



# The Challenges Teachers Experience When Trying to Enhance Learners' Epistemic Access in History

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## Abstract

Despite in-depth research that has been made on how rural teachers may enhance learners' epistemic access, teachers still encounter challenges on enhancing learners' epistemic access. This study aims to explore rural teachers' experiences that make it challenging for them to enhance rural learners' epistemic access in history. This study employed interpretivism paradigm and phenomenology design within qualitative research. Decoloniality was used as a theoretical framework. Purposive sampling was employed to select 20 participants, constituting of eight Grade 9 history learners, one parents of each learner, and four Grade 9 history teachers from 3 rural towns. Interviews, observations and document analysis were used to generate data, while thematic analysis was used to code, thematise, analyse and interpret the data. The findings and discussions revealed that rural learners' epistemic access may be impeded by lack of teachers' diversity awareness influence on learners' epistemic access, inability to promote critical thinking, teacher pedagogy such as teacher-centeredness, the challenges of teachers in developing learners' historical skills, and the inappropriate use of historical resources. These findings demonstrate coloniality of knowledge, which impedes learners' epistemic access. Therefore, this study suggests that Department of Basic Education should introduce translanguaging effectively in rural schools, to teachers. Also, it should provide them with materials such as semiotic resources for the purpose of enhancing learners' epistemic access in History.

## Keywords

epistemic access, rural education, history, learners, teachers

## INTRODUCTION

Notwithstanding the in-depth research that has been done on the strategies teachers may use to enhance learners' epistemic access in History, scholars such as Castellví (2024) allude that rural teachers still find it challenging to enhance learners' epistemic access in History. Dube (2023) argues that rural areas are no longer areas that are extremely deprived and poor. Rather, they may lack resources such as infrastructure and basic services. In schools, there could be lack of textbooks, ICT resources and other semiotic resources (Dube 2023). On the other hand, Hlungwani (2022) articulates that rural schools are gradually being provided with adequate resources, although only a very few have received adequate to this point. Again, Maharaj and Chake (2025) reveal that although schools may still be far from learners and often are overcrowded, they are accessible and most learners are admitted. Therefore, learners may have epistemic access although not adequate (Jacobs 2023).

This is why this study seeks to explore challenges rural teachers experience when trying to enhance learners' epistemic access in history. Battaly (2022) asserts that enhancing learners' epistemic access is an element of decoloniality that former colonies around the world seek to exercise. In this context, epistemic access refers to enabling learners to comprehend content, acquire knowledge and contribute contextual knowledge that is at the level of learners in a meaningful way (Knöchelmann 2021). Knöchelmann (2021) further states that history education is intertwined with epistemic access because it encourages every society to esteem its own history and archive. It conscientises learners of their indigeneity and the importance of recognizing and valuing it.

Ball and Collet-Sabe (2022) indicate that factors such as lack of understanding epistemic access, lack of understanding different cultural epistemologies, inability to use a learner-centered approach, knowledge and awareness of historical inequalities, and the inability to include different learners' styles in teaching makes it difficult for history teachers to enhance learners' epistemic access. Hudson, Gericke, Olin-Scheller and Stolare (2023) elaborates that these factors marginalise learners' ways of acquiring knowledge and silences their voices which in turn, according to Stoel, Logtenberg and Nitsche (2022), affects learners' academic performance. Motala, Sayed, and De Kock (2023) suggest that epistemic access can be facilitated when teachers allow rural learners the liberty to use all resources that are available to them in their everyday lives to contribute to the learning and teaching of history. Some teachers still find it challenging to enhance rural learners' epistemic access.

However, the vast research that has been made by various scholars on epistemic access and epistemic injustice, however most of them are not focused on the History subject in the Senior Phase (Grade 7-9). For instance, David, Motala and As (2023) focus on enhancing university students' epistemic access, while Hudson (2019) investigates how epistemic quality could ascertain epistemic access for mathematics learners. Only a few such as Klima (2024) makes mention of improving learners' epistemic access in History. This created a gap this study seeks to fill, which is to explore challenges rural teachers experience when trying to enhance rural learners' epistemic access in history. This study will be guided by the following question:

