, *Magazine of History* 3, (3/4), 1988, 30-33; Johnson, Johnson and Smith, “Constructive Controversy: The Educative Power of Intellectual Conflict”, 28-33.

¹⁷ R.Motse Manyane, *Teaching controversial issues in History: A practical guide for the classroom* (Menlo Park: ACE, 1995), 11-13.

¹⁸ Burron, “Controversial Issues: They belong in the classroom”, 6.

¹⁹ Cavet, “Teaching ‘controversial issues’: a living, vital link between school and society?”, 4-5.

²⁰ S. Cherrin, “Teaching controversial issues”, *The Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education*, 2007, www.unm.edu/~castl/Castl_Docs/Package5/Teaching%20Controversial%20Issues.html, (accessed 15.12.2007), 2-3.

scrutiny. Some teachers therefore play it safe by steering clear of controversial issues in their teaching.²¹

Adopting a diametrically opposed pedagogy is also possible. In so doing the History teacher must preferably know his/her own position and realise that it is impossible to be completely neutral, objective and fair. In relation to teaching controversial issues this implies that History teachers must preferably admit their own doubts and weaknesses and the difficulties they face when teaching such issues.²² By taking a position as a History teacher on a controversial issue learners will often exhibit what Perry calls dualistic thinking. That is, something is either right or wrong and it is so because some authority, like a teacher or a textbook, has named it so.²³ Teachers must therefore be clear that by stating their position they are not providing the answer and learners must be allowed to challenge the various positions, including that of the History teacher, on an issue. This is especially important since by dint of their position teachers, they wield an immense amount of power and have, in the words of Dryden-Peterson and Siebörger, “[...] the potential to be role models for and brokers to a new future [as] memory makers for a new South Africa”.²⁴ However, at no stage should this imply indoctrinating or coercing learners into believing certain official or unofficial versions of History.²⁵

Within the reviewed literature a range of other roles History teachers should fulfil so as to oversee the successful teaching of controversial issues are identified. These include setting ground rules related to behaviour and interaction; being an example of tolerance and respectful behaviour; exhibit a balanced approach by adopting multiple perspectives to an issue; assuming multiple roles when facilitating learning about controversial issues such as acting as good listeners and referees; and responding to all learners, regardless of what they say and who they are, with respect and dignity.²⁶

²¹ Wassermann, Francis and Ndou, “The teaching of controversial issues in Social Science Education”, 37-57.

²² Stradling, Noctor and Baines, *Teaching controversial issues*, 9.

²³ J.W.G. Perry, *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the College years: A scheme* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1999), 10-17.

²⁴ S. Dryden-Peterson and R. Siebörger, “Teachers as memory makers: Testimony in the making of a new history in South Africa”, *International Journal of Educational Development* 26, 2006, 394-403.

²⁵ Stradling, Noctor and Baines, *Teaching controversial issues*, 9.

²⁶ J.P. Lunstrom, “Building Motivation through the Use of Controversy”, *Journal of Reading* 24(8), 1981, 687-691; N.L. Valerio, “Creating safety to address controversial issues: Strategies for the classroom”, *Multicultural Education* 8(3), 2001, 24-28; K. Barton and A. McCully, “Teaching controversial issues...where controversial issues really matter”, *Teaching History* 127, 2007, 13-17; The Historical

Learners and ideas must therefore be kept separate and the focus must be on the idea. When appropriate, learners must be allowed to retreat gracefully.²⁷ The multiple roles expected of the teacher in the teaching of controversial issues furthermore includes building trust and creating a positive class culture and atmosphere that would ensure a free flow of different ideas and voices in a safe and non-threatening environment. In such a classroom context teachers must encourage learners to question their own ideas and assumptions and the implications thereof.²⁸ All along an eye must be kept on the reactions of learners, rising tension must be recognised and strategies on when and how to intervene must be developed.²⁹

Against the backdrop of the range of expectations of teachers in teaching contentious issues, a body of literature has evolved over the past three decades which promotes certain teaching strategies.³⁰ This partially came about in reaction to the demands of new History curricula, society and partially to fill the pedagogical void which makes teachers avoid the teaching of controversial issues.

With reference to the above, the key to teaching controversial issues, according to Byford, Lennon and Russell³¹ and Graseck³² is systematic and thorough planning. Such planning must consider and foreground the complexity and multiple perspectives of controversial issues and must be grounded in balance and fairness. Within this context History must be presented as a subject open to debate and interpretation in which different and competing views of the same event are possible. In the view of Stradling, Noctor and Baines, the teacher must plan which teaching strategies to assume when dealing with divisive issues – be it procedural neutrality whereby the teacher adopts the role of

Association, *T.E.A.C.H. Teaching emotive and controversial History 3-19*, 1-7; Cavet, "Teaching 'controversial issues': a living, vital link between school and society?", 4-6.

²⁷ Cherrin, "Teaching controversial issues", 3-5.

²⁸ Burrin, "Controversial Issues: They belong in the classroom", 6; Cavet, "Teaching 'controversial issues': a living, vital link between school and society?", 3-6; The Historical Association, *T.E.A.C.H. Teaching emotive and controversial History 3-19*, 2-4.

²⁹ Cherrin, "Teaching controversial issues", 3-5.

³⁰ See amongst others: Stradling, Noctor and Baines, *Teaching controversial issues*, 1-116; Manyane *Teaching controversial issues in History: A practical guide for the classroom*, 1-91; J.A. Percoco, *Divided we stand: teaching about conflict in U.S. History* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2001), 1-238; L. Visano and L. Jakubowski, *Teaching controversy* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2002), 1-184; Cavet, "Teaching 'controversial issues': a living, vital link between school and society?", 1-6; The Historical Association, *T.E.A.C.H. Teaching emotive and controversial History 3-19*, 1-47.

