

CONFRONTING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN HISTORY CLASSROOMS: AN ANALYSIS OF PRE-SERVICE HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

The purpose of the study presented in this article is to understand the experiences of final year pre-service South African high school history teachers on their engagement with controversial issues during their teaching practice. The rationale for undertaking this study was twofold: filling a gap in the existing literature, which has neglected the experiences of pre-service teachers and their understandings of controversial issues in history during the early stages of their professional development, and for us to learn from our students so as to possibly contribute to a more meaningful school history education in present-day South Africa. The data for this study was drawn from a collection of reflective reports prepared by 75 pre-service high school history teachers on their experiences of teaching controversial issues during their professional practice sessions. We found that the student-teachers' experiences in this regard greatly varied, and were informed by multifarious factors, including the pre-service teachers' positionality, the institutional culture of their placement schools, their professional relationships with the mentor teachers, and their engagement with learners, policy documents and teaching material. What stood out was the centrality of race to their experiences of teaching controversial issues, something which revealed the deep-rooted legacies of South Africa's racist past. The consequence of this was a black/white binary that continued to influence the way certain schools, pre-service teachers, mentor teachers and learners relate to history and to each other.

Keywords: Controversial issues; Pre-service history teachers; Post-apartheid; History classrooms; Student- and mentor teacher's relationships.

Introduction

In South Africa, controversy is never far away, be it in relation to the language of instruction in institutions of learning, university fees, ownership of land or issues of state capture by corrupt politicians and businessmen. These disputes

are but examples of a plethora of controversial issues which South Africans are facing today, and which invariably are underpinned by issues of moral complexity such as race, gender, class, culture, language, and, more generally, politics, economics and social justice. Against the backdrop of South Africa's apartheid past, race, as its historical legacy, inevitably transcends most matters of controversy; other controversial issues conversely are more contemporary in nature and the results of political and economic policies adopted after apartheid ended in 1994.

This article takes post-apartheid South Africa as a case study to advance our understanding of the reverberations of societal controversies in the education sector and the implications thereof in a post-conflict multicultural society. The study starts from the premise, grounded in extant scholarship, that very few, if any, of the controversial issues that exist in present-day South African society are halted by school gates.¹

Through the original lens of the often neglected experiences of pre-service history teachers working in a variety of high schools across the country, this article will provide supplementary evidence to support the argument that not dissimilarly to what happens around the world, schools in South Africa, and history classrooms in particular, are not immune to issues that are controversial to at least some members of the public. As such, they function as sites where both inexperienced and experienced teachers and their learners encounter, and inevitably have to engage with, often uncomfortable and diverging "truths" about contested issues in societies.

As will be argued in this article, many of the controversial issues arising in history classrooms are rooted in the hidden curriculum manifest in unofficially sanctioned points of view and societal structures; others are directly related to the intended South African curriculum, called the Curriculum Policy Assessment Statements (CAPS).² In reference to the potentially controversial nature of history, the British Historical Association well encapsulated the nature of the challenges connected with teaching and learning about the past in schools around the world. It points out that:³

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. This may

1 V Chikoko, JD Gilmour, C Harber, and J Serf, "Teaching controversial issues and teacher education in England and South Africa", *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 37(1), 2011, pp. 5-19.

2 Department of Basic Education and Training, *Curriculum Policy Assessment Statements – History* (Pretoria, Government Printer, 2012).

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

also be the case where there are disparities between what is taught in school history,

family/community histories and other histories. Such issues and disparities create a strong resonance with students in particular education settings.

As we will discuss, in South Africa it is not only the prescribed content topics such as apartheid, slavery and colonialism that can cause controversy but also the procedural thinking concepts that are advanced through the intended curriculum, such as historical evidence, empathy and multi-perspectivity. It must be pointed out that underpinning the South African curriculum in which such concepts are deeply embedded is the Schools Act (Act no.84 of 1996) and its subsequent amendments which, in line with the South African constitution, foregrounds human rights and equality, and prohibits any form of discrimination.

By focusing on the experiences of pre-service high school history teachers, the aims of this study in terms of its expected contribution are both scholarly and practical. First, the research aims to contribute to filling a notable gap in the existing literature, which has much neglected the experiences of pre-service teachers and their understandings of controversial issues in general, and in history specifically, during the early stages of their professional development. Second, by enhancing knowledge in this regard, we hope to improve teacher preparation so to better equip student-teachers to deal with such issues in the classroom. Hence, this study provided an opportunity for us to learn from our students with an eye to seeking to contribute to better-quality teacher preparation and ultimately to more meaningful school history education in present-day South Africa.

