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## RE-ECHOING THE PLACE OF HISTORY IN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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### **Abstract**

*History as a school subject faces the threat of losing its once privileged position in the curriculum of the Ghanaian school system. It is increasingly becoming unpopular among students as the number of those who enroll in the subject at various levels continues to decrease. This paper examines the place of history in the school curriculum against the background of students' waning interest in the subject. Specifically, the paper highlights the importance of history as a school subject. It further outlines some of the job prospects available to students who study the subject. The paper concludes with an examination of some of the curricular and pedagogical hindrances in the teaching and learning of history, and makes a call for curriculum and pedagogical renewal in the subject.*

### **Introduction**

The teaching of history as a discipline has a long tradition in the world. According to the Association of Assistant Masters in Secondary Schools (1965) "the systematic teaching of history in secondary schools has its origin in the work of Thomas Arnold, Headmaster of Rugby from 1828 to 1842" (p.1). The Association further states that the study of history as a subject increased tremendously in the schools and places of higher education during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century.

With respect to Ghana, history teaching dates back to the colonial days. During those days it was taught as a subject in both the missionary schools and the schools established by the British colonial

administration. After independence, it continued to enjoy its place in the school curriculum. History was one of the four subjects which were written during the Middle School Leaving Certificate Examination (M.S.L.C.E). History was also offered in the secondary schools from form one up to form five as an elective subject for arts students who wrote the School Certificate and General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (SC/GCE 'O' Level). At the sixth form, history was one of the subjects offered for the School Certificate and General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (SC/GCE 'A' level) examination. After the introduction of the 1987 educational reform, history was integrated with other subjects and taught as social studies at the basic school level, and offered as an elective in the General Arts programme at the senior secondary school (now senior high school) level.

The teaching of history has enjoyed its place in the curricula of schools because of the "useable past" it bequeaths nations. As Dwarko (2007) puts it, history helps nations to understand the positions they belong and the hopes of the future based on the past. The cultural identity of nations is thus inherent in the history of every nation. It provides the directions for the nation since it tells where the people are coming from. This understanding can be the platform for decisions about political inclinations and for future actions of a more general nature. At the same time, school history has a powerful capacity to deal with issues of national identity which are not necessarily examined in other disciplines in quite such detail. Thus, everything about the nation is informed by history.

Despite its intrinsic importance, emerging developments indicate that history is at the junction of jeopardy. There appears to be a waning of students' interest in the subject. A 1968 Schools Council survey revealed that only 29% of pupils thought that history was useful, and only 40% found it interesting. More recently, Adey and Biddulph (2001) surveyed a sample of over 1,400 Year 9 pupils on their assessment of the usefulness of history. Sixty-eight per cent (68%) of the pupils said that 'overall', they had enjoyed the subject at Key Stage 3, but only 42 % of the pupils surveyed thought it would be useful. A particular concern was that 'only a handful' of the 1,400 pupils could give cogent reasons for studying the subject. Adey and Biddulph (2001, p. 439) explained that the pupils' "understanding of the relative usefulness of history and geography to their future is limited to direct and naïve reference to forms of employment. Their understanding of the wider contribution each can make to their future lives is disappointingly uninformed".

More disconcerting is the gradual and continuing decrease in the number of candidates who enrol in history. Dwarko (2007) compared the number of students who registered for the Senior

Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSSCE) in history, government, religious studies and economics, conducted by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) from 2000 to 2005. He found that whilst all the four subjects registered increased number of candidates during the period, the increase in history was only 70% compared to 230%, 160%, and 140% in government, religious studies and economics respectively. Dwarko, thus, concluded: "In both absolute numbers and percentage increase, history was the least patronized subject among the four 'sister' subjects" (Dwarko, 2007, p. 171). More recent data gathered from two senior high schools in the Cape Coast Metropolis and reported by Cobbold and Adabo (2010), indicate that in one school, the number of students who read government between 2004 and 2007 exceeded those who read history by 191. In the other school, the number of students who read government in the same period exceeded those who read history by 250. This confirms earlier findings that in senior high schools in Ghana history is the least patronized among the arts subjects in recent times (Dwarko, 2007).

