

THE SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY PROJECT (SAHP) OF THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION – A REFLECTION ON ACHIEVEMENTS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES: 2001–2006

Wonga Tabata

Department of Higher Education and Training
tabata.w@dhet.gov.za

ABSTRACT

This article deals with the contribution of the South African History Project (SAHP) to the development and strengthening of History in the schooling system. One of the key components of the South African History Project was Oral History and Indigenous Knowledge Systems. The national project trained hundreds of school and office-based educators in oral history methodology. It also established ties with the heritage sector. Through oral history, South African historical voices became more diverse and new history materials were developed and introduced in South African public schools. This led to a fresh interpretation of history and an introduction of new materials with a focus on Africa.

Keywords: oral history, inclusive history, values in education, South African History Project, Kader Asmal

UNISA 
university
of south africa

Oral History Journal of South Africa
Volume 3 | Number 1 | 2015
pp. 15–24

Print ISSN 2309-5792
© Unisa Press

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of history is central to the promotion of human values, including that of tolerance. History is one of the memory systems that shapes our values and morality, for it studies, records and diffuses knowledge of human failure and achievement over the millennia (Department of Education, *History and Archaeology Report 2000*).

The South African History Project (SAHP) was established in 2001 by the then and late South African Minister of Education, Kader Asmal. Asmal was not only an anti-apartheid activist but also an intellectual,¹ a teacher and a human rights lawyer by training. When he was appointed Minister of Education in 1999, he came to the Department with the background of human rights education, the critical role of History as a vehicle to teach constitutional values of equality, social justice, nation-building as well as non-racialism, and he wanted to transform the teaching and learning of History. He was therefore critically aware of the role of History in both colonial and apartheid South Africa and the equally important role of History in shaping national consciousness.

The South African History Project started as a Values in Education Initiative of the Department of Education. It was launched by Asmal at the historic Old Fort (now Constitution Hill) on 27 August 2001 with the following objectives²:

1. To encourage the recording of unwritten histories through the oral tradition.
2. To create forums which discuss the nature of history and history teaching in schools and devise strategies on how it can be improved and strengthened.
3. To undertake studies and initiate activities that will strengthen history teaching in the context of the development of the National Curriculum Statement.
4. To establish initiatives that will bring history researchers and scholars together to review, revise and (re)write history textbooks.
5. To initiate activities that will resurrect interest in the study of history by young people.

The project was launched with high levels of optimism as the information leaflet stated, 'We are committed to the development and full maturation of our youth, especially with regard to fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of our past, the origins of our present diversity, and the rich potential among all South Africans.'

OPERATIONALISATION OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY PROJECT

Asmal appointed a Ministerial Committee to oversee and guide the South African History Project. These members were mainly academics from various South African

universities as well as History authors. Yonah Seleti³ of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) was appointed Chairperson of the SAHP Ministerial Committee. Other members were Ibrahim Abdullah, Nomathamsanqa Tisani, Lindi Nqonji, Sifiso Ndlovu, Jeff Guy, Jeff Peires, Luli Callinicos, Amanda Esterhuysen, Albert Grundlingh and Uma Dupelia-Mestrie – 12 members.

The South African History Project was located in the Race and Values Directorate of the Department of Education. This unit monitored and promoted racial integration in the schooling system. One its key objectives was to instil Constitutional values and the Bill of Rights in the school curriculum and thus contribute to building new citizens of a united South Africa.

The SAHP was managed by a Director, June Bam⁴, with five full-time members holding the following portfolios

1. National Coordinator – Curriculum: Gail Weldon.
2. National Coordinator – Learner and Teacher Support Materials: Claire Dyer.
3. National Coordinator – Teacher Development: P. Sangoni.
4. National Coordinator – Oral History and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS): Wonga Tabata.
5. Administrator : Asandiswa Nkohla.
6. Secretary to the Director: a post occupied by different people at different stages of the project.

From its inception in 2002, the project worked closely with officials responsible for the review of the National Curriculum Statement since 1994. It also set its sight on a History National Conference in June 2002 as well as establishing a National History and Heritage Schools' Competition that would lead to the 24 September 2002 Heritage Month. There was also a goal to establish an annual History and Heritage Month for South African schools with the aim of promoting the study of History.⁵

Provincial Departments of Education allocated History Subject Advisors who worked very closely with SAHP National Coordinators.⁶

ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE SAHP

Firstly, it would be important to note that the objectives of the SAHP required sufficient time to be realised, especially in the context of South Africa, where History has been abused by successive colonial and apartheid governments for more than 300 years. The South African history curriculum was never inclusive as it was designed to marginalise and overstate the victories of colonisers and apartheid architects over the disenfranchised black majority.

