

The History curriculum in Zimbabwe: Wishlist versus realities on the ground

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One historian once wrote that the best historians need stronger boots and not a big library, a testament to the fact that the best historians need to be on the ground and do research in order to find information. In many countries, the History teacher needs a strong heart, for they always have to straddle the line between teaching realistic history and kowtowing to the dictates of the syllabus, which in some cases has been bastardised by the political elite. While it is an accepted fact that history is always taught from the point of view of the victors, that mantra has been stretched to a ridiculous extent in some instances. This is not to say that the history curriculum has been stretched to irrelevance. In fact, the new history curriculum implemented in Zimbabwe is relevant but has largely been infected with unnecessary and unrealistic patriotic overtones. The job of the history teacher in Zimbabwe has generally been made more difficult by the large doses of patriotic “history” that they are now obliged to pass off as fact to learners at all stages of learning.

While the official policy is that history teachers have to emphasise the virtues of those who brought the country independence, including their contributions to various developments after independence, the fact on the ground is that the teacher no longer has a monopoly over information. That has made it difficult, for instance, to whitewash certain parts of the country’s independence. Teachers therefore have had to teach learners about the reality of corruption and other vices that affected the country, especially after independence. While the official position is that the syllabus should cover these, there is an overwhelming tendency to self-censor. Teachers therefore teach the learners about corruption, political violence and other vices, but to avoid endangering themselves, they stop short of actually naming perpetrators, preferring to speak about these in general terms. The major reason for this, of course, is that due to polarization, should the learner make use of real examples in examination answers, they never know the political affiliation of the marker, who might not take kindly to the message written by the student. Teachers therefore have had to walk a fine line between real history and what may be termed “the official unofficial line”.

The heroism of the Second Chimurenga/Umvukela, that is, the war of liberation, fought from 1964 to 1979, is another part of the curriculum that presents the teacher with

a conundrum. The official position is that learners must be taught the heroism of African nationalists and guerrillas. However, in the examination questions on the era, while they mostly punt the virtues of the liberation struggle, when talking about the role of Africans, dark chapters like the abuse of women and the unjust killing of people who crossed the paths of the guerrillas sometimes get discussed, to the chagrin of those who participated in the war and their supporters. Naturally, the teacher is expected to self-censor, lest he/she be accused of not being grateful for the role played by the African nationalists.

The land issue is always an emotive one in this country, having been at the core of the war of liberation as well as being a defining factor in relations between blacks and whites since independence. The fast-track land reform implemented by Zimbabwe started in 2000 but remains a live landmine 21 years on. Assessments of its success therefore always present pitfalls for teachers and students alike. This is because history has a multicausal approach, but the official and oft-repeated claim by government and the ruling party is that it is just the land reform that caused the imposition of sanctions on Zimbabwe by Western countries and not the other egregious factors that accompanied the land reform, such as the assault and murder of opposition political actors. From the foregoing, therefore, it is clear that the job of the history teacher in Zimbabwe is not a particularly enviable one, but it remains very interesting.

Politics is not the only fodder in the study of history. Discussions on social development since early times also take centre stage, making it all the more necessary to take a comparative approach with modern societies. Issues such as abortion and infanticide to control population growth, believed to have been used during the colonial era, are discussed. The history teacher does not shy away from the reality that these methods, heavily illegalised and punished today, are still in use, with or without official sanction. But once again, the teacher is forced to tread the topic with caution, as they do when teaching the all-important topic of spirit mediums. Unfortunately, the topics have to be discussed, but usually without much commitment of veracity by teachers, given the fact that most Zimbabweans, including learners, have an antipathy to traditional religion and view some of the claimed exploits of traditional religion with incredulity.

Having said that, the History curriculum is one where thousands of teachers and learners have staked their reputations and futures, and despite its focus on centuries of the past, it remains part of the hoped-for future.