The above picture manifests at the university level also. Between 1996 and 2002 the History Department of the University of Cape Coast admitted a total of 1,336 students but "by the time they all reached their respective final years only a total of 555 students remained as history students" (Dwarko, 2007, p. 173). Similarly, the University admitted 390 students to read history in the 2002/2003 academic year but by their final year (2005/2006), only 146 students, representing 37% were still doing history. In other words, history lost 63% of its 2002/2003 intake (Dwarko, 2007).

The reasons for the waning interest of students in history appear to emanate from perceptions which students, parents and the general public have about the nature of the subject and its importance. For example, most people see history as a subject whose understanding is gained through the recall of facts rather than analyzing and critically sifting out information to really understand historical happenings. Holt (1990) affirms this through a conversation he had with history students who indicated that they viewed history as a story which needed to be memorized to pass an examination. In other words, history is a story with a predetermined plot to be memorized but not interpreted. Shemilt (2000) concurs and notes that constructivist research into students' historical thinking suggests that students perceive the learning of history to be the presentation of a uniform picture of the past. This perception often leads students to make poorly informed choices about senior high school subjects, sometimes rejecting history because they are not clear about whether or not history would gain them a good tertiary entrance score or a lucrative job. It is, therefore, worthy to re-

echo the importance of history as a way of strengthening its position in the school curriculum. Efforts to maintain and strengthen the place of history in the school curriculum require such a justification.

This paper, therefore, examines the place of history in the school curriculum against the background of students' waning interest in the subject. Specifically, the paper highlights the importance of history as a school subject. It further outlines some of the job prospects available to students who study the subject. The paper concludes with an examination of some of the curricular and pedagogical hindrances in the teaching and learning of history, and makes a call for curriculum and pedagogical renewal in the subject.

### **The value of History in the school curriculum**

History is a subject that studies past human actions, the motives that prompted those actions and their effects on past and present generations. It is a special type of subject, and its utility must be measured in ways other than those applied to subjects such as science, economics, business management, accounting or information communication technology. The deeper values or uses of history in the school curriculum are discussed under the following headings:

1. promotion of patriotism
2. development of reasoning ability
3. inculcation of moral values
4. development of imaginative ability
5. development of tolerance

### **Promotion of Patriotism**

History develops patriotic tendencies in students (Crookall, 1975). Indeed, when history was taught first as a school subject, patriotism was almost its only objective (Dance, 1970). People educate their young ones about past activities of some people to equip the rising generation with the skill it needs if the life of the society is to be carried on (Crookall, 1975). Such an education, indeed prepares people to die for their nation in one way or the other. It also compels people to contribute their quota in nation building since the lessons in history unearth the enormous contributions of their fore fathers. History, therefore, recounts important stories of people who can serve as role models and as the basis of proper decision making for peoples' lives. This could be achieved through the teaching of

national history with a focus on the nation's heritage – its origins, growth and achievements. Such a study promotes feelings of heritage. When students become aware of the roots of their nation and its culture, they are able to understand the present condition and are therefore willing to maintain and improve upon it.

Patriotism is important because it has good citizenship as its inevitable by-product. The development of desirable attitudes towards their country will make men and women responsible and valuable citizens of their country, particularly when they realize that the present conditions they enjoy are the outcome of what others have done. In history teaching, what we are really interested in is that which can serve as ideals for generations.