³¹ J. Byford, S. Lennon and W.B. Russell, "Teaching controversial issues in Social Studies: A research study of high school teachers", *Clearing House* 82(4), 2009, 165-170.

³² S. Graseck, "Teaching with Controversy", *Educational Leadership* 67(1), 2009, 45-49.

impartial chairperson; stated commitment during which the teacher makes his/her views on the issue known; devil's advocate whereby the teacher purposefully takes up a position opposite to the one expressed by the evidence or the learners, a balanced approach in which the various perspectives on a topic are illuminated, or any other strategy for that matter.³³ Furthermore, clear educational strategies such as debating must go hand in hand with appropriate and diverse historical evidence representing multiple perspectives so as to ensure balance across the issue.³⁴

However, while the literature on the nature of controversial issues, how and why to teach it and the role and position of teachers, as reviewed above, is comprehensive, much less is known about the experiences of learners in learning about 'hot' and divisive issues in History. What the limited available literature on learner experiences does agree on is that it is regarded as educationally necessary so as to be able to deal with difficult issues.³⁵ It is to this body of knowledge, by focusing on the experiences of learning History in a post-Apartheid context, that this article will contribute.

Sampling, data generation and analysis

The sample selected for this study was purposive and consisted of 70 initial teacher education students who were predominantly African but also included a substantial minority of Indian and a handful of white students. Fifty of the respondents were female and the urban/rural schooling contexts of the respondents were relatively equal. As such the participants were, generally-speaking, fairly representative of the 1,030,755 learners (23.1% of the total learner population in South Africa) from range of schooling contexts for Grade 8-12 in KwaZulu-Natal.³⁶ They had all enrolled at a large residential university on the eastern seaboard of South Africa for the introductory – first semester of the first year – module in History Education. The respondents are also part of the roughly 25,000 candidates who wrote History as a Matric subject in the period 2007-2009 – a decline from

³³ Stradling, Noctor and Baines, *Teaching controversial issues*, 111-112.

³⁴ Burron, "Controversial Issues: They belong in the classroom", 6.

³⁵ A.F. Arsoy, "Social studies teacher candidates' views on the controversial issues incorporated into their courses in Turkey", *Teaching and Teacher Education* 26, 2010, 323-334; Johnson, Johnson and Smith, "Constructive Controversy: The Educative Power of Intellectual Conflict", 31-36.

³⁶ Department of Basic Education, *Education statistics in South Africa 2009* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 2010), 1-58.

the roughly 58,000 who did so five-years earlier.³⁷ The participants were purposively selected as it was hoped that they would provide insight into the experiences of learning about controversial issues in History at school level in KwaZulu-Natal. The criteria on which the selection was based included the fact that the participants had done History in diverse schooling contexts in the mentioned region within the last three years and therefore had a recent experience in the learning of controversial issues. They could therefore look back in a reflective manner. Furthermore, it was assumed that the research population, as prospective teachers, had a vested interest in both History and Education which would yield what Henning et al call, “thick data” – that is data rich in detail provided by participants selected because of this possibility.³⁸ At the same time the participants were willing, under the applicable ethical requirements, to participate in the project. Patton refers to the selection of a research population in this manner as “Criterion Based Purposive Sampling”.³⁹

Data for this study was generated by means of an open-ended survey. The survey consisted of three open questions phrased in simple language relating to the educational experience of learning about controversial issues in History at school. The questions were:

- “What, according to **you**, was the most controversial topic you studied in History at school? (Controversial = divisive or hot)
- What, according to **you**, made this topic so controversial?
- How did **your** teacher deal with the mentioned controversial topic?”

The survey consisted of two pages with roughly half page spacing between each question so as to allow ample room for the responses. The participants, who were instructed to remain anonymous, were given 45 minutes during lecture time to complete the survey. Allowing enough time to complete the survey served to enhance the trustworthiness of the data. The participants were encouraged to explain their lived experiences in whatever written format they were comfortable with - be it a sentence, a paragraph or a page.

³⁷ Personal communication with Simon Haw, a History inspector and then subject advisor for the past 15 years in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, 27.7.2010.

³⁸ E. Henning, W. van Rensburg and B. Smit, *Finding your way in qualitative research* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2008), 8.

³⁹ M.Q. Patton, *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1990), 169-186.

The rationale for selecting this method was to allow the participants to divulge their lived experiences on the learning of controversial issues in an uninhibited and unconstrained manner since reflective writing lends itself to that. At the same time, since enquiring about the learning of controversial issues in History is in itself contentious, it was hoped that the anonymity an open-ended survey offered would serve to yield rich and diverse data. Furthermore, open-ended surveys allow great freedom of expression and permit participants to qualify their answers since it seeks to explore the qualitative, in-depth aspects of a particular topic. The point of departure was to allow participants the opportunity to think and reflect on their experiences before committing to a response. In the view of Neumann and Krueger, as quoted by Delport, “Open questions permit adequate answers to complex issues; allow participants to answer in detail and to qualify and clarify responses; make space for unanticipated findings to be discovered and permit creativity, self-expression and richness of detail”.⁴⁰

The data generated by the open-ended survey were turned into a single document and then read as text and analysed by means of open coding. Open coding, while procedurally guided, is essentially interpretive. Strauss and Corbin therefore argue that the voices and perspectives of the people being studied must be included.⁴¹ Bearing this in mind, the responses were carefully read line-by-line, while at the same time questions were asked about the data. The rationale behind this approach was to keep the focus on the data itself and not on a prior theoretical position.⁴² In short, open coding was used so as to attempt to bring themes to the surface from deep inside the data while constantly guarding against the fact that ideas and theories associated with the topic already exist.⁴³ Proceeding line-by-line, the data were broken down, examined, compared, conceptualised and categorised.⁴⁴ 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

⁴⁰ C.S.L. Delport, “Quantitative data collection methods” in A.S. de Vos, H. Strydom, C.B. Fouche, C.S.L. Delport, eds., *Research at grass roots for the Social Sciences and the Human Services Professions* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2010), 174.