Research context and methodology

The data for this article was drawn from a group of 75 fourth year pre-service high school history teachers who undertook the practical teaching component of their B.Ed. degree. This component is part of both the legal and pedagogical requirements of teacher education and spans a period of approximately six months, during which prospective teachers in training generally teach two school subjects in which they specialise as part of their degree. The student-teachers who participated in the study were usually between 21 and 24 years of age, and were thus “born-frees”, that is, South Africans who were born after the demise of apartheid. In terms of gender, race, language and socio-economic status, they were fairly representative of South African students

entering a Faculty of Education to become teachers. Their teaching practice experience was done in schools that span the South African educational landscape and which included both private and government schools, as well as both former black and former white schools, the latter encompassing both all-white and mixed-race Afrikaans classes and mixed-race English classes. Importantly, the professional development component that is at the centre of the experiences analysed in this study constitutes a partnership between universities and schools, with the former generally providing the theoretical grounding and the latter the practical training. The major prerequisites, in the case of prospective high school history teachers, is that the placement school should offer history as an elective subject in the Further Education and Training Band (FET) for learners in grades 10 to 12 (aged between 16 and 18) and should have a professionally registered mentor teacher guiding the pre-service teachers' professional development.

In preparation for teaching practice, the pre-service history teachers who participated in this study followed a three-week long unit on "Teaching Controversial Issues in History" as part of their final-year History Methodology module. In this module, they engaged with readings from both an international⁴ and a South African context,⁵ the aim being to provide the student-teachers with a sound theoretical, methodological and conceptual backdrop to the teaching of controversial issues. These scholarly readings were enhanced by reflection on practical cases, drawn from the media, of controversies that had erupted in society, particularly in history classes. The BBC News article "Slave auction project: New Jersey school under fire" is one example that was used in the unit to discuss what makes an issue controversial, the diversity of perspectives involved and how such issues can be variously dealt with in history classrooms, for example, by developing classroom policies on how to deal with controversial issues and engaging with historical thinking concepts. Engagement with micro-lessons on particular topics was also encouraged in order for pre-service teachers to reflect on and implement different approaches drawn from the literature on teaching controversial issues.

For the purpose of this particular article, we drew our data from a summative

4 British Historical Association – Britain, *T.E.A.C.H. Teaching emotive and controversial History 3-19* (London, Historical Association, 2007), p. 8; A McCully, "Teaching controversial issues in a divided society: Learning from Northern Ireland", *Prospero*, 11(4), 2005, pp. 38-46.

5 D Frances, L Ndou and J Wassermann, "The teaching of controversial issues in Social Science education", *Journal of Educational Studies*, February 2009; J Wassermann, "Learning about controversial issues in school history: The experiences of learners in KwaZulu-Natal schools", *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, 29, 2011, pp. 131-157; 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, pp. 394-403.

assignment for this course, which, in addition to expecting a literature review engaging with existing knowledge on methods for teaching controversial issues in history, required student-teachers to compile a reflective report, using free-writing, detailing their own encounter and engagement with controversial issues during their teaching practice. We analysed the data through a process of open-coding which allowed us to uncover prominent themes, trends and patterns related to such experiences.

For ethical reasons, only the summative assignments of history students who consented to take part in the study were used. Additionally, in this article we used pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of the pre-service history teachers, their mentor teachers and the schools they worked at. While we acknowledge the constraints on authenticity and trustworthiness possibly deriving from the fact that the reflective reports formed part of mandatory continuous assessment, we view these narratives as critical portholes into the constructed experiences of South Africa's future history teachers, and as sources of significant insights into the challenges currently facing in-training teachers and their responses to such challenges.

Data analysis and discussion

The data analysis revealed a bricolage of experiences reported by our students with regard to their encounter with a series of controversies in their history classrooms. The emerging controversial issues, which we will discuss in this section with a focus on the most problematic and challenging examples, relate to both the hidden and the overt curriculum, and include: i) the ethos and dominant institutional culture of the schools the student-teachers were placed at; ii) the student-teachers' relationships with their mentor teachers, and inherent power dynamics and intergenerational clashes; iii) the student-teachers' experiences of the curriculum and the pedagogical approaches they employed; iv) and race and racism as prevailing emotive and controversial issues underpinning most of these experiences, and cutting across both the intended and the hidden curriculum.

