

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Pre-Service Social sciences Teachers' Perspectives of their Teacher Professional Identity in a South African University within the Context of Curriculum Integration

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perspectives of pre-service teachers regarding their identity as social sciences teachers. The aim is to summarise their subject and topic preferences within the social sciences curriculum and to propose ways in which social sciences can be strengthened as an integrated curriculum. This study is based on the questionnaire responses of twenty-three final year Intermediate Phase (Grade 4-6) and Senior Phase (Grade 7-9) pre-service social sciences teachers at a South African university. Forty-three percent of the participants indicated that they do not prefer teaching either History or Geography. A limited response to the questionnaire from pre-service teachers resulted in a small sample size which may not be representative of other pre-service social sciences teachers. The research presented can inform social sciences teacher training programmes about how pre-service teachers view themselves and how they feel about social sciences as an integrated school subject.

Keywords: social sciences education; pre-service teachers; teacher identity; history; geography

Introduction

The paper emerges in the South African context, with an attempt to determine the orientations of pre-service teachers regarding their identity as social sciences teachers. Key to this is the extent to which teacher identity tends to inform one's orientation to favour either Geography or History instead of appreciating the wholeness nature of social sciences. This is in line with previous recommendations by Tabe, (2021) and Tabe *et al.* (2021) of the need to separate History and Geography to be standalone subjects. Early literature highlights the importance of teacher identity in the education sector (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Beijgaard *et al.*, 2004; Pillen *et al.*, 2013). Bullough (1997); and Fomunyan (2016) indicated that teacher identity is of vital concern to teacher education because it is the basis of meaning-making and decision-making. Identity-based research is significant because it offers an ontological approach to learning, which examines how learning changes who we are (Avraamidou, 2014). According to Fomunyan (2016) and Rodrigues and Mogarro (2019), teacher identity development is a fluid and changeable social process. More specifically, social sciences teachers' identity is shaped by factors that include their educational background, individual experiences, beliefs, and values (Bezanilla *et al.*, 2019). Pre-service teachers' development will undergo a shift in identity as they move through their programmes (at university) and because of their interactions within schools and the broader communities during teaching practice school visitations (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009).

It is therefore important that researchers start to look at how pre-service teachers view themselves and how they are recognised by others (Avraamidou, 2014). However, defining identity has always been problematic, and an understanding of identity cannot be considered finite or fixed (Tsybulsky and Muchnik-Rozanov, 2019). According

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to Rushton and Reiss (2021), understanding the role of identity in shaping the experiences of pre-service teachers is important and timely given the challenging global context of the teaching environment. This is coupled with other forms of challenging circumstances like the use of innovative pedagogy for specific subject content during work-integrated learning by pre-service teachers (Ndebele *et al.*, 2023). It is only in the past decade that researchers have adopted a multidimensional sociocultural lens to study teacher development through the construct of teacher identity (Avraamidou, 2014). From the above considerations, authors have determined that it is particularly important to investigate the identity of social sciences teachers in the South African context because teachers are expected to teach History and Geography in the social sciences subject from Grades 4 to 9. Even though History and Geography are two distinct disciplines (referred to in this paper as sub-areas), it is often expected from the same teacher to teach both subjects. Gaining an understanding of how pre-service social sciences teachers view themselves and how they feel about social sciences as an integrated school subject sheds light on their identity as social sciences teachers and the implications it could have for their practice as social sciences teachers.