**Q:** *What challenges do rural teachers experience when trying to enhance learners' epistemic access in History?*

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is informed by decoloniality theory, in line with the perspective of Aníbal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo (Maldonado-Torres 2025). Quijano (2024) argues colonialism has left a legacy known as the colonial-matrix of power, which is demonstrated in the institutions' policies that enforce Euro-centric knowledge and ways of acquiring knowledge to African indigenous learners. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2025) indicates Quijano exposed the colonial matrix of power so that they may be able to disrupt knowledge hierarchy that exists therein. In addition, Mignolo (2020) reveals that decoloniality theory seeks to expose colonialism of power, knowledge and so that the hierarchy that exists therein may be dismantled.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2025) elaborates that coloniality of power refers to institutions that operate coloniality through policies and laws; coloniality of knowledge refers to the Euro-centric knowledge and ways of knowledge acquisitions that learners are exposed to in class, while neglecting their indigenous knowledge, ways of knowledge acquisition and contribution; coloniality of being thus refers to the implanted ideas that make one feel subservient to Europeans as a result of being excluded from a group of people that may harbour valuable knowledge – if they harbour any, from a group that have valuable ways of acquiring knowledge and contributing knowledge. Decoloniality theory uses these elements to expose coloniality so that it may be disassembled (Mignolo 2020). This theory resonates well with my study as it seeks to expose what impedes rural learners' epistemic access in History, because epistemic access is often impeded by coloniality (Denscombe 2025).

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Okolo and Iyanda (2025) indicate that rural learners' academic performance in history may be poor because of the inability of teachers to teach them in a way that may enhance their epistemic access through ensuring content comprehension, acquisition of knowledge, meaning, creation, knowledge construction and contribution of knowledge. Rural teachers also seem to rely on textbooks as well, which impedes learners' epistemic access (Tabé 2023). As a history rural-school teacher I witnessed that the policies make us focus on covering the curriculum instead of focusing on ensuring learners content comprehension, knowledge acquisition and participation are enhanced, and the only way to cover it in time is to go according to the textbook. Therefore, this study will explore rural teachers' challenges when they try to enhance learners' epistemic access in History.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Epistemological Access**

Sol and Heng (2022) note that the word epistemology derives from the Greek word "episteme" - knowledge, and "logo" - reason - which centres this word on knowledge. For authors such as Moon, Cvitanovic, Blackman et al. (2021) and Carter and Littlejohn (2021), epistemology seeks to understand the nature of knowledge by looking at what knowledge consists of, how is it acquired and how it relates to truth and justification. In essence epistemology investigates the origin and evolution of knowledge (Carter and Littlejohn 2021). Hannon (2021) further asserts that it seeks to establish a distinction between an opinion and a justified belief.

On the other hand, a concept epistemic access is viewed by Walker and Boni (2020), Forsey, Rowland, Freeman and Woods (2021) and Costantini (2023) as enabling learners to understand content and actively participate in class discussion through active contribution of ideas and knowledge in the construction of meaning in education. It is further viewed as the ability to understand and access the subject-content knowledge that is expected to be learned (Phyak and Sah 2022). Deng (2020) further illuminates the contextual nature of epistemic access declaring that knowledge viewed as capable of making mistakes and being wrong rather than being definite, in other words it can alter through debates and further engagements. This is in line with nature of history as a school subject as it encourage multiple-perspectivity, views and opinions on historical content under discussion. Knowledge is not presented as fixed, unquestionable and objective. This allows for opportunities to hear learners' voices and experience on the topics we are engaged with in the classroom, thereby ensuring they relate better with the content and have deepened understanding of it. This is viewed by (Ned 2022) and Knöchelmann (2021) as further dismantling the systematic barriers that were created in the past by allowing learners to acquire knowledge in their indigenous or preferred ways; and also, to contribute knowledge they accumulated from their indigenous archives in the form of cultural practices, songs, stories and language. Epistemic access gives room for indigenous contributions, other than always applying foreign knowledge to create meaning. Sterz, Baum, Biewer, Hermanns, Lauber-Rönsberg, Meinel and Langer (2024) agree, indicating that epistemic access seeks social justice by bringing equity in how learners in their cultural diversity come to know and contribute knowledge in learning and teaching. In the views of Du Preez and Le Grange (2020), epistemic access can be realised through organised systematic learning, and on the curriculum responsiveness as well, which is the process of accommodating socio-cultural diversity of learners in the learning and teaching through incorporating different strategies of teaching and learning.

### **Nature of history and pedagogical practices**

History is a subject that is based on studying the past and analyse how it informed the present and will shape the future (Department of Basic Education 2011). Through that process, Ningsih and Abidin (2022) argues that the scrutiny of historical thinking skills should be done in depth to render sound interpretations of historical events. Through the same vein, Pratama, Saputra and Hikmawaty (2024) details that the historical thinking skills that need to be scrutinised are historical sources and evidence – referring to primary, secondary and tertiary historical sources that are reliable and possess rich history; cause and effect – which refers to analysing the ignition of historical events and how they influenced the world; change and continuity – which identifies the turning points historical events brought and how they continue to influence the world going forward; time and chronology – which analysis historical events in their accurate historical sequence; and multi-perceptivity – which fosters respects for individual's different interpretations of each historical events they analyse.