⁴¹ A. Strauss and J. Corbin, “Grounded theory methodology: an overview” in N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln, eds., *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994), 274.

⁴² K. Charmaz, “Discovering Chronic Illness: Using Grounded Theory”, *Social Science and Medicine* 30, 1990, 1161–1172.

⁴³ W.L. Neuman, *Social research methods; qualitative and quantitative approaches* (Boston, Allyn & Bacon, 2003), 47-55.

⁴⁴ A. Strauss and J. Corbin, “Grounded theory methodology: an overview”, 274; C.S.L. Delport, “Quantitative data collection methods”, 174.

and no more new themes were being identified.⁴⁵ The identified themes were ultimately used to come to an understanding of the experiences of learners in learning about controversial issues in History in schools in KwaZulu-Natal.

The results of the data

The results of the data will be presented as per the themes that emerged from the analysis done by means of open coding. These themes were organised in a narrative fashion so as to give a voice to the experiences of the participants in learning about controversial issues in History at school.

What is controversial in school History?

In coding the data, Apartheid emerged as the most controversial, divisive and ‘hot’ issue studied in History at school in KwaZulu-Natal. Generally Apartheid, as a single collective concept, was identified as being most prominent to the educational experiences of participants as it related to controversy. From within Apartheid the data revealed three sub-themes that were identified as being by far the most controversial topics – the violence between the African National Congress (ANC) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) before the 1994 election; the Soweto Uprising of 1976 and the workings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

The political rivalry between the IFP and the ANC, during the late 1980s and the early 1990s, left an estimated 12 000 people dead in the KwaZulu-Natal region.⁴⁶ This is also the geopolitical region from which the participants for this study came. The legacy of the excessive political violence and related upheaval suffered during this time were therefore prevalent in not only the personal lives of the participants but also in the History classes as part of the NCS-History in Grade 12. Especially a single issue, the cartoon by Zapiro depicting the IFP leader Mangosothu Buthelezi using the blood of victims of

⁴⁵ A. Strauss and J. Corbin, “Grounded theory methodology: an overview”, 274.

⁴⁶ See A.J. Jeffrey, *The Natal Story: Sixteen years of conflict* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1997) and J. Aitchison, *Numbering the dead. The course and pattern of political violence in the Natal Midlands: 1987-1989* (MA. thesis., University of Natal, 1993) for comprehensive accounts of the political violence between the ANC and the IFP during this period.

violence to sign the agreement to participate in the 1994 election, was fore-grounded as having caused immense tension. In reaction to the cartoon, which appeared in the *In search of History Grade 12* textbook,⁴⁷ one of the books that are commercially produced that could be purchased for use in schools, the IFP undertook a series of protest actions including the public burning of the mentioned textbook. This protest, which happened in the final years of the schooling of the participants in this project, clearly brought about much tension as explained by one participant:

Many people were against that idea, some were in favour of it saying that yes Mr Mangosothu was a traitor, many black people died because of him. Why, it is because it was too political and learners in my class belonged to different political parties like ANC & IFP. Many were saying one member of the ANC made that cartoon so as to decline the dignity of Mr Mangosothu.

Especially participants who came from an IFP affiliated background or community felt that the general depiction in the historical evidence used at school portrayed the IFP negatively and created the idea “that they are the ones who started the war”. In a region that bore the brunt of the IFP/ANC conflict it is clear that the emotions on this topic would be raised in the lived experiences of the participants, the unofficial histories they were socialised in and the official History encountered at school were not a perfect fit.

Alongside the ANC/IFP tensions, the Soweto uprising of 16th June 1976 was highlighted as a very controversial issue. Not only is this event a prominent part of the Grade 12 History curriculum but it is also marked by a public holiday aptly named Youth Day. At the same time this is an event that could resonate with participants for as young people they can associate with an act of uprising against a sub-standard and oppressive educational system by people of their standing and age. In other words, they could make a personal and emotional connection with it. One participant gave voice to this sentiment: “To some learners it was too emotional understanding that the Soweto youth were on a peaceful march with no weapons yet they were removed roughly from their protest”.

The third clear theme related to Apartheid that emerged dealt with the TRC.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ J. Bottaro, P. Visser and N. Worden, *In search of History Grade 12 Learner's Book* (Cape Town: Oxford, 2007), 200.

⁴⁸ For an overview of the TRC see D. Posel and G. Simpson, eds., *Commissioning the Past: Understanding South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2002).

Although not explicitly identified as a topic in the NCS-History, it is covered in some depth by the Grade 12 textbooks, for example in *In search of History Grade 12*, the TRC is described as a “cathartic or healing experience” in the South African search for a common identity.⁴⁹ As the workings of the TRC were officially promoted as part of the processes of healing, forgiveness and nation building, large volumes of audio-visual and printed material subsequently made it into the educational sector. Some of this was seen by members of the research population who commented on “being shown films about the T.R.C”. It must also be borne in mind that when the participants were starting their school careers in the second half of the 1990s the actions of the Apartheid authorities came into the public domain as the TRC hearings were broadcasted live daily on television. Apart from the public and official memory of the TRC as a controversial event, the hearings touched a very raw personal nerve which heightened its controversy among the participants as can be gathered from the following two extracts: “If you have done something wrong, you have to ask for forgiveness and you have to show that you are sorry so that you will be granted forgiveness” and “... you had to say what you did and ask for forgiveness but what made people to be angry was that people were not as sorry as they were saying, they were just saying it and it brought wounds that were starting to heal to the victims and anger”. This is what Barton and Levstik refer to as the “Moral Response Stance” in learning History whereby adolescents seek fairness and justice for the common good of society.⁵⁰

What also emerged was that no other topics were viewed as being as controversial as Apartheid. On almost all other topics, that is apart from some references made in passing to the Cold War studied in Grade 12, Colonialism covered in Grade 11 and slavery⁵¹ engaged with in Grade 10, the participants were silent. The Cold War, and especially as it related to Communism and the South African political landscape, in the experience of one participant “became controversial because many people in my class like the USSR and mainly communism and when we heard that USSR collapsed we felt bad and no one liked that”. Slavery was being identified as controversial since it “made

⁴⁹ Bottaro, Visser and Worden, *In search of History Grade 12 Learner's Book*, 212-218.