Keiler (2018) indicated that the construct of identity is important within the field of teacher education because it offers a comprehensive construct for studying teacher learning and development, which goes beyond knowledge and skills. Teacher professional identity is defined as the beliefs, values, and commitments an individual hold toward being a teacher (as distinct from another professional) and being a particular type of teacher, e.g., a social sciences teacher, a rural teacher, or a novice teacher (Hsieh, 2010). Three approaches to professional identity can be summarised from literature with specific lenses as follows: The first approach examines the importance of personal factors in the construction of professional identity. Studies in this approach centre on either the connection between elements of personal identity and professional identity (Heled and Davidovitch, 2021; Vavrus, 2009), the connection between emotions and the construction of identity (Reio 2005; O'Connor 2008; Shapiro 2010), or the importance of self-image in the construction of teacher professional identity (Chong and Low, 2009; Settlage *et al.*, 2009; Sutherland *et al.*, 2010). In the second approach, studies emphasise the role of teacher education in promoting and establishing aspects of professional identity (Van Huizen *et al.*, 2005; Ronfeldt and Grossman, 2008). A third set of studies examines the connection between aspects of environment and professional identity. This third set can be subdivided into studies that focus on the importance of site and learning contexts in professional identity development (Mahlios, 2002; Cohen and Garcia, 2008; Hung, 2008) and those that discuss identity in socio-political contexts. Fru and Wassermann (2020) submit that the tension between having a fixed identity ascribed by others (which often represents only one portion of an individual's often complex achieved identity) and a more dynamic achieved identity can have a significant impact on overall identity formation.

The paper draws heavily from Vygotsky's theory of socio-cultural development. It also rests on decolonial theory to a lesser extent with an endeavour to theorise the findings. To begin with, Vygotsky's theory of socio-cultural development shows that there is a significant correlation between cognitive development and the students' environments, cultural backgrounds, and social sources of thinking (Helou and Newsome, 2018). It emphasises that learning is a social process and emphasises how cultural beliefs, interactions, and attitudes play important roles in learning (Vygotsky, 1978). These sentiments are underscored by Mpisi and Alexander, (2022) who foreground the developmental benefits of including a culturally responsive approach to teaching and learning. This paper will be underpinned by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory by understanding that social sciences pre-service teachers' backgrounds are critical for understanding their perceptions and negotiations of their identity since teaching and learning do not take place in isolation (Lim, 2002). Using Vygotsky's cultural-historical activity theory as a framework, the teachers' historical and psychological processes can be harmonised to enhance our appreciation of how they negotiate their professional identity as social sciences teachers in the context of curriculum integration (Deborah and Bodrova, 2001). As for the decolonial theory, this is the extent to which knowledge production is called into question, and the attempt is to explore unconventional ways of writing, seeing, being, and becoming (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Hence, decolonial theory is a blueprint with which to make sense of the study's findings and which informs their teacher identity concerning social sciences (Maluleka, 2021). From these considerations, Ndlovu-Gatsheni, (2018) contends that decolonial theory raises sharp debates about the nature of social sciences which encapsulate the following: First, what is the philosophical orientation of social sciences? Second, what is taught in social sciences? Taken together, this is what makes the theory worthy of consideration for this study.

It is within the above context that Drake and Reid (2018) suggest that an integrated curriculum has varied definitions and provides a continuum for understanding diverse ways of constructing it. This continuum includes different layers of fusion, a multidisciplinary curriculum, an interdisciplinary curriculum, and a transdisciplinary

curriculum. Integrated curricula refer to curriculum approaches and pedagogic practices that are not subject-centric, such as History, Geography, Mathematics, English, and others. These are rather theme-centric where different disciplines work in a complementary manner (Rijal, 2021). This is because our real-life situations are complex, and people need more than one disciplinary collaboration to solve those challenging situations. Therefore, an integrated curriculum means a collaboration amongst disciplines so that our education can be used to address our real-life challenges in a holistic rather than compartmentalised manner. This is the motivation of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) of South Africa with the adoption of the social sciences Curriculum for the Intermediate and Senior Phase comprising History and Geography.