Shifting to pedagogical practices of history, Hakizimana and Andala (2024) indicate that sometimes History education in rural schools is used in a manner that does not encourage creative thinking and accommodate relevance to the learners' everyday knowledge because it is fact-based. Fufa, Tulu and Ensene (2024) concur that rural-school teachers often do not accommodate learners' everyday knowledge in the learning and teaching of History and they are unable to facilitate it whenever learners spontaneously bring in their personal experiences in learning and teaching. It transpired that, whenever teachers try to accommodate it, they would do so in an impromptu manner.

Furthermore, learners find it boring to learn History when they solely focus on memorising facts (Seelig and McCabe 2021), which Carrete-Marín and Domingo-Peñafiel (2022) assert to happen by virtue of rural-school teachers using textbooks in a way that portrays that the information it provides is definite, cannot be criticized and reconstructed. Monte-Santo, Bordonaro and Aumen (2020) and Ingersoll and Tran (2023) support asserting that the rural-school teachers tend to use one source as evidence to make a point instead of presenting the source as an attestation to be interrogated, they tend to give learners sources either as divided groups or individuals and only provide them with an opportunity to share what the sources say with the class instead of providing learners with an opportunity to corroborate their sources. As a result, rural-school learners knowledge acquisition is limited as they cannot create further meaning nor construct new knowledge from analysing, synthesising and interpreting the sources to draw inferences. As result, rural-learners knowledge acquisition is limited to what is transmitted to them, resulting in epistemic access being blocked (Ingersoll and Tran 2023).

Rural teachers struggle to teach learners historical reading skills and focus on equipping them with comprehension skills (Hamzah, Hamzah and Zulkifli 2022), which according to Pearce (2020) could lead to forgetting historical information because of the rift that exists between basic facts and detailed historical knowledge. As a result of forgetting historical information, learners are blocked from acquiring in-depth knowledge on history, which could block rural-school learners' epistemic access. Pearce (2020) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2025) add that the knowledge we acquire may also be faulty because it relies on how we view and interpret events, which brings uncertainty about our identities – whether we really are who we think we are; belief systems, whether what we believe is true; power relations sustainability – who is at the top, middle, bottom and outcast of the hierarchy.

Dube (2023) asserts that rural learners find it challenging to recognize and bestow the meaning of time and cause, sourcing, perspective and argument in history because they are taught in a finished and static knowledge manner. In other words, learners also fail to contextualise history, accommodate multiple perspectives and actively engaged in historical discussions and debates (Bartelds, Savenije and Boxel 2020). Similarly, Hasin and Nasir (2021) elaborate that teachers did not often present multiple forms of sources such as pictures, graphs, videos and audios; they would only provide

multiple primary sources which would often be texts, and that limited the learners critical thinking and creative thinking as they would passively receive the information from only one form of source without corroboration.

### **The impact of resources on epistemic access**

The resources that are thought to be epistemic enhancers may also serve as rural-school learners' epistemic access blockades (Balarin and Rodríguez 2024). Carrete-Marín and Domingo-Peñañiel (2022) explain that textbooks used in class may be available but present information in a language the learner does not understand, which blocks learners' epistemic access, according to Thi Ngu, Huong, Huy, Thanh and Dongul (2021). Also, some rural learners may understand the language used but the information could be biased, which limits learners' exposure to the reality of historical events, limiting rural learners' epistemic access. Ndomondo (2024) adds that the analysis of historical information in some textbooks has not been newly analysed and interpreted based on the emerging historical facts that are updated by historians. Therefore, rural learners' exposure to knowledge is limited, which blocks learners' epistemic access as they may be unable to acquire vast knowledge to analyse, synthesise, interpret and critique.

Furthermore, Parveen and Ramzan (2024) show that semiotic resources may also impede learners' epistemic access when they are not used properly. Rural teachers may play learners audios that are in the LoLT, which is the language in which rural learners may not be competent (Syahabuddin 2025). As a result, rural learners' epistemic access is impeded because they cannot acquire knowledge (Firmansyah and Atmaja 2025). Again, Haydn and Stephen (2021) reveal that audios may provide poor sound quality, which would make learners miss-out on historical information thus leading to epistemic exclusion. Further, the use of videos as well, maybe presented in LoLT; even the *Long Walk to Freedom* movie is cast in English and grandiloquence, which rural learners may find challenging to understand and easy to misunderstand – demonstrating epistemic injustice. No translations were made in Xhosa and other South African indigenous languages like Sotho, where subtitles could be made in English – for accommodating other nations. Sapire and Essien (2021) elaborates that rural learners are often multilingual; they understand languages that are often used in their communities and English is often not the commonly used language in most South African rural towns. Therefore, educational videos that are not translated to 12 South African languages for learners to access their preferred languages on their devices or libraries only serve to impede learners' epistemic access (Mhlongo, Mbatha, Ramatsetse and Dlamini 2023).