### **Development of reasoning ability**

The activities involved in the study of history also develop the reasoning ability of the learner. History provides skills such as thinking critically about documents, cause and effect relationships, and ability to read and summarize material. Critical thinking skills are what learners need in order to work through, articulate and argue in support of their own positions on matters that concern them. Such activities cause the individual to be engaged in both inductive and deductive reasoning which in turn develop the reasoning ability of the person. According to Gosden and Sylvester (1968), such activities help boys and girls to understand themselves better and then develop the ability to understand and respond to other people. The skills of analyzing, comparing, interpreting, evaluating and drawing valid conclusions enable students to function creatively and positively in their jobs, as well as in their labour unions, companies, professional organizations, among others. These educational and life skills are not only important for the individual but are also essential skills if learners are to participate actively and capably as citizens in this democratic era. For without the social awareness and analytical skills which learners can develop through the study of history, they will forever remain susceptible to propaganda and political manipulation. This is because, we have to accept that history teaching is inextricably political in nature and that equipping today's learners to become active and critical citizens is essential to the task of nation-building (Bam & Visser, 2002).

### **Inculcation of moral values**

Another reason for teaching history in schools is the inculcation of moral values in the minds of the young ones. Historical topics have implicit moral issues and to exclude them from the classroom is unacceptable (Association of Assistant Masters in Secondary Schools, 1965). Gosden and Sylvester (1968) posit that “when the subject first began to appear on the curricula of schools in the nineteenth century, it was widely regarded as a vehicle for the transmission of moral ideas” (p.2). It was to inspire a sense of moral indignation against the crimes of political leaders such as Napoleon or Charles I. Indeed, it could be argued that apart from the study of literature and religion, history lends itself more than any other subject to the inculcation of moral values in the students’ minds. As Johnson (1940) posits, “History was regarded as of great value in cultivating judgment and in stimulating right conduct” (p.30).

It must be noted, however, that in history moral values are neither taught like the facts of a science subject nor preached in the form of a sermon. Rather, in history lessons, the past can be seen as a kind of a stage on which the students see all kinds of men and women. Therefore, their deeds, misdeeds, their courage, wisdom, folly, their achievements both good and bad, tend to influence the students’ sense of moral values (Crookall, 1975). This means that history describes the vices, unmasks the false virtues and exposes the errors done by men and women (Johnson, 1940). In this way, history teaching provides students with standards of reference against which they can measure the values and achievements of their own age.

### **Development of imaginative abilities**

In addition, as an academic discipline, history also quickens the imaginative abilities of the students. Crookall (1975) indicates that history offers the material, which is able to stir the imagination of people more than any other subject. He defines imagination as that power in the human being which enables him or her to be aware of things and people not present in his or her sense and to take part in experiences which are not his or hers (Crookall, 1975). The fact is, history is the study of past events and both the external and internal aspects of past human actions are generally not observable. Johnson (1940) opines, “Human observation, memory and inferences are fallible. Even our own experiences of yesterday may emerge faded and distorted from the accounts which we strive to give of them today” (p.7). Chaffer and Taylor (1975) also admit that in all history activities, it is the process

of sifting out evidence from the dust heap of the past in order to understand man's achievement. This therefore calls for imagination, mature judgment, careful balancing of facts and meticulous attention to detail to be able to understand and appreciate them (Pamela, 1974). To understand history properly, "a quality of sympathetic imagination is needed" (Jamieson 1971, p.5). Gosden and Sylvester (1968) also comment on the use of imagination in the study of history:

A considerable part of the understanding of history depends on the imaginative reconstruction of another person's points of view and in their study of history children should be constantly asked to make this act of the imagination, to capture another person's feelings, to recognize his thoughts and to interpret his motives (p.4).

Indeed, such an activity inevitably propels the imagination of the individual. It thus makes the individual more intelligent and creative in analysing issues of importance. Imagination is also a vital source of scientific invention and artistic creation in that the picture of what has to be invented or created has its cradle in the mind. As a nation we need men and women whose imaginative faculties are developed if we seek breakthrough in all aspects of development.