Despite these realities, the SAHP coordinators hit the ground running immediately after their appointments in 2002. Provincial roadshows were held in all the nine provinces of South Africa. These were covered by both the print and electronic media. In provinces such as the Eastern Cape and Limpopo, the SAHP even received support and endorsement from community and traditional leaders who were particularly keen to see the recording of their unwritten histories and the importance of History in nation building.⁷

Educators often raised the issue of content and teacher development. Initially, the Human and Social Sciences Learning Area under Outcomes Based Education (OBE) combined History and Geography. The textbooks focused more on outcomes than on content. As a result of this step, a content-driven subject such as History was bound to suffer. The SAHP played a pivotal role in ensuring that this anomaly was corrected during the curriculum review process during the tenure of Asmal. The identity of History as a distinct subject with its own content was restored in the Revised National Curriculum Statement for Grades 1–9.⁸

The National History Conference at Diocesan College, Campground, Rondebosch⁹, Cape Town, was one of the milestones of the SAHP. The Conference, which was held on 3–5 October 2002, brought together 300 history teachers, office-based educators, academics, publishers and cultural workers who frankly discussed the challenges and opportunities for History in post-apartheid South Africa, under the theme, *History, Memory and Human Progress*. There were calls for History to become compulsory in South African schools but the DoE argument was that the subject should firstly be transformed, be more inclusive and be resourced in terms of teacher development and Learner and Teacher Support Materials before the subject could be compulsory.

SAHP PARTNERSHIPS TO PROMOTE AFRICAN HISTORY IN SCHOOLS

Proceedings of the conference were published in a book, *History memory and human progress*. Furthermore, new history materials were developed for schools to provide additional materials in order to empower learners and teachers. A partnership between New Africa Books, UNESCO and the Department of Education led to the DoE obtaining a UNESCO licence to reprint the *General History of Africa, Volumes 1–8* (2003), focusing on Grades 10–12. Volume 1 of the abridged version of UNESCO *History of Africa* focuses on the ‘Methodology and prehistory’, covering the history of Africa from trends in historiography to regional histories as well as the role of languages and geography in history. The following publications also came out under the banner of the SAHP:

- Abridged versions of the *General History of Africa, Volumes 2–8*, following volume 1;
- *A Teachers' Guide* to the volumes;
- A supplementary book covering Africa from 1990 to the present written by South African historians;
- A compact disc including historical and iconic artifacts of African history; and
- Charts including maps from the Parliamentary Millennium Project, a history methodology chart and a political map of Africa.

Furthermore, the SAHP partnered with other media houses to produce the following:

- A television education programme produced by Kagiso Media; and
- An oral history video produced on behalf of SAHP by Dompas Productions on the use of oral history in teaching significant sections of South African history such as the pass laws and the Bulhoek incident (1920s) outside Queenstown.

These initiatives were important as they addressed the dearth of African history materials in the South African school system and provided teachers with the History content for the effective teaching of the *Revised National Curriculum Statement*.

Another creative initiative to beef up history content was a partnership with the South African History Online (SAHO) under Omar Badsha in 2003. SAHO provided teachers and learners with relevant up to date historical sources and introduced learners to the use of websites to study History, a significant development for many disadvantaged schools. The website, www.sahistory.org.za, also encouraged History teachers to upload their own materials.¹⁰ This was a contribution to the study of History in the internet, a significant development given South Africa's long tradition of teaching history thorough the textbook and within the four walls of the classroom.

In his speech at the launch of the South African History Online electronic classroom on 16 July 2003, Asmal said:

This History Online classroom provides rich resources of this country's history to teachers and students. It spans from oral history methodology, to exciting content of those who fought for freedom in this country as well as includes information on our rich cultural history We recognise the provisional nature of knowledge and the importance of ongoing research in history and would therefore welcome public participation in the rewriting of South Africa's history.¹¹

The media was used to promote History as a subject of choice in preparing learners for careers in the public service as well as in other professions such as research on social issues, education, journalism, law and heritage studies. The project worked closely with the South African Broadcasting Corporation and the print media.¹²

According to the final report of the SAHP to the Carnegie Corporation (March 2005: 8), ‘the SAHP enjoyed national television coverage for 6 months on a weekly basis through the Education Express TV Programme, aimed at General Education and Training (GET) learners and teachers on the relevance of integration of history, archaeology and values’.