Moreover, Anisijević (2025) asserts that rural teachers seem to have no time to conduct historical excursions due to the curriculum they have to cover, as a result learners' epistemic access is blocked because learners fail to engage with concrete cultural historical resources that may enhance their understanding, knowledge acquisition, meaning creation and knowledge construction. Radebe, Moreeng and Alalade (2025) support that the pursuit for curriculum coverage deprives learners effective learning and acquisition for skills. Acquiring primary historical artefacts is also a challenge because they can only be viewed in museums and on field trips (Marovah and Ncube 2024). Rural schools seem to not find it necessary, rather they engage learners with digital versions of artefacts and historical fields (Aryee 2021), and relying on abstract knowledge impedes learners' epistemic access because it makes it challenging to understand and actively engage with the content. (Aryee 2021) reveals that sometimes it may be because parents do not afford to pay for the excursions since most of them would be doing minimal jobs that wages less, and the department is not yet making provisions for historical excursions for learners in rural towns. Other historical primary sources of text are often written in political activists' jargon since they were often addressing political activists and officials. The language that is used there may be the one learners do not understand, or rural learners may not be understanding the English language (Modisane and On 2025), which impedes learners' epistemic access.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The aim of this study is to explore the challenges experienced by rural teachers when they try to enhance learners' epistemic access in History. This study followed a qualitative approach, which was guided by an Interpretivist paradigm and phenomenology design (Lim 2025). These elements used to accumulate exhaustive experiences, thoughts and opinions to interpret them (Oluka 2025). Participants in this study were 4 rural teachers, 8 grade 9 rural learners and one parent for each of the participating rural learners. All participants were purposefully selected from three rural towns in Xhariep district in the Free State. Semi-structured interviews were used to interview the participants on a one-to-one or one-to-two sessions. Interviews for teachers were mainly conducted in English and with learners and parents they were conducted in Sesotho as this was their preferred language of communication. Observations were done on teachers while they were teaching and learners while learning. I collected documents such as pictures of texts they use, learners' activities and assessments from the teachers. Therefore, they sent the pictures of documents through *WhatsApp*. Equally important, I used thematic analysis to code and thematise the data so that I may analyse and interpret it.

The University of the Free State's research ethics committee provided ethical clearance to collect the data, and the Free State Department of Education provided permission to collect data from their schools. The principal, teachers and parents provided their consent, and learners assented as well. Karthikeyan (2023) affirms that seeking permission and consent from participants is an ethical practice. I hid my participants' identities from the public by using pseudonyms to refer to them. I made them aware of the possible risks and aware that they could withdraw from this study at any point without providing a reason; however, once the data had been collected and were being processed, they would not be able to retract their data.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As a result of the semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis conducted in the rural schools of Xhariep district in the Free State and presented in this study, the challenges that were discovered and discussed hereunder are diversity awareness, pedagogical practices, such as challenges in promoting critical thinking, teacher-centredness, and teachers' struggle to develop History skills. The findings also look at the impact the resources teachers use have on learners' epistemic access.

### Diversity awareness influence on epistemic access

Woldegiorgis and Chiramba (2025) indicate that epistemic access refers to going beyond access to the school premises nor content information, rather enabling learners to comprehend the lesson so that they may be able to actively engage with it creatively and critically. It refers to giving learners the opportunity to contribute actively in learning and teaching (Woldegiorgis and Chiramba 2025). Therefore, the findings in this section demonstrate that teachers may not be aware of epistemic access. Teacher LT indicates, *"Unfortunately, the only things we have is the textbook. And so many times when we improvise, you make copies and you give them copies so that the child can work."* The teachers' sentiments here demonstrate the limitation teachers have to explore semiotic resources and multimodality to enhance learners' epistemic access. SJ-L2 also posits, *"She uses a textbook and past papers to help us understand and to solve some problems we might face in the next question paper..."* The learner reveals that some teachers may not be aware of the impact of going beyond textbooks and question papers in enhancing learners' epistemic access.

Furthermore, Teacher LT reveals:

*"So if we use, rather than saying this one is Xhosa, we teach them in Xhosa, or that one is using their home language to explain some of the concepts, that one is not right ... But in terms of taking it to English, they may encounter a challenge or problem using it. So you always encourage them to use English as much as possible, so that they get used to it they understand it."*

He demonstrates lack of cognisance in the potential of enhancing learners' epistemic access through allowing the use of home language in the history class. Teacher RS extends, *"I don't entertain issues of learners who will be writing in Sesotho, or trying to explain the particular concept in Sesotho, or using Isixhosa ... When Comes to assessments, I'm strictly using English because language of medium of instruction, it is English."* The teacher seems to not be aware how liberating learners to respond to assessments in their own language of instruction may enhance learners' epistemic access.