Experiencing the schools' ethos and institutional culture

The vast majority of reflective reports revealed that the pre-service history teachers experienced schools as institutions supportive of their professional development. In such cases, the student-teachers had perceived teaching

history as an exciting and enjoyable experience during which they were allowed to experiment and find their voices. The reports, however, also laid bare signs of a hidden curriculum at play in certain schools, which constrained and demoralised some of our students. The data revealed that controversy arose early on in certain instances, even before the pre-service teachers had entered the classroom. A controversy recorded by one student-teacher ensued in a former white Afrikaans school that was being transformed by taking in black learners; the latter were accommodated through the introduction of English as a medium of instruction alongside Afrikaans, while the teaching corps remained white Afrikaans. The perception articulated by this student was that the arrival of himself and of another black pre-service teacher at this institution had been seen by the school authorities as a transformative dynamics constituting an overt threat to this school's white Afrikaner institutional culture. According to this student's report:

[the school manager] asked us if we can speak Afrikaans because the school's main language of teaching and learning is Afrikaans and said that they had instructed the university to only send students who can speak fluent Afrikaans. Of course this was not the case for both of us ... This was followed by a look of disappointment on Mev. [Mrs] Vogel [pseudonym] part as she instructed us to call the university and tell them to find us a new school. In essence, we found ourselves in a school where we did not feel welcome (as the university could not find space for us in any other school), we also attributed this to the fact that we were the first black student teachers at the school, as we found out later on in the term, and we knew that it was going to be a very long two and a half months.

As a result of their perceived unwelcoming reception, the two students chose to sit outside on the lawn during break and not in the staff room with other staff, hence avoiding a direct confrontation with the controversy that had arisen from their presence in the school. According to the student's report, the school's unequal treatment of the pre-service history teachers, which rode roughshod over the South African constitution and the South African Schools Act, was eventually detected by certain learners who saw it as racism, but was downplayed and brushed aside by the student-teachers to avoid "trouble". Although the above is an extreme example of a hidden curriculum at play, more covert signs of student-teachers being unwelcome in schools because of their racial and cultural background were experienced by a minority of other pre-service teachers, notably in the form of unsupportive mentoring as discussed in the section below.

While race and culture/language were identity issues often underpinning reported controversies and frictions in the schools, our analysis also revealed

cases in which gender and religion played a central role in the emergence of tensions in institutions of learning. The most prominent gender issue recorded in this study, which intersected with issues of religion, referred to the case of a Muslim boy refusing to be taught by a female pre-service history teacher, whom he considered disrespectful to his religion as she was unmarried and not covering her hair. The student-teacher recounted how, “The boy called me many different things that were rude and hurtful” and how, upon discussing this instance with her mentor teacher, the latter “had nothing to say about the matter”. Again, choosing avoidance as a strategy to deal with controversies in an unsupportive environment, the student felt obliged to wear a head scarf whenever she taught to the boy.

Experiencing student- and mentor teacher’s relationships

As hinted at above, the role of mentor teachers, to whom student-teachers were allocated once placed in their respective schools, turned out to be of great influence to the student-teachers’ classroom experiences. While most experiences had reportedly been relatively positive, a significant minority of student-teachers experienced their relationship with their mentor as problematic when dealing with (potentially) controversial issues; in fact, this relationship itself often turned into as a source of controversy.

The students’ accounts reported numerous cases of mentor teachers excelling in their professional support on how to deal with controversial issues in history. Several student-teachers reported on their mentor’s valuable guidance in this regard, and underscored having found their teaching practice enjoyable and enriching as a result of this support. Among the recommendations considered useful by these students was the idea of agreeing on “ground rules for civil discussion” with the learners as a point of departure; these included the prohibition of provocative and hurtful language, and the importance of learners’ active, inclusive and respectful classroom participation. The students also reported having benefited from guidance relating to working with a range of historical sources and providing multiple perspectives to all historical event in an exercise of historical enquiry, thereby allowing space for unofficial histories. Other valuable advice referred to the need to encourage learners to express themselves and provide evidence for statements made or opinions expressed, while being attentive and sensitive to the learners’ emotions arising in the process. A piece of advice that strongly resonated in one student-teacher was that learners must be made aware of the fact that “we can’t change history,

and we can't impose our own modern values on people who lived decades or centuries ago”.

Such positive experiences were in stark contrast to instances reported by other student-teachers, whereby the guidance offered by the mentor teachers itself created controversy. The study recorded several cases of mentor teachers stifling or undermining student-teachers' initiatives to critically engage with history by means of multi-perspectivity; they did so by instead foregrounding dogmatic teacher-centred pedagogies as a strategy to support a hidden curriculum in which they felt confident, safe and untouchable. A regular occurrence garnered from the reflective reports was the shutting down by mentor teachers of any debate or discussion deemed to have the potential to turn contentious. Reasons deduced by the student-teachers for this widespread practice varied: they included mentors' wishes to prevent conflict in the classroom, their patronising views of learners as not being mature or knowledgeable enough to debate controversial topics, their understanding of such debates as being in conflict with the accepted textbook interpretation of events, and their use of the history classroom as a platform for politicking in order to advance particular agendas. In doing so, mentor teachers fundamentally undermined the intended curriculum and its expectations that multiple perspectives be presented and multiple voices be heard in conversation with each other.