STRENGTHENING ORAL HISTORY METHODOLOGY IN BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE HISTORY IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

The South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET) Oral History Project in the Western Cape equally played an important role in training educators in oral history methodology. Martin Legassick of UWC History Department and Sean Field of UCT History Department¹³ did not only train teachers in oral history methodology but also on how to set up local history projects that can enrich the curriculum. These workshops stimulated alternative ways of delivering the new History curriculum in post-apartheid South Africa and were eye-openers for many History teachers and subject advisors.

Another major initiative of the SAHP was the distribution of the *Road to democracy in South Africa Volume 1*¹⁴ (Zebra Press), edited by the late Ben Magubane, to South African public high schools offering History from Grades 10–12. The first volume of the *Road to Democracy in South Africa (1960–1970)* is largely based on oral history sources and was meant to address the lack of historical materials covering the history of liberation movements such as the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), the Black Consciousness Movement, rural struggles and the broader trade union movement. The distribution of the volume was launched in 2006 by Minister Naledi Pandor in Orlando High School, Soweto, and was then sent to schools.

In Gauteng, North West, Mpumalanga and Limpopo provinces, the SAHP worked with the Wits History Workshop under the leadership of Phillip Bonner as well as with local academic historians based in the universities of Limpopo and Venda in strengthening Oral History in the school curricula. This was done through their facilitations of oral history workshops under SAHP auspices. The same process took place in the Free State and the Eastern Cape where the project gained intellectual support from Rhodes University¹⁵, University of the Free State and University of Fort Hare academics. The Sinomlando History Project under the Theology Department of University of KwaZulu-Natal as well as historians led by Wassermann (UKZN Faculty of History Education) also provided their academic expertise for teachers and subject advisors under the Provincial KZN Department of Education.¹⁶

The Oral History component of the SAHP also received funding from the Royal Netherlands Embassy (RNE) from 2003 to 2006, with the Centre for Education

and Policy Development (CEPD) as the fund-holder. This allowed the project to conduct further training workshops for subject advisors, teachers and the heritage sector and to provide tape recorders to schools and commission research. More than 600 teachers and subject advisors were trained in 9 provinces of South Africa. Seed funding was also provided for a community-based oral history project (imiDange Oral History Project) in the Eastern Cape.¹⁷ This project documented the history of imiDange, one of the first Xhosa groups to meet and fight Dutch colonists in the 18th century Eastern Cape frontier.

The Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC) was one of the major sponsors of the SAHP as it enabled the latter to organise History methodology cluster workshops in December 2002 for 700 General Education and Training (GET) teachers through funding of R5 million (see *Final SAHP Report to Carnegie* March 2005: 7).

ROLE OF MUSEUMS AND HISTORICAL SITES IN ORAL HISTORY METHODOLOGY TRAINING FOR TEACHERS

Museums and historical sites remained critical to the promotion of oral and inclusive history. The SAHP conducted desktop research on South African museums and historical sites in 2002¹⁸. This enabled it to work closely with museums and their staff members in various workshops. David Morris and Sephai Mngqolo of McGregor Museum in Kimberley, Northern Cape, participated in Oral History workshops for teachers as they had expertise in the fields of archaeology and oral history, respectively.¹⁹ The Castle in Cape Town and the Iziko Museum was also the venue of the 25–27 April 2003 Freedom Day²⁰ celebrations. Iziko Museum also worked closely with the SAHP and SADET Oral History Project in the Western Cape as these bodies had a shared objective of using oral history and archaeology in the classroom.

TEXTBOOK REPORT OF THE SAHP (2004)

There was a general complaint on the part of History teachers that most History textbooks in classrooms contained outdated information as they relied mainly on outdated secondary sources. The South African History Project commissioned the Universities of Stellenbosch and Witwatersrand²¹ to conduct a quantitative and qualitative study of history textbooks. The study established that there were few 'new' history textbooks in South Africa and further highlighted the need to encourage South African historians to write history books for the school system.

CHALLENGES FACED BY THE SAHP UNDER THE THEN DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (DOE) – A REFLECTION

The lifespan of the South African History Project was very short as the damage caused by colonialism to South African history teaching and learning could not be eradicated within a 5 year term of a single Minister of Education. Also, the movement of the SAHP from the Values Directorate in 2004 to School Education Directorate (GET Curriculum) was a strategic mistake on the part of the then DoE. The SAHP effectively supported the values in education programmes through its involvement in national identity and heritage programmes, and the promotion of values and democracy in education. The project's focus was narrowed when it fell under GET Schools Directorate after the 2004 elections as it became a solely school curriculum instrument. It was also unsustainable for a project like the South African History Project to rely on donor funding. Limited donor funds could not address all the priorities of the project as envisaged in its objectives.