The accounts demonstrated hereinabove allude that teachers are unaware that not using various teaching aids including learners' home language to teach History impedes learners' epistemic access. They limit their teaching resources to textbooks that are limited in knowledge and may contain outdated information, which blocks learners from making well informed analysis and inferences of the history they learn. They regard the application of semiotic resources such as videos, audios, exhibitions, fieldtrips and role play to be time consuming (Agne, Mezieobi and Salawu 2018). Moreover, the use of learners' preferred language to learn to comprehend the lesson, acquire knowledge, create meaning, construct and contribute knowledge appears to be excluded from the learning and teaching of History, which may block learners' epistemic access to historical knowledge as they may not understand the content. Learners' languages are deemed to be subservient concerning responding to assessments their home languages are incapable to create meaning and construct knowledge. During observations, I noticed that teachers solely use English. The moment they transition to the learner's home language, it sounded and seemed deliberate as though it was just in compliance to how our interview unfurled. This demonstrates coloniality of being, as learners are made to disregard their homework language when they learn, in the name of LoLT (Maldonado-Torres 2025). This notion is what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2025) claims that decoloniality seeks to dismantle and bring equity among various cultures and languages, making each prominent in their respective context, societies and communities.

### Pedagogical practices

According to Dippenaar and Mehndroo (2024), pedagogical practices are the ways teachers use to teach, ranging from how teachers plan their lessons, deliver the content and assess learners' comprehension. He elaborates, supported by Nganga and Kambutu (2024), that such ways can either be teacher-centred or learner-centred. The teacher-centred ways encompass lecturing while a learner-centred approach encourages learner autonomy demonstrated through active learning and critical thinking (Nganga and Kambutu 2024).

### Challenges in promoting critical thinking

Learners' epistemic access obstruction is demonstrated through learners' lack of applying historical skills because of the way they are taught history does not impart those skills; they are mainly taught to memorise (2025). Teacher SJ implies, *"The learners also struggled to compare ... .. interpret ... I don't know what Makes it difficult for them to compare,"* Teacher SJ shows that teachers are not aware of what makes learners find it challenging to apply historical skills, and the inability of learners to apply historical skills obstruct learners' epistemic access. Similarly, Teacher LT states, *"When learners have to write their activities in English, if the answers are not on the sources that they are reading, they often write wrong answers."* Teacher LT shows that learners also struggle with the basic skill of Bloom's Taxonomy, "remembering", which demonstrates epistemic access obstruction, because lack of remembering is the sign of lack of

knowledge acquisition. Therefore, TV-L1 adds, "... activities are simple ... and the questions come in a different way [in formal-assessments] ... He came with this strategy, and it did not work for us, we failed..." TV-L1 shows that learners do not understand the way the teachers teach strategies of applying historical skills, which impedes learners' epistemic access as they would wrongfully apply those skills to interrogate the content for in-depth comprehension, knowledge acquisition and articulation of knowledge – in writing or verbally, then end up with wrong answers.

These sentiments suggest that teachers could be the blockade to learners' epistemic access. They are portrayed to not be able to explain to learners in a way that learners understand, which results to learners applying historical skills wrong thus end up with wrong answers. They are also unable to identify why learners are unable to apply historical skills, of which learners believe to be them who cannot teach them in a comprehensible manner. This demonstrates that teachers could be doing subject improvement plans just for compliance and not to identify the learners' weakness and enhance their epistemic access (Boadu, Donnelly and Sharp 2020). However, because my research took place in the second term, I would infer that the teachers were probably still going to modify their teaching ways. However, it is demonstrated that the reasons learners forget the content they learn could also be that teachers limit learners' knowledge acquisition within school perimeters, they do not encourage extension of knowledge acquisition to learners' communities. This underscores learners' exclusion and identity damage as learners may deem their indigenous knowledge and archives less important. It speaks to both coloniality of being and coloniality of knowledge as they are made to think their community knowledge is irrelevant, meaning they themselves are less important in knowledge production. Also, they are not guided properly on how to emancipate their minds through applying historical skills for comprehension, meaning creation and knowledge construction (Glover 2023).