⁵⁰ K.C. Barton and L.S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the common good* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), 91-92.

⁵¹ From the literature surveyed slavery emerged as a particularly controversial issue. In this regard see for example: J.C. Woodfork, “Teaching slavery: Overcoming artificial barriers to past, present”, *Black Issues in Higher Education* 18(7) 2001, 80; and D. Richardson, “Latest historical thinking on some emotive and controversial issues”, *Teaching History* 127, 2007, 37.

learners feel uncomfortable during discussions. Learners were always intimidating the teacher and continuously raising strong questions of anger”. But these were isolated comments on topics on the periphery of controversy which articulated in one way or another issues of racial oppression and exploitation. The reality is that these topics were completely dwarfed by Apartheid as a controversial issue.

A consequence of the above is that the gigantic shadow of Apartheid as a ‘hot’ and divisive issue managed to block out almost all other topics that could possibly have been experienced as controversial. Consequently, in this myopic world, learners were deprived of experiencing the richness of interrogating other issues of moral complexity and the benefits of the teaching and learning strategies associated with studying controversial issues.

If viewed against the prominent position Apartheid occupies in the NCS-History, it is hardly surprising that participants chose to foreground aspects of it as the most controversial issues studied. In Grade 6, learners touch on Apartheid in the theme on democracy in South Africa.⁵² Three years later, in Grade 9, Apartheid is dealt with much more explicitly and in greater depth. In Grade 11 the NCS-History expects teachers and learners to engage with the question of how unique Apartheid was to South Africa. In the final year of schooling, Grade 12, learners study the protests and resistance to Apartheid.⁵³ It would, however, be short-sighted to attribute the identification of Apartheid as the most controversial issue studied in school History solely to the repetitive nature of it in the curriculum. Apartheid is part of the memories of the lived experiences and life histories of both the family and community members from which the majority of the participants came. The dominance of Apartheid as a controversial issue in their experiences is because it was such an overwhelming and traumatic policy that it transcended school History. Accordingly, a decade and a half after the demise of Apartheid, the participants still have to deal with the residue of the policy as part of the fibre of their daily lives. This probably had a greater impact on their memory and historical consciousness on what is controversial than the prominence of Apartheid in the NCS-History and their study of it at school. Hence the identities of learners, more than 15 years after the fall of Apartheid, are

⁵² Department of Education, *National Curriculum Statement Grades R-9 (Schools) Social Sciences* (Pretoria, Government Printer, 2003), 61-62.

⁵³ Department of Education, *National Curriculum Statement Grades 10-12 (General) History*, 26.

still strongly tied in with it. That is the case even though the research population for this study has no living memory of personally experiencing Apartheid. However, in both official and unofficial History, Apartheid, and especially the themes discussed above, is still very close and tangible and serves as a reminder of the power of historical memory in people's lives.

What is also clear is that the participants for this study were not suffering from what Allen referred to as being "Apartheid out".⁵⁴ And, unlike the white students surveyed by McKinney who had difficulty in grasping the importance of Apartheid as part of the South African past⁵⁵ the participants in this research project clearly had no such trouble. In terms of historical significance, as theorised by Partington, the study of Apartheid was elevated to its position because of its importance, profundity, scale, durability and relevance.⁵⁶

Experiencing History teachers dealing with controversial issues

Teachers are central to the manner in which learners would learn about controversial issues in History. In analysing the data, several clear categories emerged on how the participants experienced the teaching of controversial issues, and especially Apartheid, as the foremost such issue, namely indoctrination, avoidance, teacher-centredness, learner-centredness and peacemaking. These categories generally tally with the research conducted by McCully and Kitson in Northern Ireland who identified History teachers who had to teach controversial issues as either "avoiders", "containers" or "risk-takers".⁵⁷

The first category revealed participants who had experienced teachers who indoctrinated or coerced learners into believing certain unofficial versions of Apartheid. In the process, teachers used their influence and position of power, "to influence us to hate & revenge to our sisters & brothers oppressors" and "provoked hatred for other races".

⁵⁴ G. Allen, "Is Historical Consciousness Historical?" in J.W.N. Tempelhoff, ed., *Historical Consciousness and the future of the past* (Vanderbijlpark: Kleio, 2002), 41-53.

⁵⁵ C. McKinney, "'It's just a story.' 'White' students' difficulties in reading the Apartheid past", *Perspectives in Education*, 22(4), 2004, 37-45.

⁵⁶ G. Partington, *The idea of an historical education* (Slough: NFER, 1980), 112-116.

⁵⁷ The Historical Association, *T.E.A.C.H. Teaching emotive and controversial History 3-19*, 28.

Some participants could see through such indoctrination and understood the anger of a teacher who was a victim of Apartheid and as a result explained,

As we are based in South Africa as a black man is indoctrinated towards Apartheid. He also used a similar element of criticising white candidates as barbarians. He made me see most of our black strugglers as heroes, which is something that I expected to be taught as a modern student of African history.

