

Teaching and learning with sensitive histories

Nelson Mandela's life story and the history of apartheid involve sensitive themes, issues and events. These include oppression, racism on a nationally institutionalised scale, brutality and human suffering. Here are some principles and approaches to consider in teaching and learning about these histories.

South Africa before apartheid

It is important to give context to the history of apartheid, for students to have some understanding of how it came about and what life was like for people before. The [Timeline](#) includes a useful overview of how the territory we now know as South Africa came to be colonised by Europeans and the origins of the oppression of its indigenous peoples. The [Map of South Africa](#) can also help.

Nothing is black and white

Apartheid was a regime built on legalised racism. At its core was the classification and division of people into racial groups using an indiscriminate series of tests. One of the most infamous of these was the 'pencil test' – if you could hold a pencil in your hair when you shook your head, you could not be classified as White.

The population was classified into four groups: White, Black, Indian and Coloured. Coloured and Indian groups were further subdivided. Peoples of different origin and race were treated in different ways. To simplify this for students, this resource focuses on the life of Nelson Mandela and the experiences of Black South Africans. However, students should be reminded that this is by no means the whole story.

Some White South African men and women played a significant part in the struggle against apartheid.

Language is important

In talking about the histories, it is necessary to understand how people of different races and ethnic origin were distinguished with terms. Words were often used that have different connotations and meanings in different contexts.

Explaining and agreeing terminology with students can help prevent stereotyping and encourage critical thinking. Explain that in this historical context:

- Black South African people is a collective term for people descended from the indigenous peoples of the area such as the Khoisan, Zulu and Xhosa.

- White people is a collective term for those descended from the mainly Dutch, British, German and French people who colonised the area in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.
- Coloured people was a term used to refer to people of mixed race origin. Their ability to exercise their political rights was dependent on the attitude of the government at the time. It is still used today. Students should be aware that many apartheid laws applied to these people.
- Non-white people was a collective term used for Black, Coloured and Asian people living in South Africa.

Madiba

Madiba was the name Nelson Mandela preferred in later life. To avoid confusion, this resource generally uses the name Nelson Mandela. However, teachers and students are encouraged to refer to him as Madiba in teaching and learning activities and discussions.

The changing map of South Africa

The geographical boundaries and territories within South Africa have been politically charged over the course of its history, not least during the apartheid era with the establishment of the Bantustans. Where possible, this resource uses modern-day place names.

TEACHING AND LEARNING WITH SENSITIVE HISTORIES

Images and representations

Images and representations from the time can be derogatory and show violent or upsetting scenes. Prepare students for these, and avoid stereotyping and gratuity by providing context, talking about who produced the images and how they might have been used to influence views. You could try to humanise the people represented in photographs or films by discussing them as men, women and children with emotional lives. The [Picturing the past](#) resource includes useful questions and pointers to help with this.

A sense of scale

The apartheid regime spanned nearly 50 years. Its origins are centuries old. Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years. For students these facts and figures can be difficult to grasp and can all seem a bit ‘long ago and far away’. For many teachers and members of students’ families, some of this history is still within living memory which can help make it more immediate. Try drawing on personal memories within your own community to help students make connections. Did their parents go to the concert at Wembley or watch it on TV? Did their grandparents boycott South African goods in the supermarket? Did they actively protest against apartheid in any way?

It is also important to humanise the history. To focus in on people and their lives so that they don’t become a series of statistics. This resource helps with this by focusing on the life of Nelson Mandela. A note of caution, however: can we really imagine what it was like to live in these times or to be imprisoned for 27 years? It is respectful to acknowledge the limits of our ability to empathise with others’ experiences.

Perspectives

As with most histories, a balance of voices and perspectives has not always been conveniently collected and preserved. Asking the following questions can deepen understanding and help students view the history from multiple perspectives:

- Whose voices are being represented by a particular image, object, film, report or website?
- What messages are these voices conveying?
- Whose voices are missing from this resource?
- Why might they be missing?
- How can we find them?

Reflection

The curriculum is ‘squeezed’ and teaching and learning time is short. But, where possible, build in time for the students to reflect on what they have seen, heard, thought and felt about apartheid, Nelson Mandela and his legacy. The [Thinking and discussing](#) resource includes some useful pointers and activities to help with this.