### Teacher-Centredness

Woods and Copur-Gencturk (2024) argue that a teacher-centred approach disparages learners' autonomy; it often suggests that learners are empty vessels. Teacher TV, "*Other learners cannot answer what is required on history, that is why we need to drill them, we need to teach them, to show them how they must interpret sources to get to possible answers.*" Here we see the teacher emphasising their role on ensuring that learners can apply historical skills to respond to assessments, which demonstrated a teacher-centred approach that may limit learners' epistemic access. Teacher TV further indicates:

*"Resources we use are teaching guides, pamphlets and sources that are written sources and visual sources ... photographs and extracts from the written sources ... notes that I googled, for example, on apartheid. We use these notes to explain how essays are constructed - introduction, how it is formatted; how the line of argument is being formulated, how to take a stance, and how to go through about an essay because it must have a background, it must have a time frame, it also must be chronological in order, so that you point, elaborate, link based to the key question on that particular content."*

Again, the teacher demonstrates his efforts and role in making learners understand how to respond to essay questions; without demonstrating the learners role. This statement demonstrates that learners' knowledge and ways of knowing is deemed irrelevant, which demonstrates their epistemic denial. Therefore, TV-L1 alludes: "*But when he explains, sometimes he confuses us ... In class, when he teaches us, 'refer to paragraph one of Source 2A or 2B, when we go to paragraph one, you read the entire paragraph and get answers.'* However, the ones that we see correct would be in line two or three. But when the teacher explains, he says the answers are in line one, paragraph one. That's what confuses us when he explains to us. He does not explain to us in a way that would make us understand how we find questions when they're asked..."

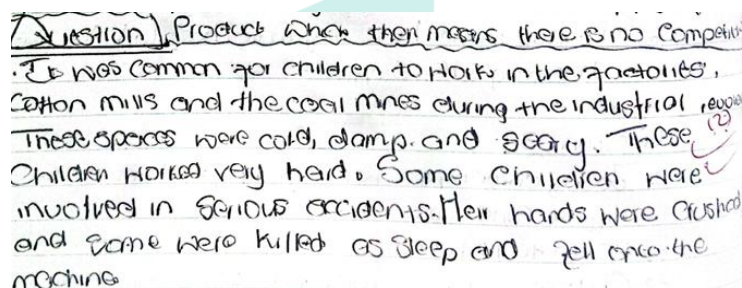
The learner demonstrates that they may have the ability of finding correct answers, but it is blocked by the teachers' knowledge transmission way of teaching. LR-L2 supports, "*the teacher uses only a textbook ... the words that we do not know, where we don't understand, we go to him and ask, and we find those answers that we did not understand, that were difficult in the textbook.*" The learner demonstrates reliance on the teacher's teaching resources and the teacher, which demonstrates that learners deem themselves as empty vessels as well, thus compromising their epistemic access.

These sentiments demonstrate that some History teachers assume that history learners are empty vessels which they must infuse with their knowledge and ways of acquiring knowledge. These assumptions limit learner-autonomy, which impedes learners' epistemic access as learners may be limited to drawing from their background knowledge and cultural archives by virtue of not being given the liberty to explore those avenues. As a result of the teachers' knowledge-transmission way of teaching, learners end up doubting their own way of thinking and limit themselves to applying the teachers' way of knowledge acquisition, which sometimes results in them getting wrong answers in assessments. Coloniality of knowledge, as espoused by Mignolo (2020), is demonstrated as learners' way of thinking, acquiring knowledge, creating meaning, constructing and demonstrating knowledge are limited to the teachers' transmitted knowledge and suggestions. In our observations, except of one, we noticed that teachers do a lot of talking and learners only talk when responding to questions teachers ask. Peer learning and teaching is minimal, as I only observed it in one school. Chimbunde, Moreeng and Chiwara (2023) postulate that teacher-centredness disadvantages learners as it often does not stimulate the use of critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills. Therefore, Mignolo (2020) avers that decoloniality theory advocates for the emancipation of such, which means learners autonomy should be demonstrated through having them tap into their cultural backgrounds and archives, including their own preferred ways of acquiring knowledge in order to learn history.

## Teachers struggle to develop History skills

Teachers struggle to enhance learners' epistemic access because learners have developed passive learning instead of the application of historical skills (Terentev, Shcheglova, Federiakin, Koreshnikova and Costley 2024). Teacher SJ avers, "... *Essay writing is a challenge to them.*" Teacher SJ indicates that learners have challenges with essay construction, and it hampers their epistemic access because they cannot contribute knowledge through expressing themselves in writing. Teacher LT supports indicating, "*Paragraph questions ... it is a challenge to them because they cannot remember the events.*" Teacher LT elucidates that learners have challenges remembering the content and it demonstrates denied epistemic access because what the learner cannot remember in a space of 2 months, the learner did not comprehend and acquire. RS-L1 concurs alluding, "*We forget the information, the content. I feel like when the question appears, we forget what we read.*" They realise when they get assessed that they did not understand the content, which demonstrated that learner's epistemic access was blocked. RS-L1 further indicates, "... *the questions are difficult because there are those where words are changed ... [from those used in the] scope for history ... it comes as what we have not been given...*" RS-L1 shows that the teachers misguide learners on what the research question is going to compose, and it blocks learners' epistemic access as they would not be able to contribute accurate information in essay writing. This goes hand-in-glove with Teacher SJ's assertion, "*Another challenge ... we do not know which essay is going to appear, so I cannot prepare learners for a particular sub-topic they should focus on, learners write without having delved enough into the topic*". This shows that another factor that impedes learners' epistemic access is that learners lack thorough preparation to write an essay – whereby they will articulate their comprehension of the content and knowledge acquisition, because teachers often do not elaborate on the topic the essay question will be based on.

