

A new history curriculum

Photo by Nina Frödin



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Under Apartheid history was taught in South African schools from a white supremacist perspective, overtly racist and exclusivist and embedded in Afrikaner Nationalism.

The new government was concerned about the biased content of history syllabi, the quality of history teaching, the unsatisfactory learning and teaching materials and the diminishing importance of history in the National Curriculum introduced after 1994. To tackle this, South Africa's former Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, set up the South African History Project which had the following goals and objectives:

- To create forums to initiate discussions on the nature of history teaching in schools and devise strategies on how it can be improved and strengthened;
- To undertake studies and initiate activities that will strengthen history teaching in the context of the development of a National Curriculum Statement;
- To establish initiatives that will bring history researchers and scholars together to review, revise and (re-)write history textbooks; and
- To initiate activities that will resurrect interest in the study of history by young people.

In 2001, the South African History Project Ministerial Committee produced a Report on

History and Archaeology, which stresses the need for a strong, dedicated study of the past as an educational imperative in a country like South Africa, which is itself consciously remaking its current history, enabling us “to listen to formerly subjugated voices and to redress the invisibility of the formerly marginalized”.

Furthermore, the Report stresses that the importance of oral history is not simply to fill gaps in history but to enable “a total reassessment of history, given that our written archive is colonially- and white-dominated”. According to the Report, not only does oral history help us to recapture the past, in the South African context it also promotes the study of indigenous languages, which is essential for the re-writing of a more inclusive South African history.

The National Curriculum Statement replaces the old Apartheid-era curricula and gives expression to the values and principles of democracy, human rights, social justice, equity, non-racism, non-sexism and *Ubuntu* (African humanism, epitomised in this Xhosa concept suggesting compassion, love, humanity etc) that underpin our Constitution. The implementation of the new National Curriculum is a challenge to all those involved in education. Teachers in particular have demonstrated over the past few years the role they can play in transforming teaching and learning in the area of history and other disciplines. Students are learning about South Africa's rich history not from a narrow perspective, as in the past, but in the context of a collective vision for a New South Africa.

The archives of the liberation phase that are available in South Africa and in other parts of the world, such as the Nordic liberation archives, are vital for re-writing the history of South Africa. These archival collections comprise many oral records, which are proving invaluable to historians.

In addition, many archival collections also contain audio-visual records, thus further enriching the recording of the past. Acknowledgement must be given to the various Anti-Apartheid groups in many countries for safeguarding the liberation archives of that period, thus facilitating the re-writing of South African history in an inclusive way. ■

References

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Archival challenges

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The 21st Century has brought about immense organizational changes in the world of documentation. Information Communication Technologies have led to the creation of vast amounts of documents and the privatisation of public records. It poses new challenges in relation to information storage, retrieval and re-use. The costs of maintaining electronic records and *migrating* them to new technologies often demand both human and financial resources that are beyond the reach of many archival institutions.

Developments related to the ICT revolution have necessitated a revision of skills for the archivists/records managers. A school of thought advocates that a multi-disciplinary approach must be adopted if archivists are to cope with the challenges of preserving electronic records. Access to public records is a right for citizens in a democratic society in the spirit of Article 19 of the Universal Human Rights Declaration. Governments have an obligation to guarantee the authenticity, integrity and preservation of information. Archives therefore play a major role as a backbone of effective democratic rule. It is through sufficient information that citizens are able to participate actively in public debates and decision-making and can exercise control over those they vote into power. The ease with which information is trashed and deleted in today's societies can challenge

democratic values. It is also a well-known fact that enlightenment of a society through access to information is a vital key to development and human rights.

Many developing countries are working hard to integrate themselves into the information society. A disturbing question is how fragile democracies are coping with the challenges posed by today's information society. Paper records are deteriorating in different archival institutions and the responsible organizations cannot afford to hire enough staff to carry out inventories. Developments in the communications field show how the knowledge gap between the information-rich and the information-poor countries has deepened over time. It seems that only people with a first-rate education and informational abilities can survive in this globalising and highly competitive world.

The establishment of Archival and Information Science Programs in Universities and the strengthening of the profession would ease the challenges. It is also important to emphasize the indispensable role played by archivists in government institutions. The aim of the archival mission is to preserve information for future research and juridical matters, serve as a corporate memory and a cultural heritage at a time when electronic and cultural imperialism are taking over indigenous cultures.