Another, however, adopted what Perry described as dualistic thinking⁵⁸ and found similar forceful personal perspectives from the teacher appealing: “She would tell us the right side of the story and try to accommodate all what we already had in our minds”. The data also revealed that participants experienced History teachers who were somewhat more subtle in indoctrinating them by “faking neutrality”, constantly siding with “one side of the class because this affected her as well”.

The other extreme also formed part of the educational experiences of the participants with History teachers avoiding any real engagement with potentially controversial debates by telling learners “to drop it” or “to go and read it and come to present it” or to fall back on the safety net of official History as explained by one participant: “The teacher agreed and understood the concerns and the views of the learners but felt that we need to consider what is in the textbook as what is right”. It is thus hardly surprising that a significant number of participants could not recall at all how their History teachers dealt with controversial issues and one claimed, “She possible left out such topics or just brushed over them”. For these participants not even Apartheid was a controversial issue to be negotiated as their teachers managed to skilfully avoid any tension by serving up a very neutral fare. In the words of one participant, “I don’t remember studying history in anyway other than just absorbing what we read”.

Apart from indoctrinating about or avoiding controversial issues, teaching strictly in a teacher-centred manner also emerged as a category. Testimony from participants in this regard revolved greatly around the notion of explaining - “he explain in a way that we understand”; “explained what may be the cause or motive”; “explained to us nicely so that we understand” or by using “simple examples which will make us laugh and understand the lesson”. Helping learners to understand Apartheid in an uncontested one-sided manner

⁵⁸ Perry, *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the College years: A scheme*, 74-77.

was underpinned by the use of a range of historical sources such as textbooks, notes, films and DVDs and pictures. Despite the wide range of material used, being exposed to multiple-perspectives and engaging directly with the issue, was not the real intention and the definitive voice from teachers in this category tended to be “what is in the textbook” or as one participant explained: “My teacher did not make us to think for ourselves but taught us to think as he saw and handled things”.

A slight deviation from the afore-mentioned also came to the fore during the analysis. Although still teacher-centred, the educators took it upon themselves to provide multiple perspectives on an issue by presenting different views and by being “objective”. This ranged from “trying to show two sides of the story by finding bad things made by ANC” to “giving us both views and asking us to be objective” or by declaring “you don’t have to believe everything in history”. Under such circumstances no issue would rise to the level of controversy simply because the final perspective still remained that of the teacher.

However, as revealed by the analysis, History teachers that allowed for structured interaction between learners and historical evidence related to controversial issues were also experienced. In doing so, these teachers fulfilled the ideological and methodological intentions of the NCS-History. Learner-centred engagement with a controversial issue included whole class activities such as “a panel discussion about Apartheid so that one may understand the issue” and “In class people were also divided like those who were in favour of communism and those who favoured capitalism. So the teacher emphasised the point that we are learning not fighting against each other”. Evidence of experiences of individuals being directly drawn into controversial issues for educational purposes also emerged, “He always made sure that we stated our comments and feelings. We were all given chances to comment or argue ...”. A striking case from the data relates to how a teacher simulated a historical event related to Apartheid as a learner-centred strategy to deal with such a ‘hot’ topic: “He made us to follow the objective method of the TRC and reminded us that we are all different therefore we expected to come up with different points of view in that case we don’t have to judge each other”.

History teachers, having to play a mediating or peacekeeping role in the teaching

of controversial issues, emerged as a dual theme from the data. The first related to how teachers dealt with learners deeply hurt by studying Apartheid as a controversial issue. The broad phrase “calming us/the class down” as an act of management appeared repeatedly. This happened when “we were going too far with it” when “some were even fighting” with the teacher him or herself “being very calm”. The second theme related to the management of learners by juxtaposing Apartheid against the current democratic dispensation in South Africa. In so doing the changes that have happened were used to pacify the learners about the past. A cameo from the data in this regard points to a teacher who, “[e]xplained that we are living in a democratic country now and that Apartheid is history so we should respect if not accept it and view it from where it is”. Others explained “that the past cannot be changed, what is more important is that we are now free” and “that the Apartheid era has passed”. In the process of mediating the tension, the TRC was invoked as the definitive answer as explained by a participant, “the teacher told us that the aim was to forgive”.

From the above it is clear that History teachers in KwaZulu-Natal schools had walked the tightrope of teaching Apartheid, as the foremost controversial issue in the NCS-History, in a varied manner which in turn informed the experiences of learners in this regard. In the process diverse strategies ranging from indoctrination to critically engaging with controversial issues by means of a learner-centred approach were employed as teachers had to manage the emotional roller coaster ride of teaching Apartheid. Throughout this teachers had to take heed of an intended curriculum which emphasised that History must be taught using a process of rigorous historical enquiry.⁵⁹ By implication History teachers therefore had to adopt a critical teaching approach to all historical knowledge and create the opportunity for learners, having considered the multi-sidedness and complexity of historical evidence, to come to their own reasonable conclusions. However, the enacted and hidden curricula took on a very different guise, and, although teachers were central to the learning about controversial issues, the methodologies and power positions adopted ensured that the experiences the participants had when learning about Apartheid were extremely diverse.

⁵⁹ Department of Education, *National Curriculum Statement Grades 10-12 (General) History*, 1-34.

What makes a topic controversial?

What then, apart from the role of the teacher, made a topic, and, as emerged in this study, Apartheid, a controversial issue? In analysing the data three clear themes emerged in this regard, namely the truth and new knowledge about Apartheid, “debating” (a generic term used for all kinds of talking – the most common and at the same time divisive methodology adopted to engage with controversial issues), and thirdly, doubting and thinking critically about History, including Apartheid.