Therefore, these sentiments imply that learners forget the information when they must write the essay because teachers did not expatiate on the topic since they often do not know which one will be asked. This demonstrates that teachers do not adequately teach content to learners, they only place emphasis on topics they suspect will be essay questions. In other words, teachers try to make learners memories the essay they are going to write instead of engaging with the content critically and creatively to construct an essay. Chimbunde, Lekhethe and Moreeng (2024) also revealed that learners struggle to write essays nor respond to historical source-based questions. Coloniality of knowledge is demonstrated as learners are made to regurgitate what is written in textbooks and notes instead of creating meaning and constructing knowledge creatively and critically; if learners do not possess any relevant information to contribute (Ndhlovu-Gatsheni 2025). Additionally, reliance of learners on teachers as repositories of facts demonstrates learners' restrictions to go beyond what the teachers presents. Learners' knowledge is at the peripheral, thus not considered according to coloniality (Mignolo 2020). Figure 1 shows an example of a learner obtaining 2 out of 5 from a paragraph question, which reiterates that the learner does not remember the content. In other words, learners lack the basic and fundamental skills according to the history cognitively level ranks (Department of Basic Education 2011).



Question Product which they means there is no competition  
It was common for children to work in the factories, cotton mills and the coal mines during the industrial revolution. These spaces were cold, damp, and scary. These children worked very hard. Some children were involved in serious accidents. Their hands were crushed and some were killed as sleep and fell into the machine.

Fig. 1 Paragraph of the learner who forgot the content

Department of Basic Education (2011) stipulates that Senior Phase learners cannot write essay at their required length and cannot formulate it in the correct format, which demonstrates another lack of skills named application in the cognitive levels of knowledge conveyed in the Social Sciences CAPS (Department of Basic Education 2011). The length and format could be impeded by the lack of English vocabulary learners have, which makes it challenging for them to articulate themselves through writing. the learner to articulate themselves in writing. Emphatically, the learners right to express themselves in their home language is infringed by conservative teachers and the policy of the school that advocates for English as LoLT. Thus, colonial matrix of power is demonstrated because the teacher does what the policy of the school stipulates, as an agent of education (Ndhlovu-Gatsheni 2025). Again, not allowing learners to respond to historical questions using semiotic resources such as creating videos of acting the content, making posters and so on shows that learners' epistemic access is denied, as their way of creating meaning and constructing knowledge is disregarded. It demonstrates coloniality of knowledge, because learners are not allowed to demonstrate their knowledge acquisition in their preferred manner, which could also be cultural (Mafile'o, Kokinai and Redman-MacLaren 2022). Figure 2 supports that learners have challenges writing paragraphs and essays, as they write them in a numbered form.

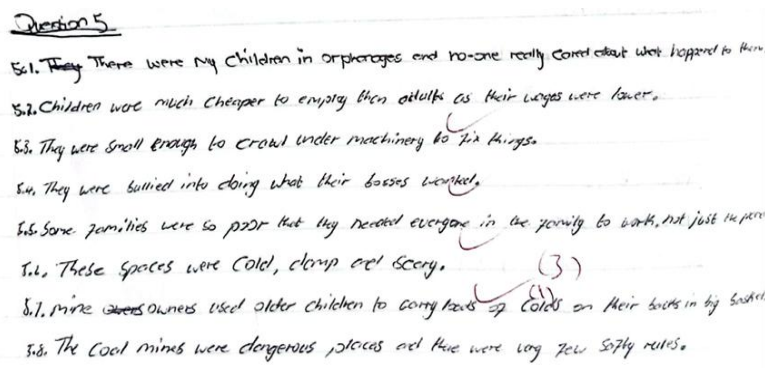


Fig. 2 Inability to formulate a paragraph

We use paragraph questions to demonstrate lack of formulating writing skill and information recall instead of essay questions because by the time of data collection, the learners' assessment did not include essays.