### **Development of tolerance**

Finally, history develops in those who study it a spirit of tolerance. History is the subject that promotes sympathies and genuine tolerance (Crookall, 1975). The creation of a tolerant outlook and the enlargement of human sympathies are important for peaceful human living. On the other hand, "Lack of sympathy leading to intolerance between one group and another, between one nation and another, has always been one of the major causes of war and conflict" (Crookall, 1975, p. 20). However, historical reflections give us reasons to develop a proper view of the world and the people in it. It also allows us to appreciate the views of others no matter how different they may be to ours.

The foregoing discussion indicates that History performs important functions in the school curriculum, which has a rapid turn around in terms of nation building.



## **Job prospects of history**

One of the reasons for the decreasing student interest in history is the perception that the subject offers very little opportunities for employment, especially when compared to the so-called utilitarian, job-oriented, practical subjects or disciplines such as business management, accounting, agriculture and engineering, among others. Dwarko (2007) indicates that some parents hold such a perception to the extent that they threaten to stop sponsoring their children's education if they chose history from the senior high school and pursued it in the university. And for many people, the only job destination of the history graduate is the classroom. Such people's understanding of the wider contribution of history to their future lives is disappointingly uninformed.

We argue, in agreement with Dwarko (2007, p. 173), that "history indeed can and does prepare students for the job market". The list of job opportunities for the history graduate is inexhaustible. It includes: teaching and researching in history in public and private institutions; working as human relations officials in local and international organizations; managing information and cultural resources in archives, libraries, museums, national cultural centres and tourist centres; and working as research officers in law firms. The history graduate can also work, like any other graduate, in the civil service, foreign services and security services.

We further argue that in the current job market where emphasis is placed on workplace or on-the-job training, all employees, irrespective of the disciplines they pursued in school, are given some induction and training. This occupational socialization even widens the job market for the history graduate, making him/her fit and work effectively in any establishment.

## **A call for curriculum and pedagogical renewal**

One factor often cited as a cause for the lack of interest in the study of history in Ghanaian schools is the nature of the curriculum. The content of the curriculum, that is, the topics selected for study are not seen as attractive when measured against modern demands. In the universities there is still a greater emphasis on foreign rather than African and Ghanaian history. Yet, educational authorities in Ghana are aware of the pressing need to relate our curricula, at all levels of education, to our national life and culture and our man-power needs. Conferences on curriculum development and the utterances of renowned educators and government officials echo this one point. The curriculum is also criticized as not being technology driven. A history curriculum that is technology

driven refers to the type whose contents are principally centered on issues such as how past technological exploits had led to the birth of modern technology, the growth and decline of past economies, how the internet communication technology came into existence, among others. The call, therefore, is for a history curriculum that emphasizes the African and Ghanaian past - the activities of our statesmen and women, chiefs, heroes, warriors and educators, rather than those of the Europeans, and that equally brings on board technology-related issues. Furthermore, it is important to make history an integral part of the citizenship education subject in the upper primary, and a core subject at the junior and senior high school levels to foster in students a sense of its significance. It is our contention that if the current curriculum is reviewed to reflect these issues, it would give history a face-lift and make it more attractive to students.

The teaching and learning of history has always been bedeviled by a lot of challenges such as lack of teaching and learning resources. Cobbold and Adabo's (2010) recent assessment of resources and methods for teaching and learning history in senior high schools in the Central Region of Ghana found the lack and inadequate use of instructional resources as a critical problem. The corollary is that teachers mostly use inappropriate methods such as lecture and reading round the class to transmit information without engaging the students in critical analysis of historical facts. These pedagogical practices limit students' participation in class and their understanding of what is taught, making history a boring and abstract subject and, therefore, uninteresting for students. In order to curb this, the Ghana Education Service (GES) must provide schools with modern technological equipment such as video tapes, projectors, and computers for use as teaching and learning materials. The GES must again see to it that teachers are trained on how to use these teaching resources effectively, and monitored to ensure that they actually making good use of the instructional resources in the school. Teachers must also take students on field trips to enable them interact with historical resources outside the school. Preston (1969) has argued that by employing such strategy, the teaching of history "need no longer be dry chalk and talk" but lively and active, freeing students from 'the chains of the classroom and endless note-taking'. This way, students would find history an interesting and useful subject to study.