On various occasions reported by the student-teachers, dogmatic practices that shut down debate seemed again rooted in racism, at times leading to overt tensions between students and their mentors. One such case was experienced by a black student-teacher who reported on his black mentor's chagrin with his use of a multiperspective approach that challenged the one-sided view and misconception that only black people had resisted apartheid. The student-teacher reported on standing accused of being “a sell-out ... brain washed by white people”, and thus appeared victim of the mentor's apparent stiffness and irritation vis-a-vis attempts at destabilising a neat black/white binary around apartheid and resistance to it. Overt racism was also experienced at the hands of white mentor, as indicated in another student-teacher's account of the unfolding of a class discussion he had initiated:

In her defence [the mentor said] that apartheid and Afrikaner people should not be blamed for the suffering of black people and that they brought it to themselves, she further mentioned that they [the learners] don't have the ability to interpret and enough intelligence because they are black.

The student further reported on how emotions ran high as a result of this exchange and how he responded to the affront:

... not only learners were angry and out of control but myself as well, I was ready to give up my training there and go to another school that was not that racist, what stopped me from leaving is that if I do without addressing that issues, some of the learners will take that at heart believing that they are inadequate due to their skin colour, as that had in effect even on their self-esteem.

In the process of mentoring then, issues deemed controversial were reportedly avoided, indoctrination of learners took place by means of statements that were, every so often, overtly racist and political in nature, student-teachers were silenced or controlled by their mentors by dint of the marks they were allocated or were browbeaten into submission as they had doubts casted over their abilities. In light of the above, it is scant wonder that some pre-service history teachers were disappointed in the attitudes and practices of their mentors. The conduct of certain mentor teachers resulted in controversies as their views and pedagogies appeared diametrically opposed to what the pre-service teachers had been taught at university and what policies expected of them. Unsurprisingly then, one of the student-teachers proclaimed that, if there was anything to take away from his teaching practice experience, was that: "I did learn what I was not going to do in my future classroom in my years to come".

The data thereby points to cases of generational conflict characterising the relationship between certain pre-service history teachers and their mentors. While these student-teachers were attempting to present history as an analytical disciplinary discipline as expected of them from their training and the curriculum, certain mentor teachers pursued history as a memory discipline based on a simplistic reading of the dominant narrative as found in state-sanctioned textbooks. Acting in a context marked by power imbalance between the pre-service teachers and their mentors, the former reacted in different ways, with responses ranging from submission so as to please the mentor teachers, to subversion.

An explanation for these practices by mentor teachers may lay in the fact that most of them had, in all probability, never been educated on how to teach history as an inevitably contested field. Older teachers particularly, who had been trained under apartheid, had possibly never attended professional courses in this respect and this translated to classroom practices fundamentally undermining what the intended curriculum expects in terms of teaching the subject. Another possible explanation may be found in teachers' political

agendas, at times a manifestation of a school culture that is in conflict with the law, the constitution and the changing nature of South African society. Such behaviour by experienced history teachers in South Africa is in itself not new but an indication of the continued use of the history classroom as a political battlefield,⁶ a practice that undoubtedly is not unique to South Africa but is especially common in post-conflict and divided societies.⁷

Experiencing the programmatic curriculum: textbooks and their controversial content and use

Once in the classroom, CAPS as South Africa's intended curriculum serves as the guiding policy in teaching history and related controversial issues. As indicated above, not all mentor teachers fully embraced the critical and participatory pedagogy subscribed to in the curriculum and this caused controversy and friction in itself. As transpired from some of the cases reported earlier, across the board, the chance of such controversies and frictions occurring and intensifying increased when addressing a series of prescribed content topics which emerged as particularly contested during teaching practice. Such topics related to both national and global history, and included: slavery; the French Revolution; transformation in southern Africa after 1750 and the rise of the Zulu Kingdom and Shaka; social Darwinism, eugenics and theories of race in the 19th and 20th centuries; apartheid and especially Afrikaner nationalism and the National Party's coming to power in 1948; civil society protests in the 1960s–1980s in South Africa and the challenge of Black Consciousness to the apartheid state; and the coming of democracy in South Africa and the country's efforts at coming to terms with its violent past. Again, with the exception of the French Revolution, most of the historical topics that proved controversial dealt, in one way or another, with race.

The controversial nature of these topics was reportedly enhanced by how history textbooks, as cultural artefacts made up of selected representations, were used in the classroom, leading, as hinted at earlier, to instances of conflict between the pre-service teachers and their mentors. One student-teacher indicated the complete absence of resources other than a single textbook in the classroom, and pointed to a practice whereby “the teacher read straight

6 J Wassermann, “Learning about controversial issues in school history: The experiences of learners in KwaZulu-Natal schools”, *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, 29, 2011, pp.131-157.