Methodology

The research was conducted at a higher education institution in South Africa. The university is one of two established in the post-apartheid era. One of the programmes in the School of Education is to train pre-service teachers specialising in social sciences. Social sciences subjects are compulsory within the South African curriculum (Grades 4 to 9). Thereafter learners have the choice to continue with Geography and/or History during the Further Education and Training Phase (Grades 10 to 12). According to the social sciences Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement that describes what social sciences is, “Both History and Geography should be taught and assessed during every term of the school year. Although the two disciplines are kept separate, this curriculum is designed to complement the knowledge (content, skills, and concepts) outlined in each.” (South Africa, Department of Basic Education CAPS, 2011: 8). Within the curriculum, both Geography and History have their own set of aims to achieve and skills to develop. Some connections are evident, for example, “Finding a variety of kinds of information about the past” (History) and “Find out about places, people, events, and issues using different sources, e.g. books, people, photographs, the Internet” (Geography) (South Africa, Department of Basic Education CAPS, 2011).

This paper focuses on the subjective viewpoints of preservice social sciences teachers based on their first-hand experiences (at university and during teaching practice at schools). By sharing their perspectives, the light was shed on aspects such as the notion of being, subject teaching (History or Geography) preference, topic preference, and participants' view on social sciences as an integrated subject within the South African curriculum. To establish how pre-service teachers view themselves and to understand their teaching preferences, calls for a constructivist research paradigm. The constructivist philosophical paradigm asserts that people construct their knowledge of the world through experience and reflection (Adom *et al.*, 2016; Honebein, 1996). This means that an individual's perceptions of the world may or may not change because of new experiences. The participants in this study have been subjected to a variety of experiences to varying degrees. These experiences may or may not influence the way they view social sciences as a subject as well as their identity as social sciences teachers. A qualitative research approach is ideal for exploring subjective perspectives because groupings, clusters, or themes are used rather than quantification and statistical generalisations and conclusions. Following a qualitative research approach provides an opportunity to illuminate individual perspectives (often based on personal experiences) and personal preferences (in the case of teaching a sub-area in social sciences).

The purposive convenient sampling technique was used to gather research data from the participants. At the time of data collection, the participants were pre-service teachers who were in the process of concluding the fourth year of their B.Ed. degree at a South African university. One hundred and twenty fourth-year students who specialise in social sciences teaching were approached as research participants. Both Intermediate Phase (Grades 4-6) and Senior Phase (Grades 7-9) students could have been potential participants. Only final-year B.Ed. pre-service teachers were included because they have had multiple opportunities to visit schools, they have had significant work-integrated learning experiences and it is assumed that they have had more time to construct and reflect on their teacher identity compared to first-, second- or third-year education students. In total, 23 pre-service teachers responded to the invitation to complete the questionnaire. The responses of all 23 participants were utilised to form the basis of the results and findings of the research paper. The final-year pre-service social sciences teachers were asked to complete an online Google Form questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of eight (8) questions open-ended questions such as “What makes you as a social sciences teacher unique?” and “Explain why the other subject (History/Geography) is not your teaching preference”. Participants were able to complete the questionnaire at any given time. Since the pre-service teachers are studying at a university, ethical clearance was sought from the university's ethics committee. Participation was voluntary and did not form part of a formal assessment or academic programme. The pre-teacher's perspectives were treated as anonymous and confidential.

Findings and Discussion

The responses to the questions were analysed qualitatively and grouped into three main themes, namely (1) subject preference, (2) topic preference, and (3) recommendations by pre-service teachers. Before the three themes are discussed, the paper provides insight into the demographics of the participants and how participants view themselves as social sciences teachers. The 23 participants are future social sciences teachers. Out of the 23 participants, 12 participants will potentially teach social sciences to Grade 7-9 learners (Senior Phase) and 11 participants will potentially teach Grade 4-6 learners (Intermediate Phase). Fourteen (14) of the participants identified as being female, eight (8) as male and one (1) participant preferred not to say (Figure 1). The sample is an accurate representation of the gender ratio in the Faculty of Education and education programmes at large (being dominated by females).