### Resources use

Despite the advancement of technology, most small-town schools still succumb to lack of technological resources, which limits teachers to using textbooks to teach irrespective of how limited and out-dated they are, and it impedes learners their epistemic access (Carrete-Marín, Domingo-Penafiel and Simo-Gil 2024). Teacher TV indicates, "We don't use textbooks as much.... the textbooks are very much limited, because they are the old textbooks..." Teacher TV believes that effective learning and teaching cannot happen when textbooks are the only resources used to facilitate it because they contain minimal information, which may limit learners' epistemic access in History. RS-L1 divulges, "... the textbook helps me, but I don't get enough information... I go to the internet to get a better explanation." RS-L1 concurs that textbooks do not contain enough information to increase learners' historical knowledge. SJ-L2 explains, "... we do not use projectors to watch YouTube videos in the history subject." She reveals that teachers do not deem it necessary to use information communication technology (ICT) to help learners with historical knowledge comprehension, acquisition and construction. TV-L1 emphasises, "... We do not use projectors in history ... Booklets, textbooks and study-guides are the only things we use." This statement demonstrates that teachers often subject learners to text-information and disregard other various resources that can be used to enhance learners' epistemic access.

These sentiments align with an inference made by Nagre (2025) that textbooks are outdated and potentially limit learners and teachers' epistemic access. Despite that, textbooks continue to be the main media of learning and teaching according to the sentiments hereinabove. Only one teacher from my observations was, instead of a textbook, using a pamphlet of notes he indicated were downloaded from the internet and some provided by the Department of Basic Education. Their reliance on textbooks could be because of lack of other educational resources the Department of Basic Education does not provide the schools with. However, the schools I visited, besides only one that got burned and its ICT was damaged, have projectors and the internet; they are used in other disciplines just not in history. In other words, the possibility of such resources enhancing learners' epistemic access is disregarded by teachers besides the poor performance of learners. Teachers also do not liberate learners enough to engage with their communities and present what they have acquired from their communities in the class. None of the teachers mentioned such an activity. The colonial matrix of power is at play here, whereby the school including the Department of Basic Education (DBE) boxes learners' thoughts within what was thought and interpreted more than a decade ago (Glover 2023), by not furnishing every class with internet connection, projectors and other ICT media. Also, they exclude learners' indigenous ways of acquiring knowledge from cultural resources as well. Therefore, teachers struggle to enhance learners' epistemic access because they only use outdated textbooks in history learning and teaching and does not include ICT to enhance learners' epistemic access.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the challenges rural teachers experience when trying to enhance learners' epistemic access. Rural teachers experienced challenges that impede learners' epistemic access are teachers' lack of diversity awareness influence on learners' epistemic access, pedagogical practices, which include challenges in promoting critical thinking. It hampers rural learners from critically engaging with historical content to extract historical knowledge. Also, teaching media and epistemic access, which are outdated textbooks which often provide limited information and is irrelevant to learners' context. This study also demonstrates that learners' epistemic access is impeded by teacher-centeredness, whereby rural learners solely rely on teachers as repositories of facts, because learners' knowledge is undermined in that sense. Notably, the exclusion of rural learners' indigenous knowledge and ways of coming to know demonstrate coloniality of knowledge. This study also reveals that rural teachers struggle to develop historical skills, which exhibited that rural learners lack historical skills such as remembering and application of knowledge because of the lack of competency of rural teachers in making history inclusive for the purpose of enhancing learners' epistemic access. Lastly, it evinces that South Africa's challenge of lack of providing adequate technological materials and an effective introduction of translanguaging pedagogy in rural schools demonstrate that colonial matrix of power is unconsciously promoted and it

compromises rural learners' epistemic access, as the government does not make extra efforts to ensure rural schools have adequate resources and can implement them with ease. The government and relevant stakeholders should thus intervene. Research should be undertaken to seek a swift way to roll out adequate semiotic resources in rural schools that will enhance rural learners' epistemic access in History education at school.

### STATEMENTS OF OPEN DATA, ETHICS AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors were granted ethical clearance by the University of the Free State Ethics Committee and permission by the Free State Department of Education to collect data in 4 of the schools in the Xhariep district. Consent was requested from the parents of the interviewed learners and teachers, including the principals; assent was sought from learners as well. The participants were made aware that they can withdraw from the study without even providing a reason, however, once data has been processed, they may not be able to withdraw. They were assured that their identity will be kept hidden, contributions will be confidential and pseudonyms will be used instead of their real names.

I, the corresponding author, also declare that this manuscript is original and has not been published anywhere, not is it currently considered for publications elsewhere.

### DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The first author collected data and drafted the article and the second author read and approved the final version of this article for publication. The editor did a splendid job as well with proofreading and editing the manuscript. This article forms part of the first author's thesis.

### DATA AVAILABILITY

Since this was an empirical study, the data used is with the authors and it is kept safe as it is confidential.

### FUNDING INFORMATION

No funding was provided for this study.

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