7 D Bentrovato, K Korostelina and M Schulze (eds.), *History can bite: History education in divided and postwar societies* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2016); L Cajani, S Lässig and M Repoussi (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Conflict and History Education in the Post-Cold War Era* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2019); C Psaltis, M Carretero and S Cejahic-Clancy (eds.), *History teaching and conflict transformation: Social psychological theories, history teaching and reconciliation* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

from the textbook”. In line with the expectations set by both the school curriculum and her university education, she reported favouring the use of different historical sources to expose the learners to multiple perspectives – to the dissatisfaction of her mentor teacher who hauled the student before the headmaster, accusing her of “teaching the wrong thing because I was not teaching from the textbook”. Similarly, another student reported having been “discouraged from doing fun activities with the learners because he [mentor teacher] believed it [was] a waste of precious time” and that “I should stick to the prescribed textbook”. The mentor teacher dismissed the student’s view that the textbook’s approach to the topic of colonial expansion was biased as it adopted a predominantly Eurocentric perspective, and thus needed to be supplemented with additional sources; the mentor made clear that “it was unnecessary to include information that would upset the learners ... and their parents” by offering contestable historical perspectives. These reports point to a practice whereby textbooks are elevated to the status of authoritative semi-religious texts and not understood and employed as particular interpretations of the curriculum that need to be critically engaged with.

Controversies further arose in various instances where the learners themselves openly criticised and challenged the school textbooks as sources of historical evidence. The most notable controversy reported by the student-teachers in this regard centred on the theme of “Transformation in southern Africa after 1750”, a topic on which the learners’ unofficial knowledge appeared to be in conflict with the textbooks used, resulting in their content being consequently challenged by the learners. The foregrounding of the Zulu Kingdom especially left certain learners, belonging to the Zulu community, with a belief in their group’s historical dominance and relative importance vis-à-vis other groups, whereas non-Zulu learners articulated contrasting views, arguing that “the Zulus had always been the violent ones in history”. In the ensuing debates, the learners denounced the textbooks as being biased and as promoting ethnic tension through their focus on a single group as well as through misrepresentations of the Zulu Kings Shaka and Moshoeshoe which one-sidedly relied on jingoistic British colonial evidence. On reflection, one pre-service teacher felt that he had been “pushed into the trap of using only the textbook”, which, as the sole source available, brought about ideas of tribalism amongst the learners.

In sum, while some learners came to critically engage with textbooks and hence demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of their being designed by people

with specific agendas,⁸ certain pre-service teachers gave in to their mentor's hesitancy to encourage learners' critical engagement with these educational media because they feared the textbooks could turn into sources of undesired controversy in the history classroom. Others instead subtly resisted the mentor's instructions, as reported, for instance, by one student-teacher who affirmed to have complied with the mentor's preferred practice of relying on the textbook while he simultaneously "still tried to slip other sources into the lesson".

Experiencing learner- vs teacher-centred approaches

In addition to related reflections on textbook use, the pre-service history teachers reported on their experiences in engaging with contentious topics in a learner-centred manner as prescribed by South Africa's history curriculum.

The research recorded student-teachers' experiences of both perceived success and limitations in encouraging learners' critical engagement with controversial issues, notably through class debate. Among the most positive experiences in this regard related to practices meant to foster deep historical understanding, for instance by grounding class debate on the concept of historical evidence and on learners' prior research into causes and consequences in preparation for discussing sensitive and controversial historical topics such as apartheid. Another valuable practice reported by the student-teachers in dealing with such topics was to explicitly work with the concepts of empathy and perspective-taking as notions enabling learners to more thoroughly understand different experiences and perspectives which make up history. More generally, what worked for some pre-service teachers was also the prior establishment of rules of engagement which included the respect of learners' right to freedom of expression while "mind[ing] the language, and how they address their peers".

Exercises in perspective-taking, specifically, were often conducted as strategies to approach controversial issues. In one case, a student-teacher encouraged debate on the abolishment of slavery by means of a mock court case: as part of this exercise, the class was divided into two groups – one having to argue from the perspective of slaves and abolitionists and the other from that of slave owners. This was followed by a structured debriefing on the lingering impact of slavery on society. In her reflective report, the pre-service teacher described the benefits of such an approach as she realised that "the learners who had blatantly made comments on the question of race

8 M Apple and L Christian-Smith, "The politics of the textbook", M Apple and L Christian-Smith (ed.), *The politics of the textbook* (New York, Routledge, 2006), pp. 1-21.