What was referred to as “the truth” – meaning historical evidence which served to highlight the emotional and physical suffering of black people under Apartheid and which encompassed a mixture of factual and personal truths – emerged as a reason for causing controversy. Issues raised in this regard included, amongst others, the fact that Africans were “living like a slave without raising their views because only white were the boss during Apartheid, blacks had no say” and “the names they called them” and “that some people are superior and others are inferior, as a part of the theory, black people were inferior” and “because it painted a picture that black people then were very stupid. For example, the barter system when it was said that they were given mirrors in exchange for their cattle”. As a result, as explained by a participant, “... pupils were alarmed at how black people were treated by whites. It always broke out into huge debates”. In the process the “solid truth which was hurting and it opened old wounds, brought anger and hate” making the learners feel the burden of the past. What enhanced Apartheid even further as a controversial issue to the participants is that the above was not new knowledge as “learners had heard from their parents” and “our families were affected”. As a consequence official and unofficial History⁶⁰ dovetailed neatly to make “the truth” about Apartheid personal and real.

Against this backdrop, a substantial number of the research population claimed that what made Apartheid controversial was the new factual knowledge that they have learnt. By implication this means that these participants did not know this before – not even from

⁶⁰ Although this was a study in experiences in official History unofficial History kept rearing its head. For a comprehensive scholarly investigation on the tension that exists between official History taught in school and unofficial History see: R. Phillips, “Contesting the past, constructing the future: History, identity and politics in schools”, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 46(1), March 1998, 40-53.

encounters with unofficial History. This new knowledge about Apartheid spoke directly to the notion of the “truth” as outlined above and encapsulated ideas on pass laws, low salaries, schooling, suffering, feelings of people, lack of freedom, fighting for freedom, oppression and that “Indians and coloureds also experienced difficulties” and how “the country become a one nation”. The new knowledge as studied in Grades 9, 11 and 12 was viewed by some as “the whole truth about the uprising which I didn’t know about before” and getting the “truth and facts about Apartheid era” as the eventual learning outcome of their educational experiences.

A consequence of experiencing the truth and new knowledge regarding Apartheid as a controversial issue was the range of very strong emotions that it brought about. These included anger, finding it “difficult to tolerate other races”, hurtful memories and some learners “wish to pay revenge”. Strong emotions were also mixed in with racial identity and in the words of one participant in studying Apartheid, “I learnt about oppression and how it affected people in its area and got some what emotionally involved in this, being that I am black.” As a result of such thinking the fear was expressed, “That it’s a sensitive topic. I found out that by studying this topic, we kind of teach the present generation or remind them of all the past hurts and I think this somehow makes children keep grudges and stereotypes because they did not experience Apartheid but yet we get young children involved and they turn to choose a side”.

It is necessary to point out that these strong emotional views are not new and were also encountered by Dryden in Cape Town schools in 1998 when a learner told her that the History they were exposed to made them think, in a narrow ethnocentric manner, of revenge on white people, but they did not want to think that way. The study by Dryden similarly revealed the emotional ordeal learners endured in studying Apartheid: “I don’t think we can talk about things because it makes pain for other people and their families. And then the pain comes again. They must put it in the past and plan for the future”.⁶¹

According to Johnson, Johnson and Smith, constructive debating is one of the most beneficial educational techniques to deal with controversial issues as it increases self-

⁶¹ S. Dryden, *Mirror of a nation in transition: Case studies of history teachers and students in Cape Town schools* (M-Phil thesis, University of Cape Town, 2009), 122.

esteem, develops social support and allows for constructive engagement with divisive topics.⁶² In contrast, what emerged from the analysis of the data indicates that the experiences of the participants were exactly the opposite. Consequently participants had experienced debating as a factor that contributed to the controversy around Apartheid. This seems especially to have been the case in racially integrated History classrooms with a black/white fault line developing around the topic. According to one participant, “[t]here were black people who were criticising the whites in the class because the topic was getting too emotional. Everyone was supporting his race and criticising the other race”. In another “evenly mixed” school a similar racial undertone was experienced: “Certain racial groups believe that they were still deprived by the racial system. This was either by blacks who believed they were still disadvantaged or by the whites who felt that they were now disadvantaged by the quota system”. The reasons proposed for this kind of thinking was “[...] because, some people still feel like victims and some people always use the race card till this day. Others still felt a certain race should have been blamed but others feel they too were the victims. Some still believe is not fair because of this thing that happened in the past. Still till this day we group ourselves.”

Furthermore, what was clearly discernable was the marked difference between debates taking place on Apartheid in racially integrated schools when compared to schools that are not. A participant who had attended an integrated school stated: “We had discussed it openly in class, which had aroused a lot of anger and resentment in the non white pupils. Everyone felt as if they had completely been affected by it, or had nothing to do with it. People get mad about the past”. In a school exclusively populated by black learners the dynamics when debating the topic seems to have been much more inward looking and the fact that people held different views about Apartheid brought about division.

Clearly severe challenges existed on how to proceed methodologically when debating Apartheid as a controversial issue and the ability to debate it in a constructive manner was not the norm but rather the individual exception – “I learnt that study the people who will be dealing with the topic first. Remain on your side, criticising in a civilised way” – and not as a consequence of sound educational practices.

⁶² Johnson, Johnson and Smith, “Constructive Controversy: The Educative Power of Intellectual Conflict”, 36.

In the outlook of Johnson and Johnson, “Learning situations are filled with conflicts among students [...]” and will come about regardless of what the teacher does. This is exacerbated when teachers and learners alike lack the skills and procedures for debating issues in a constructive manner.⁶³ The emotions raised by Apartheid as a recent historical experience which makes neat rational debates difficult, especially so in integrated schooling contexts were amplified by the lack of methodological skills by teachers and learners alike. Guyver, who quotes Ignatieff, however, brings another angle to this and views it as the tension between two conflicting models of national identity – the ethnic and the democratic.⁶⁴ While open debate and multiple perspectives are encouraged as part of the educational identity that is under construction and by the NCS-History, this tends to come into strong conflict with the racial legacies of the Apartheid past.