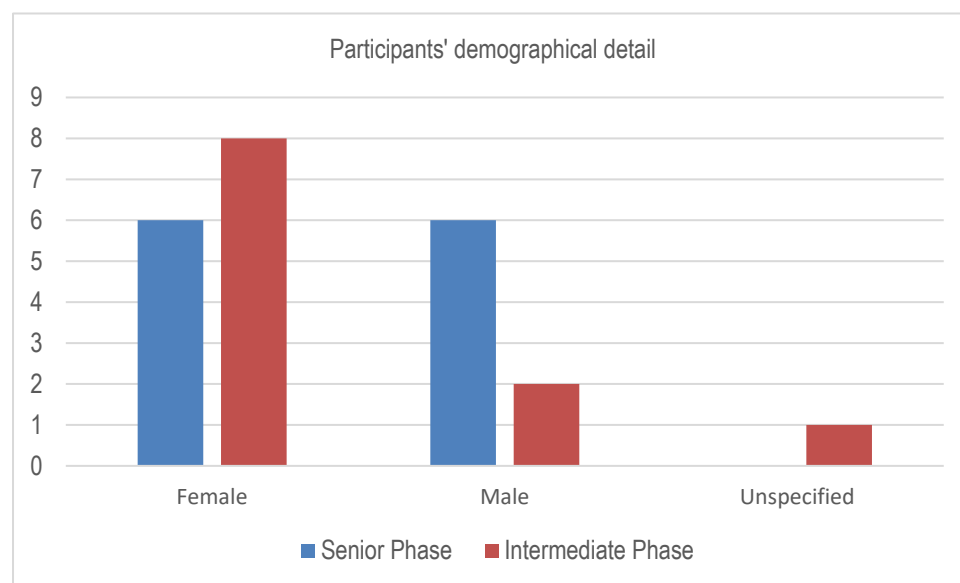


Figure 1: Gender and teaching phase

Participants were also asked to reflect on what they believe makes them unique as social sciences teachers. The reflection is useful because it reveals how they view themselves as teachers of Geography and History and what their approaches are to teaching the subject of social sciences. Most participants argued that it is required of a social sciences teacher to bring understanding about the world into the classroom. This understanding is often supported by the teacher's own experiences, socialisation, curiosity, engagements, and experiential learning opportunities. Social sciences teaching, according to the participants, is about conveying information about what is in our surroundings and introducing real-life examples so that the content is more understandable and relatable to learners. This is evident from the excerpts below:

"I believe that I have a strong ability to relate to the current world we live in and I get to observe things in a very different way that other students do."

"As a social science teacher, you should be interested in socialising with people and the environment so that you can understand both factors."

"... my ability to bring the world into the classroom."

"i open the world for them."

"they [social science teachers] learn, observe and teach about their surroundings, especially our everyday lives."

"My personal experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, shape my teaching approach."

"I get to link the real world with the information I teach."

"Bringing the lesson alive through lifelong learning experiences."

"I teach learners intending to become better citizens of South Africa; we are living in a diverse society, and one requires knowledge of the world around us."

Some participants highlighted their personal attributes such as their creativity, personality, and creativity as being important. Being different and sensitive as a social sciences teacher means that the teacher conveys the content (which is often focused on socio-cultural aspects) more appropriately. Understanding the viewpoints of the 'other' becomes increasingly important.

"This makes me unique because I use all the resources and even create my own, and I continuously encourage learners to do the same."

"Social sciences educators have to be culturally sensitive and respectful of students' different views and opinions."

"...that I bring my personality to the classroom."

According to the literature, social sciences teachers need to understand their perceptions of identity since it does not take place in isolation from the socio-context (Lim, 2002). Social sciences teachers need to negotiate their professional identity in the context of curriculum integration (Deborah and Bodrova, 2001).