started to think deeply about this controversial topic”.⁹ This student-teacher’s perceived success was not shared by other pre-service teachers, who reported their experiencing limitations in the use of perspective-taking as an approach to teaching controversial issues. One student-teacher, for instance, while adopting a similar participatory, multiperspective approach to addressing slavery in South African history, observed that “the learners in the ‘Europeans for slavery’ group found it difficult to continue the debate as many of them couldn’t fully understand the reasoning behind the treatment of slaves”, and they therefore asked to be moved to a different group as they felt they were on the “wrong side” of the controversy. As a consequence, one-sidedness eventually came to dominate, hence defeating the purpose of the exercise. A similar challenge was faced by another student-teacher who, in addressing the origins of apartheid, encouraged her learners to put themselves in the shoes of the ideologues of this system. This strategy reportedly resulted in a “big argument” because “the learners could not see how ... to empathise with people who enforced such a cruel system on their parents and grandparents for so many decades”. In contrast to the reaction of her peer mentioned earlier, who had eventually conceded to the learners’ refusal to see the past through a different historical lens when dealing with slavery, this pre-service history teacher persevered in trying and make her class see that the past is different from the present and must be understood as such.¹⁰

Overall, several in-training history teachers experienced classroom debate as being of little use because, as one student explained, “we were not getting anywhere with this issue [why apartheid happened]”, “causing a lot of chaos in the classroom”. Another pre-service teacher reported on his unpleasant experience in resorting to the devil’s advocate approach as a strategy to steer the debate towards a close: he lamented that this approach backfired, as he found himself unintentionally “crushing some of the learner’s views and opinions” whereas he “just wanted the whole debate [on apartheid] to end”. The study recorded several such cases of class debate being initiated by the pre-service teachers, only to be abruptly shut down as a reaction to the student-teachers’ irritation, discomfort or fears. Terminating uncomfortable debates thus seemed common practice not only among mentors, as indicated

9 Translation from Afrikaans by the authors. The original statement read: “Ek kon sien dat die leerders wat blatante, uitgesproke aanmerkings oor die rasse kwessie gemaak het in diepte oor die omstrede onderwerp begin dink het”.

10 Similarly, the attempt by one student-teacher at encouraging historical empathy towards Afrikaners among Black learners resulted in some learners “having a hard time understanding why we should empathise with the oppressors” and had to be explained that “empathising does not mean we condone the acts or events, but it is important to understand why Apartheid was permitted in the past and why people acted the way they did”.

earlier, but also among student-teachers. On one occasion, for instance, after giving learners the opportunity to openly articulate their thoughts, a pre-service teacher ended the discussion by informing the learners that, regardless of their arguments and views, “the textbook is the one that we are going to use whether we agree with it or not”. Another history student-teacher similarly indicated his falling back on a safer teacher-centred approach when faced with great uncertainty as to how to manage the class when emotions spiralled out of control: he opined that “[the] learner-centred approach was not very successful because when things got emotional for learners I did not know what to do, [and] I went back to direct instruction [from the textbook] and just gave learners notes”.¹¹

All told, the pedagogical approaches used by the pre-service history teachers and their related experiences greatly varied. On the one hand were sophisticated attempts at dealing with controversial issues which permitted learners to voice their views so as to instil critical historical thinking skills and allow them to create their own understanding. On the other were cases of student-teachers falling back on teacher-centred and textbook-based approaches ostensibly to protect themselves and their learners from uncomfortable confrontations with the past and with each other. These differences in experience need explanation. From the reflective reports it is clear that a number of pre-service teachers managed, sometimes against the odds, to implement some of the approaches studied at university better than others. A range of factors seem to have played a role in this, ranging from the support received from schools and mentor teachers to the students' own views of history as a school subject. Others did not fare so well, with their experiences consequently raising questions about the level of preparation offered by their university education. The theories, concepts and principles covered in the course on teaching controversial issues in history clearly did not always translate easily into practice. This failure was expressed by one pre-service history teacher who articulated her “wish to have been told and taught and trained well in how to deal with controversial issues as it is part of history and it's one thing I can't avoid”.

Overall, a certain disjuncture thus seems to exist between theories studied at university and teaching in the real world. Learning to teach controversial issues at university is contextually far removed from the real world of schools which are populated by a diversity of learners and teachers, each with their

11 In yet another case, a student-teacher admitted that, while having guided the learners to come to their own conclusions and freely express their opinions, he eventually ended up openly dismissing “those who had views which were disturbing or not constructive”.

own ideas, agendas and beliefs. This, along with inexperience, resulted in pre-service history teachers falling into avoidable traps, such as allowing shouting matches rather than debates and forms of racism to be expressed.