A theme that also emerged from the data was that different opinions and perspectives among learners also caused controversy. An example of this was the tension that existed between official and unofficial History as explained by a participant: “I learnt that history always have different views from different people. Why? Because our parents told us about what was happening in a different way than that of the teacher and the text book we had”. Consequently, serious doubts were expressed about the reliability of the official History on Apartheid as dispensed by teachers via textbooks and lessons, for example: “According to history it was the Africans who threw stones at the police therefore causing the police to shoot first. And according to the students, it was impossible that the Africans started it”. Similarly surprise was expressed at the manner in which the ANC adopted the armed struggle: “It was amazing the way they just suddenly went ‘crazy’, from resisting peacefully and the ANC being banned therefore forming a military alliance underground”.

In the light of the afore-mentioned examples it became clear that doubt existed about textbooks as the lifeblood of official History and it was stated that “[m]any textbooks differ in its sections dealing with Apartheid” and “[h]istorians or authors were bias” and “I learnt that my textbook does not teach me everything I needed to consider my

⁶³ Johnson and Johnson, “Conflict in the classroom: controversy and learning”, 51-70.

⁶⁴ R. Guyver, “The History curriculum in three countries – curriculum balance, national identity, prescription and teacher autonomy: the cases of England, New Zealand and South Africa”, *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research*, 7(1), January 2007, no page numbers.

personal opinions and views”. One participant in particular made it clear that the material studied contributed to the controversy as “[t]he origins and reasons for Apartheid were not covered but merely its demise”, implying that a conceptual void existed which proved fertile soil for added controversy.

In the outlook of the participants, interpreting historical evidence in a critical manner therefore not only meant doubting but also “to put my own opinion across”, “be critical and question things” and “learn to reason in some cases, learn to be opinionative, and learn to defend yourself”. Although having your own opinion was deemed to be good it was felt that substance must be provided to opinion so as “to justify your thinking with something factual”. For one participant this was the way out of the tension associated with controversial issues: “Whenever you come across topics that are regarded as controversial, you do not have to take things that are being said by others personally. It must be a matter of stating the facts”. The value gained by thinking critically about a controversial issue was brought home by a participant who linked it not only to her personal educational liberation but to the demise of Apartheid,

No matter what is happening I can rise and defeat the situation as long as I think critically. My teacher did not teach me how to think but spoon fed me but at the end I rose and taught myself to be a little critical and that’s how the black people rose against Apartheid.

Alongside having doubts and thinking critically about Apartheid as a controversial issue, a related theme emerged from the data, which was that of participants having a deeper philosophical stance on what was learnt from studying such issues in History. Prominence was given to the fact that studying a controversial issue was an opportunity to look into the past and grasp “the difficulties and hardships that people encountered and this made me realise how fortunate I was”. In a similar vein it was stated “[t]hat history is very touching. It makes one visualise what really went on and to make one make sure that things that occurred in the past do not repeat again”. At a certain level these participants have achieved learning outcome 1 of the NCS-History as they have engaged critically with the idea of multiple perspectives – despite the controversy it could arouse, as one participant put it: “I learnt that no matter how concrete and factual something appears, there are always two sides of the story”. As such, they have managed to engage with controversies by engaging with historical analysis and judgement – competencies needed,

in the view of Von Borries, for historical thinking.⁶⁵

But, in the light of the data as presented, it is likely that constructive learning experiences on controversial issues were in many cases incidental rather than planned as, for the most part, the truth and knowledge about controversial issues, the methodologies employed and the critical thinking that emerged contributed to the level of controversy rather than to the abilities to engage with it.

Concluding discussion

Why then did learners experience the learning about controversial issues, i.e. Apartheid, in KwaZulu-Natal schools the way they did?

In 2007, the former Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, at a conference on the NCS-History commented on “what may be arguably a difficult, but most significant aspect covered in the new curricula, viz, the teaching of the history of Apartheid”. Asmal then proceeded to identify some of the points of view on the teaching of Apartheid, such as that it was not relevant to the future, that black learners might react negatively towards it because it puts up barriers against whites and that many white learners might react negatively because they do not want to carry the blame. According to Asmal, these views obscured “what is undeniable that the ending of Apartheid in South Africa represents a great victory, worthy of celebration by all, and that South Africans have the ability to rise above it”. He continued: “The issues that teaching Apartheid raises are not to be ducked or deleted, but are to be grappled with and faced up to”.⁶⁶

However, what Asmal neglected to touch on was how the grappling with and facing up to were to happen. First and foremost the post-Apartheid curriculum development process left History teachers on the side-line. In the view of Dean, “[c]urriculum 2005 left teachers stranded, with their values, attitudes, beliefs and practice threatened ... they find it difficult to relate their understanding of history and its pedagogy

⁶⁵ B. von Borries, “Multiperspectivity – Utopian pretension or feasible fundament of historical learning in Europe”, in J. van der Leeuw-Roord, ed., *History for today and tomorrow. What does Europe mean for school History?* (Hamburg: Körber-Stiftung, 2001), 284.