It is important, in signaling to students the significance of history and uplifting its image in the school curriculum, for history teachers to have a new orientation to the teaching of the subject. Firstly, history teachers need to have an understanding of history as a discipline, its critical areas of

controversy, and the various explanatory paradigms with which historians work. Perhaps the best way to integrate the foundational, pedagogical, and historiographical skills needed for educationally effective and efficient history teaching would be to follow Dewey's principles – but placing his principles in relation to current pedagogical dilemmas pertaining to constructivism in its various versions – to develop an historical inquiry model that would engage the students in a substantive manner (Rosa & Martin, 2002).

Secondly, history teachers should think through clearly the purposes of school history, and have a sound grasp of the full breadth of benefits that young people can derive from the study of the past. After a student teacher had taught a lesson about the battle of Akatamanso during an internship programme, an assessor wrote in his evaluation of the lesson (honestly but worryingly), 'I have no idea why you are teaching this.' If the grown-ups are not clear about why we teach history, what hope is there that students will make sense of it? The case for history in schools needs to be based on more than a concern for 'market share' of examination entries and curriculum time. If history is to reflect the changing world and be motivating to students, teachers must find ways to convince them of its relevance and usefulness in their lives outside the classroom, and after they leave school. Teachers need a clear and well-articulated vision of the full range of ways in which the study of the past can be rendered significant to the needs of young people.

An important consideration in persuading students that the study of the past is of relevance to their lives is to clarify the relationship between historical knowledge and the present. Aldrich's definition of history suggests such clarification: "History is about human activity with particular reference to the whole dimension of time - past, present and future" (Aldrich, 1997, p. 3). It is important to be explicit about the idea of historical perspectives as one of the ways of understanding how things are today, and how they might be in the future. Is there any present-day problem or question where it might not be possible to gain further insight by considering what has gone before? As Husbands (1996, p. 34) illustrates,

Learning about the concept of kingship (or whatever) frequently involves two sets of simultaneous learning: learning about power and its distribution in past societies, and learning about power and its distribution in modern society. The former cannot be given real meaning until pupils have some more contemporary knowledge

against which to calibrate their historical understandings.

If we therefore want politically literate citizens, they will need to integrate their political understandings of the past with present-day political issues and problems. Without this, even events that are important such as the 1948 riot can come across to students as something that happened a long time ago, that has nothing much to do with their lives. Like the assessor referred to earlier, students would not see the point in studying the battle of Akatamanso, while the world is exploding with current and more relevant models of modern warfare.

Finally, the issue of unqualified teachers manning history in some secondary schools in Ghana should be tackled. Government should of necessity ensure that only those who qualify to teach history are allowed to teach the subject. A qualified history teacher in this sense is the one who has studied and passed history as a major or a minor subject at a bachelor's degree level in an accredited tertiary institution, and holds a professional teaching qualification. The Government must also ensure that history teachers upgrade themselves within specified periods. This would go a long way to revive the teaching and learning of history because the success of every student in the study of any subject largely depends on how competently and knowledgeably the teacher handles the subject.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear from what has been discussed so far that in spite of the unfortunate circumstances that have characterised history as a school subject, it has not outlived its importance as an academic subject worthy of contributing to knowledge and to personal and societal development. History has deeper values and utility and still holds promise for its graduates in the world of work. We have also attempted to indicate some of the reasons for the waning students' interest in the subject, and argued that a review of the curriculum and a new orientation to teachers' pedagogical practices would bring revival in history teaching and learning in Ghanaian schools. We challenge all who 'love' history and would want it survive the next century to bring all hands on deck.

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