OPPORTUNITIES AND WAY FORWARD FOR A 'NEW' NATIONAL HISTORY PROJECT OF SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa still needs a project of this nature and it should be located outside the confines of a state bureaucracy and be funded by the national government as a fully fledged entity attached to a national research institution. This would enable it to forge links with regional and international history associations and bodies committed to inter-disciplinary studies that nurture history, humanities and social sciences.

The 2002 International Oral History Conference²², which was held at the University of Natal from 24–27 June 2002, highlighted the relevance of oral history for other disciplines such as medicine and how oral history has played an important role in the reconstruction of the memories of people affected by radical social, political and economic changes. This International Oral History Conference dealt with relevant topics such as migration, memory and trauma, memory and reconciliation, indigenous culture as well as gender.

CONCLUSION

This article outlined the brief history of the South African History Project (SAHP) under the then Department of Education. It is clear that the SAHP contributed to the revival of History in the school system as the subject was facing extinction after 1994. The emphasis on science and mathematics, though justified, nearly eroded the importance of History in building a progressive citizenship that is ready to contribute to the social and economic development of the country. Also, the histories

of many communities in South Africa remain undocumented and unrepresented in the national narrative.

Similar initiatives, such as the *Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) Report* of the Ministry of Higher Education and Training and the current promotion of research in humanities and social sciences can go a long way in promoting the relevance of History in the basic education system. One of the enduring legacies of the South African History Project is the Nkosi Albert Luthuli Oral History Competition of Schools,²³ run by the Department of Basic Education. This oral history school competition project was nurtured by the SAHP and the Values in Education Directorate of the then DoE, and it introduced both teachers and learners to the critical role of Oral History methodology in History as new topics are researched and local and regional histories are developed. Learners are also able to link textbook material with oral sources, thus making History a living subject. This could not have happened without the early training of teachers and subject advisors in oral history methodology by the SAHP.

NOTES

1. Asmal, K. James, W. (eds.). 2002. *Spirit of the nation – Reflections on South Africa's educational ethos*. New Africa Education and Human Sciences Research Council in association with the Department of Education.
2. Department of Education. 2001. Launch of the South African History Project(SAHP) leaflet, Department of Education.
3. Department of Education (March 2005). *Final Report of the South African History Project* submitted to Carnegie Corporation, New York, Grant #7323, p.2.
4. *Ibid.*: 3.
5. *Ibid.*: 4–6.
6. SAHP, Reports of Oral History Workshops in provinces, 2002–2006.
7. Personal recollections by author.
8. Department of Education, 2003, *Revised National Curriculum Statement, Social Sciences*.
9. Department of Education, *Final Report of the SAHP* to the Carnegie Corporation: 6.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Asmal, K. (16 July 2003). Speech by the Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, MP, at the launch of the new learning material for History teaching in South African schools.
12. SAHP, (letter dated 17 July 2002). Correspondence between Chief Executive Officer June Bam and SABC Umhlobo Wenene Station Manager, Lizo Gqomfa.
13. SAHP, 2002. Letter of CEO Ms. June Bam to Western Cape Education Department History Subject Advisor, Valdi van Reneen. Also see SAHP Oral History Methodology Reports compiled by National Coordinator, W.F. Tabata.

14. Personal recollection by the author.
15. Wells, J., Mkhize, N., Greyling, S. and Koetaan, Q. 2006. Oral History for Educators – Eastern Cape Social Sciences (History) Workshop, Mpekweni, Peddie.
16. SAHP (2002–2006). Reports of Oral History Workshops in provinces, compiled by the author.
17. Department of Education (2003–2006), RNE Oral History Reports of the SAHP to the fundholder, Centre for Education and Policy Development (CEPD) and personal recollections by the author.
18. Jennecke, C. (15 July 2002). An Audit of Museums in South Africa. A Report for the South African History Project.
19. SAHP, 2002–2006, Oral History Workshops Reports compiled by author.
20. Department of Education, Final SAHP Report to Carnegie Corporation, March 2005.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Tabata, Report.
23. Department of Education (2008). National Adjudication Report, Nkosi Albert Luthuli National Oral History Competition.