Experiencing race and racism among learners

Pre-service history teachers across the board, be it in former white or black schools, reported having been confronted with manifestations of learners' racist views and negative perspectives of "the other", which posed enormous challenges to many of these future teachers. Most student-teachers experienced the teaching of sensitive topics such as slavery and apartheid as a racial powder keg: when such topics were taught, adversarial attitudes had surfaced among learners and difficult questions with racial overtones were asked, leading to acrimonious arguments and tensions within the classroom. In a context in which race-based preconceptions and angry reactions were not uncommon among learners, some student-teachers admitted their failure in applying the idea of "using history to learn from the past and to understand what led to the forming of contemporary society". Against this backdrop, several pre-service teachers expressed their fears of tensions arising and race-based finger-pointing when teaching a sensitive history to a diverse class of learners who encompassed the descendants of those "who are still suffering from the debts of apartheid (unskilled parents and uneducated parents who are unable to find suitable jobs to provide for their families and escaping poverty)" as well as those who benefitted from it. The diversity characterising many of their classes indeed came to be viewed by a number of pre-service teachers as a particular disadvantage and an obstacle to meaningful teaching geared towards historical thinking.

The reports pointed to various instances in which issues of race and racism arose and led to controversy among learners. These instances often took different forms in different types of schools. As validated by the student-teachers' reports, schools that are Afrikaans and predominantly white are usually sites characterised by a shared language, culture, religion and value system, which they further promote. The data seemed to confirm that white learners in these schools tended to have a shared view of apartheid which they were taught at home. According to the reports, when confronted with the racial realities of apartheid in the history classroom, some were shocked as they heard about the violence for the first time, leading them to shift their mind-sets; others dug in their heels, as they continued to see apartheid as being perfectly acceptable. This inability to understand and acknowledge the horrors of apartheid reportedly

gave rise to tension and dispute in the classroom.

In former white Afrikaans schools that had instead enrolled a significant number of black learners since the demise of apartheid, teaching certain topics became a contestation along a white/black binary of perpetrators and victims. Two cases recounted in the reflective reports serve to illustrate how this binary played itself out, at times aggravated by the student-teacher's use of a generalising race-based historical vocabulary and categorisations. In the first case a student recounted the difficulties she encountered in talking to learners about slavery "because it was linked to race", as "People of colour were made slaves and whites treated them very badly".¹² The second case refers to the experience of another student-teacher whose black learners, being under the impression that this history could be summarised as a story of the whites' capture and trade of black people as slaves, were angered, arguing that this was why "white countries" like Britain and America could prosper and develop and "black countries" in Africa could not.

In several instances, such debates boiled over, creating great discomfort among the student-teachers. One such instance was sparked by the response provided by an Afrikaans learner to the question "what is nationalism?" In this context, the boy affirmed his pride in the Afrikaans nation and its acquired wealth and achievements, which, in his view, starkly contrasted with the situation of the blacks. An acrimonious argument followed, with black learners denouncing that Afrikaner pride stemmed from their oppression of blacks and their wealth from the exploitation of black labour. The discomfort experienced by the student-teacher when confronted with the task of managing rising tensions in the class culminated with the learners' demanding her to disclose her personal position on the matter. This clashed with the pre-service teacher's favouring an objective, balanced or procedural neutrality approach, which meant not only trying to remain "unbiased at all times", but also appearing neutral, in so doing allowing learners to partake in class discussions "without having to impose my own ideas on them".¹³

Similar scenarios and related encounters with racism played out in former black schools as well, which still predominantly cater for black learners only. In her reflective report, one pre-service history teacher found the topic of apartheid, and the preceding rise to power by the National Party

12 Translation from Afrikaans by the authors. The original statement reads: "Dit was vir my moeilik om met die leerders te praat oor slawerny omdat dit ook gekoppel was aan ras. Gekleurde mense is slawe gemaak en blanke mense het hul vreeslik sleg behandel".

13 Another student similarly declared that as a "teacher I always kept my opinion and feelings to myself because I could also change the views of learners with things I say".

that established it, to be highly controversial and emotive in such schools as a reflection of perceptions and resentments apparently held in black communities. As she reported, most learners expressed a belief that “blacks are the legitimate rulers of South Africa because they lived in South Africa decades before the Afrikaners came”. Another student-teacher reported on her similarly challenging experience of teaching about apartheid in a former black school. She observed that:

Although learners were not yet born during the Apartheid years, I realised that they held some form of connotations and opinions regarding the topic due to what they learnt from their families, media and previous grades, as a result emotions were raised. What made it challenging was that some learners were not willing to understand why Apartheid was considered legal by then, therefore they had some form of resentment for the whites. The lesson was challenging in a way that some learners thought I was on the side of the Apartheid regime when I tried to explain its nature, but [the] majority of them understood me and [the] nature of the topic.

In the light of the above, one pre-service history teacher expressed her belief that:

... for a white teacher teaching racial issues to let's say a black class, will always be difficult, despite the best efforts of the teacher, and the same for a black teacher in a white classroom. Unfortunately in South Africa especially, we always see the colour of the other person, we simply cannot ignore it. This poses great obstacles in society and education, but how do we ignore it?