Theme 1: Subject preference

Among the twenty-three (23) pre-service teachers, ten (10) individuals abstained from expressing a specific teaching preference, seven (7) expressed a preference for History, and six (6) indicated a preference for teaching Geography. The preferences of the social sciences students can be observed below in Figure 2:

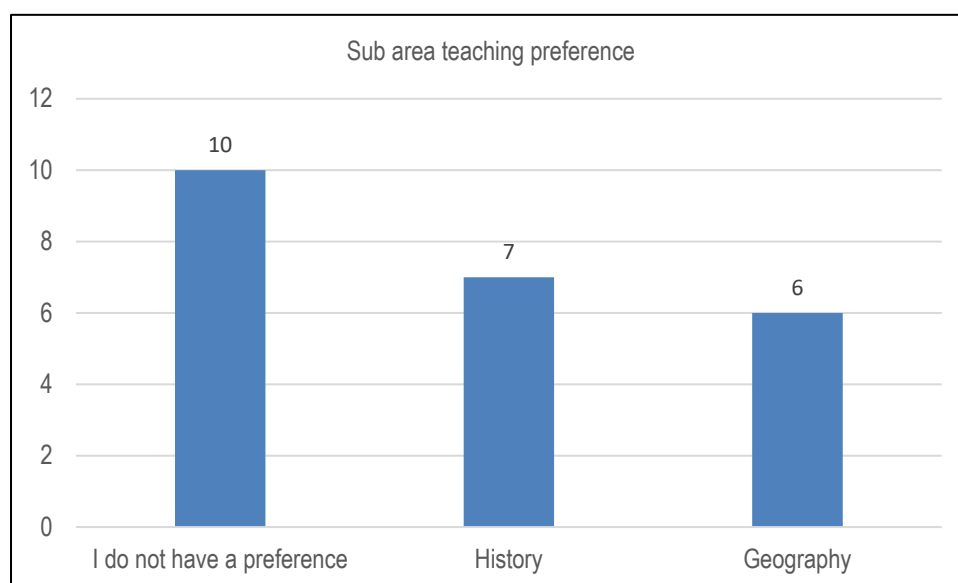


Figure 2: Participants' teaching preferences

As indicated by Bezanilla *et al.* (2019), the identity of social sciences teachers is shaped by their educational background. Therefore, this might be one of the reasons for the difference in the participants' responses. The responses from the participants who did not prefer either History or Geography ranged from their enjoyment of teaching both subjects to the importance of both subjects. Rather than viewing them as mutually exclusive, they recognise that the two sub-areas (Geography and History) can complement each other. These participants also believe that learning does not take place in isolation but that the knowledge gained from one subject can and should be used to supplement the learning of the other. These participants voiced their opinion by stating the following:

"I don't have a preference because I believe that as a social sciences teacher, I have to make sure learners know that both are cooperatively intertwined with each other; for example, I can easily use examples I used in History to incorporate in my Geography lessons. it goes hand in hand. I want learners to know that both subjects are great, and they can learn a lot from both if done by one teacher effectively."

"I teach learners intending to become better citizens of South Africa. We are living in a diverse society, and one requires knowledge of the world around us. We therefore need both History and Geography knowledge: it goes hand in hand. Remember that teaching doesn't occur in isolation; we need knowledge of the one subject to link it with the other."

"The reason I don't have a preference is because History and Geography work hand in hand. History is very interesting to learn about things that happened in the past, and in Geography, we work with things that we can see or that are part of our everyday knowledge."

It is clear from the explanations of the participants that both History and Geography do have some integration concepts (Holt-Jensen, 2018). Some of the concepts that Holt-Jensen (2018) referred to are concepts such as globalization and the social sense of place which are relevant to the teaching of Geography as well as History. The intertwining of these concepts can also foster or relate to the social process that is important in both subjects, and teachers can use these concepts to foster the social learning culture which resonates with the Vygotsky theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Helou and Newsome, 2018). Furthermore, the South African curriculum (Department of Basic Education, 2011) aims to equip learners to acquire and apply knowledge and skills that are meaningful to their own lives, to promote knowledge in local contexts, and to ensure meaningful participation in society. The participants' understanding of this important role of both subjects is important because learners can become better citizens. Using both subjects to instil the necessary skills to enable learners to understand societal factors, and contribute to society positively, will also enhance their independent skills. It is therefore important that social sciences teachers adopt a sense of social identity to understand the learning context with the socio-context (Mahlios, 2002; Cohen and Garcia, 2008; Hung, 2008).