⁶⁶ K. Asmal, “Interrogating the History Curriculum after ten years of OBE”, Keynote address at the South African Society for History Teachers Conference, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 21 September, 2007, 2-4.

to the specified outcomes”.⁶⁷ Weldon, who participated in the History curriculum development process, described it as a “top-down, politically motivated and driven, human rights framework that had not been discussed and debated at the levels of curriculum construction or implementation”.⁶⁸

Apart from being confronted with a curriculum whose development passed them by, History teachers had to, post-1994, make a quantum leap from the previous official position on the teaching of Apartheid. While previously, criticism of Apartheid as a system was taboo in schools they now had to, as per the NCS-History, teach critically about it by revealing new historical truths, implement OBE and integrate countless curriculum documents into their practice. To boot, no History teacher in KwaZulu-Natal had received any training whatsoever on how to teach controversial issues or for that matter Apartheid.⁶⁹ That is, despite the fact that, as was pointed out earlier, Apartheid forms a central part of the NCS-History. Consequently teachers were left to their own devices on how to deal with the residue of post-Apartheid society. In a nutshell, a methodological impasse existed when it came to the teaching of and the learning about Apartheid because teachers did not know how to deal with such a controversial topic because they were underprepared. Consequently, when contestation arose around Apartheid as the dominant controversial issue, the lack of methodological skills on how to engage with it showed up. And since the pedagogy was lacking in teachers to successfully facilitate teaching and learning about ‘hot’ and divisive topics in general, Apartheid rose to the top as the only true controversial issue in the experiences of the participants purely because of its historical position in society.

Furthermore, the participants, as members of the post-Apartheid generation, were taught by History teachers who were not only underprepared but who were mostly from the Apartheid generation. These teachers now had to face up to the challenges and traumas of teaching about Apartheid in a constructive manner while at the same time negotiating their own pasts and memories of Apartheid as either victims or perpetrators.

⁶⁷ J. St Clair Dean, “Coping with Curriculum Change in South Africa”, *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research*, 1(1) December 2000, no page numbers.

⁶⁸ G. Weldon, “A comparative study of the construction of memory and identity in the curriculum of post-conflict societies: Rwanda and South Africa”, *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research*, 6, 2006, no page numbers.

⁶⁹ Personal communication with Simon Haw, a History inspector and then subject advisor for the past 15-years in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, 27.7.2010.

Thus, as revealed by the porthole that the data provided to the learning of controversial issues, the intended neat and sanitised pre-packed NCS-History was a world removed from the enacted curriculum. Teaching and learning about the moral complexity of Apartheid was therefore never neat and clean and neutral and value free. Rather it was messy, contentious, structured and unstructured, diverse, raw, emotional, caring, opportunistic and innovative – a multihued learning experience, and for the most part out of sync with the techniques and roles the literature on teaching controversial issues promotes.

In addition, race and Apartheid as the central issues in South African society – both past and present – were not really spoken about in the study. Kallaway, as quoted by Siebörger,⁷⁰ refers to this as a form of denial or concealment brought about by the conceptual tension of democracy, nation-building and non-racialism on the one hand, and notions of ethnic identity and the historical legacy of Apartheid on the other. Unsurprisingly then, coupled with the lack of pedagogical skills on the part of the teachers, the experiences of the participants in this study when it came to the learning about Apartheid as a controversial issue, could best be described as a predominantly destructive one, punctuated by anger, angst, hate, ethnocentric statements and other strong emotions.

However, in spite of the overbearing nature of Apartheid as a controversial issue which clearly still shapes school History in the present, the educational experiences of the participants points to the absence of a collective meta-narrative of what an imposed official History should look like. For that too, much doubt and contention existed about historical evidence, textbooks, curricula and teachers and on how to react to Apartheid. This was greatly enhanced by the lack of training for teachers on how to deal with Apartheid ideologically and educationally. Subsequently no single collective reaction – even to why Apartheid was controversial – was forthcoming. In the process both the idea of an agreed upon truth and school History as a reconciliatory force was shunned in favour of varied and conflicting ideas on both. This lack of a collective meta-narrative on Apartheid is aptly reflected on by a participant who commented as follows: “To some people, Apartheid still exists and to some it’s a foreign country”.

⁷⁰ R. Siebörger, “History and the emerging nation: the South African experience”, 39-48.

Flowing from the above, the participants expressed their educational experiences, as it related to the learning of controversial issues, freely, honestly and openly during the research process. In the course of action, diverse and different experiences were reflected upon in both a constructive and a destructive manner. This was possible, as one respondent put it, “[b]ecause now that we are past Apartheid everyone is equal and free”. Also, free and equal “[t]o deal with the truth even though it hurts, to control my temper/anger, to forgive others”. In the process some members of the research population at least, as expected by the NCS-History, managed to engage with “a broad range of evidence and diverse points of view” and understand “that historical truth consists of a multiplicity of voices expressing varying and often contradictory versions of the same history”⁷¹ be it mostly in a crude, emotional, methodological flawed and unintended manner.

Although the nature and scope of this study makes any uniform generalisations difficult and provides but a mere snap-shot, the value of it is that it served to provide a glimpse of how, within the region of KwaZulu-Natal, controversial topics in school History were experienced by the research population. This in itself is reason enough to make a case for History teaching and learning at both school and university level and also reason for interventionist measures to empower teachers, students and learners on how to constructively engage with ‘hot’ and divisive topics. After all, this is the responsibility of all who have a vested interest in History Education in the KwaZulu-Natal region; be it curriculum designers at school level, textbook producers, History teachers and students, History teacher educators like me or academic historians working in the subject. An intervention in preparing teachers, students and learners to engage in a pedagogically and historically sound manner is not only necessary but probably possible since, as Phillips points out, South Africa has managed to avoid the most rampant and negative examples of ethnic nationalism. Therefore, in his view, there is at least hope for a positive reconstitution of the nation, based upon reconciliation with the past.⁷²

⁷¹ Department of Education, *National Curriculum Statement Grades 10-12 (General) History*, 9.

⁷² R. Phillips, “Reflections on History, nationhood and schooling”, in M. Roberts, ed., *After the wall History teaching in Europe since 1989* (Hamburg: Körber-Stiftung, 2004), 39-40.