Some student-teachers explained the persistence of racism and of a black/white binary amongst many “born-frees” by pointing the finger at their learners’ homes and the ideas and beliefs parents instilled in them. One pre-service teacher placed at an Afrikaans school, for instance, came to the conclusion that “There were still learners who based their opinions in class on the views of their parents”.¹⁴ Another student-teacher similarly affirmed that “While teaching a topic like apartheid I would always get comments from learners that are unwanted and with these comments I realized that the legacy of apartheid is still being kept alive ... it is very hard to try and teach this to learners if they already have a perspective or view on certain topics”.

A direct consequence of the controversies around race that emerged in certain history classrooms was the emotional impact experienced by the pre-service teachers. Some reported on their feeling overwhelmed, their discomfort when confronted with learners’ expectations for the teacher to adopt a certain view based on race, the stress and anxiety deriving from their inability to control classes where debates descended into

¹⁴ Translation from Afrikaans by the authors. The original statement reads: “Daar was steeds leerders wat hulle eie opinies of hulle ouers se siening in die klas voor gebring het”.

racial shouting matches, and their exposure to learners' verbal attacks.¹⁵

In sum, when it comes to deeply controversial issues connected to race, the school experiences of the participants in this study were dotted by ethnocentric sentiments as well as anger, most likely a reflection of the society they serve. In such an environment, only the brave ones seem to have taken risks to address controversial issues as is expected of them by the curriculum. This is in itself worrying, for Dryden-Peterson and Siebörger argued that history teachers, on account of their position, wield an immense amount of power and have "the potential to be role models for and brokers to a new future [as] memory makers for a new South Africa".¹⁶

Conclusion

In conclusion, the pre-service history teachers whose reflective reports were used as data for this study experienced the teaching of controversial issues in multifarious ways. These experiences were coloured by a multitude of factors including the positionality of the pre-service teachers, the institutional culture of their placement schools, their professional relationships with the mentor teachers who were many a time from a different generation, and their engagement with learners, policy documents and teaching material, which, among other things, evidenced the power and obstinacy of traditional teaching methods over innovative ones and an overall disjuncture between academic and school training. Although the experiences of each individual pre-service teacher were unique, the data revealed a number of common controversies that stood out when teaching history in South African classrooms, at the same time also uncovering student-teachers' divergent responses to related challenges. While many had pleasurable experiences during the professional development component of their teacher education, others faced a range of trials that at times turned overwhelming. Most were related to race, which permeated almost every aspect of the students' teaching experiences. The experienced racism reported in this study is evidence of partly untransformed history classrooms in post-apartheid South Africa, arguably a reflection of contemporary society; it provides proof of the continuing legacy of a divisive and conflict-ridden past with which the learners, their families, and their schools and teachers are trying to come to terms. Particularly, the study evinced the influence of this past and its legacy on "born-frees", be they pre-service history teachers or learners: while neither

15 Sometimes these traumas were self-inflicted by dint of the teaching approaches employed or the lack of sufficient preparation. One student, for instance, admitted "I should have planned and done research on the overall situation when it comes to issues of apartheid in the school".

16 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, pp. 394-403.

of these groups directly experienced apartheid, their classroom experiences are deeply rooted in this past which still casts a long shadow into contemporary history classrooms and is integral part of the historical consciousness of these younger generations. The result and manifestation of this is a black/white binary that continues to influence the way institutions, pre-service teachers, mentor teachers and learners relate to history and to each other.

Ultimately, this study confirms how difficult it is to teach history in contemporary South Africa. Consequently, it also points to a need to rethink how we can best support South African pre-service history teachers in dealing with the challenging realities brought to light by this study. Thinking of possible ways forward in this direction, this pilot study allowed us to critically reflect on and think of ways to revisit the unit on teaching controversial issues in history that we have been offering our students in preparation of teaching practice and ultimately of a professional career as school history teachers. It demonstrated its insufficient ability to prepare our students for the inevitable prospect of classroom conflicts as well as of opposition to innovative approaches possibly arising from deep-seated 'older' interests that may be embedded in conservative school ethos and that may be further entrenched by insecure and ill-trained senior teachers. Our lesson learned as both practitioners and researchers of history education is to develop strategies to strengthen and improve how we train our students in confidently navigating school cultures, in working with mentor teachers, and in engaging with issues of race and racism as prevailing emotive and controversial issues underpinning most of the challenging experiences our students have reported. For this purpose, we will consider workable solutions for ensuring that our students and a number of history teachers work alongside us as co-constructors of an improved module on confronting controversial issues in history classrooms in South Africa. Our responsibility is to do so while also continuing to investigate and closely monitor the successes and challenges experienced by our students as they venture into the daily complexities of being a history teacher in a post-conflict, multicultural society.