An interesting finding was that some participants indicated that they were not permitted to have a teaching preference. It was their contention that having a preference can potentially influence the quality of teaching and learning that takes place which may be to the detriment of the subject and the learners. By preferring one sub-area (Geography or History) above the other might mean that the other sub-area is being neglected. According to these participants, it is a social sciences teacher's responsibility to teach both (with all their different topics) with the same interest and passion and not favour one. The two quotes below showcase these participants' thinking.

"I do not have a preference because I feel like it will be unfair to the learners. Having a preference means that I would have to teach one content better than the other which is unfair as social sciences needs a teacher to teach both contents better for the benefit of the learners."

"I have learned that you can not only favour one component because teaching both components is critical."

The seven participants who indicated that History is the sub-area they prefer to teach indicated that, apart from the fact that they find the History content more enjoyable to teach, teaching resources are readily available. Having access to teaching resources and evidence (including ethnography) means that their teaching is being supported by information and facts about what happened in the past. Three participants' viewpoints are reflected below:

"As a social Science teacher, I prefer more History because it is based on case studies and evidence."

"I find it easier to teach and there are a lot of accessible resources that I can use to teach its content."

"It is based on true stories and shows us where we come from and guides us on a way to go. It prepares us for our future."

The authors contend that it might be that these participants feel more confident teaching content that has been reported on as being factually correct and concrete rather than teaching Geography content, which is subject to change and, in some cases, unpredictable (based on societal and environmental processes).

The remaining six participants indicated that they prefer teaching Geography. Participants describe Geography as a sub-area centred around real-world applications and phenomena around them:

"It is about things that happen around us and easy to teach learners."

"It's more practical which accommodates me as I'm a practical learning person."

"Related to everyday life, environment, etc."

Based on the abovementioned findings, it is evident that participants view themselves as social beings in a physical world. In a study by Wepener (2022), it was found that individuals could easily relate to geographical processes and phenomena, especially those happening in proximity. The participants recognise that their everyday experiences are invaluable and contribute to their teaching approach, teacher identity, and teaching preferences. Their preference for teaching one sub-area rather than the other is driven by internal factors (e.g., interest and enjoyment) as well as external factors (e.g. availability of teaching resources and the impact on learners' learning). In their model of the relationships between lived experiences and geographical consciousness, Wepener and Pretorius (2023) propose that factors such as interest and curiosity enable individuals to understand Geography as a subject better. The authors argue that the enablers and barriers proposed by Wepener and Pretorius (2023) can also potentially influence social sciences teachers' teaching preferences.

Theme 2: Topic Preference

The second theme that is explored is that of the social sciences topic preference of the participants. Data for this theme emerged from the following four questions that were asked of the pre-service teachers as follows: please list your two favourite topics from the social sciences curriculum and give reasons why these topics are your favourite; and please list your two least favourite topics from the social sciences curriculum and give reasons why these topics are your least favourite. the data for question one covers 20 topics from history and 17 from geography. while the indication here is that more of the participants show a preference for topics in history, the very small margin is also an indication that there is not a distinct penchant for one over the other. some of the topics that were most cited include turning points in history (4 times); transportation through time (4 times); map skills (3 times). in terms of the reasons for these topic preferences, the relevance and significance of the topic to the lives of the participants and their immediate contexts seem to be the reason why the majority of them preferred certain topics and probably rejected others. The following excerpts from the data support this claim:

"Because they are all about things that are related to our life today as we are using transport to move from one place to another, also every day we use money for trading."

"They teach the History of our country."

"They are relevant in the teaching and learners and learners can interact more".

"It is very interesting, and the learners show interest."

"These are my favourite topics because I can use different sources to teach these topics, sources that learners can relate to."

On the question of the least favourite topics, interestingly, seven participants indicated that they do not have a least preferred topic. This number represents a third of the participants in the study and therefore has strong implications for our analysis. Our initial interpretation here is that the fact that teachers prefer certain topics does not necessarily mean they do not like others. They might just be more comfortable with some that they find relevant and significant. The authors argue that the topics participants prefer to teach and the reasons for their preferences may be the same as those outlined in Theme 1.

In other responses, map work and Mapungubwe were mentioned twice each as the least favourites. Except for map work that teachers find "extremely complex" and difficult to grasp, the majority of the responses here also linked to the issue of the relevance of these topics. The excerpt below supports this view:

"They teach History that does not have an impact on the learning of South African history. South African history topics should've replaced them".

Summarily, the topic preferences of the participants were quite diverse and varied and did not demonstrate any strong pattern or trends. This leaves one to think that the teachers' identities about the preference of topics within the social sciences cluster are more informed by the personal, subjective, and probably prior experiences of History and Geography.

Theme 3: Recommendations by pre-service teachers

Central to this theme lies the recommendations by the pre-service teachers concerning teacher identity in the context of curriculum integration in South Africa. The recommendations can be conceptualised into three findings which incorporate the following: decolonising History and disintegrating social sciences. From the short review data, participants stressed the issue of decolonising History. To be precise, most stressed about teaching African History than focusing on slavery. This view also finds further evidence as some participants recommended that while they appreciate Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi in Grade 4, this was nevertheless at the exclusion of other leaders who played a crucial role in their respective communities. This is true for Maluleka (2021) who calls into question the nature of the school History curriculum the episteme of which relates so much more to the West than it does to South Africa. These are similar concerns that let Fru (2015) determine that history education in different contexts of Africa is at a crossroads. At another level, participants also stressed identifying unheard voices in the teaching of History since school History continues to exclude other voices. This finding aligns with the literature search which unmasks silences in the teaching of school History (Depelchin, 2005; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The silences in African history rest on subsuming African history into European history; thus, Shaka KaSenzangakhona becomes African Napoleon. Nonetheless, the participant did not explicitly mention those unheard voices.

From the above considerations, the paper posits the need for decolonising school history. Our findings on disintegrating social sciences at least hint at the fact that few participants felt that History and Geography should stand on their own in the Intermediate and Senior phases. Essentially, the perspectives of these participants contradict the stance of Drake and Reid (2018) who advocate for an integrated curriculum. Furthermore, one claimed that an independent Geography should incorporate recent developments such as COVID-19 with an attempt to determine the effects of COVID-19 developmentally, and above all, economically. On the other hand, one posited that History should be framed from different values than those articulated in the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). It should be noted, however, that this was not engaged with in great depth in the literature search, and thus underlines the importance of the finding. Beyond values, one posited that History should incorporate innovative ways of teaching, such as field trips.

Conclusion

Many participants indicated they do not have a sub-area teaching preference. This reasoning was largely driven by the fact that they believe that a social sciences teacher should not favour a specific sub-area because it can negatively impact the integrity of social sciences as a subject and the quality of learning. The availability of evidence-based resources to support their teaching and their interest in the sub-area were the main reasons why some participants prefer teaching History. Those drawn to Geography enjoy the fact that the sub-area lends itself to being grounded in real-world applications and everyday occurrences. Even though some challenges of integration were mentioned and despite some participants recommending that History and Geography should be standalone subjects, there is no strong evidence from the responses that the integration of History and Geography is a serious concern for pre-service social sciences teachers. The findings are based on South Africa which follows a unique approach to social sciences in the school context. The authors recognise that a sample size of 23 participants may not be sufficient to draw generalizable conclusions. A larger and more diverse sample would have strengthened the study's external validity. The reasons why some participants are recommending the separation of History and Geography are not thoroughly explored owing to short responses and limited explanations. Interestingly, some participants abstained from making recommendations when asked "If you could make changes to the social sciences curriculum, what would you change and why?" The question arises as to what the absence of recommendations means. The authors confirm the need for further research on such issues since others did not fully offer their orientations relating to teacher identity concerning curriculum integration in South Africa.

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