




First-year South African education students' historical consciousness regarding the imagined future

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Abstract: In South Africa, the legacies of apartheid and colonialism continue to shape how young people perceive themselves and the society they inhabit. Despite three decades of democratic reform, structural inequalities persist in education, including higher education, as well as in economic opportunity and social mobility. Student-led campaigns such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall, along with global debates about higher education, have reignited discussions about the role of higher education in addressing these injustices, reflecting a renewed sense of historical consciousness among young people. This paper examines how first-year education students at a South African university use their historical consciousness to imagine the future. Historical consciousness can be defined as the ability to use knowledge of the past to orient oneself in the present and imagine the future. Using a qualitative case study approach, this paper analyses open-ended survey responses from 155 purposively sampled first-year education students. This analysis is grounded in Rösen's process model of historical thought, the theory of personal development of historical consciousness, and the concept of future self-continuity as theoretical frames. The findings reveal five thematic orientations of imagined futures: Romantics, Pragmatists, Fatalists, Realists, and Avoiders. The paper argues that these thematic orientations illustrate the complex, often contradictory ways students connect past injustices, present realities, and future aspirations. These orientations offer insights into the way young South Africans make meaning of their historical context as they navigate personal and collective transformation. It concludes by reflecting on the implications of these findings for history education, teacher training, and broader educational transformation in South Africa.

Research Article



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Introduction

The transition to democracy in South Africa in 1994 heralded promises of freedom, justice, and equality. Policies such as the *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (South African Department of Education, 1997) set out to dismantle apartheid-era inequalities and build an inclusive and democratic education system. However, three decades later, many of these aspirations remain unrealised. Structural inequalities persist, with access to quality education still largely shaped by race, class, and geography. In particular, students from Black African communities — disproportionately concentrated in quintile 1 and 2 schools, which are non-fee-paying schools for the poor — continue to experience limited opportunities, poorer schooling infrastructure, and constrained access to higher education (Statista, 2022; Wassermann, 2022).

The tensions between historical legacies and contemporary challenges have contributed to growing disillusionment among youth. The *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)* (Tomlinson, 2023) recently revealed that 81% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa cannot read for meaning. Simultaneously, the youth unemployment rate hovers around 62 per cent (Sikhakhane, 2023), while poverty remains entrenched and service delivery is uneven. These realities have given rise to powerful youth-led protests, most notably the *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall* movements in 2015–2016, which called for decolonisation, affordable education, and an end to systemic inequalities (Badat, 2009; Glenn, 2016).

These student protests provide a window into the historical consciousness of young people. They reveal how the past — particularly the traumas of apartheid, colonial dispossession, and racial inequality — continues to inform how students interpret the present and imagine possible futures. However, while there is a growing body of international scholarship on historical consciousness (Apostolidou, 2013; Curry & Horn, 2021; László, 2021; Lévesque & Zanzanian, 2015; Seixas, 2004; Sung, 2020), research on how South African higher education students use historical consciousness to envision their futures remains limited (Angier, 2017; Wassermann, 2018).

The focus on first-year education students is especially significant. As future teachers, their perceptions of the past and their imagined futures will inevitably shape how they construct, teach, and transmit knowledge in the classroom. They are uniquely positioned to influence future generations' understandings of South Africa's past and its possibilities for transformation. Moreover, this cohort comprises first-generation university students from historically disadvantaged schools, making their perspectives crucial for understanding the intersection of personal biography, historical consciousness, and imagined futures (Fengu, 2024).

This paper addresses three central questions: (1) How do first-year education students in South Africa draw on historical consciousness to imagine the future? (2) What thematic patterns emerge in their responses? (3) What are the implications of these imagined futures for higher education, teacher education, and broader societal transformation? In exploring these questions, the study contributes to the limited but growing scholarship on historical consciousness in the Global South. It underscores the importance of equipping future teachers with the tools to cultivate critical and transformative historical consciousness in their learners.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The literature review situates this study within broader scholarly conversations on historical consciousness and future-oriented thinking in education. It explores how university students in South Africa interpret the past, negotiate the present and imagine the future by drawing on South African and international research. Attention is given to scholarship on memory, identity formation, and the pedagogical role of history education in shaping civic agency.

Historical consciousness can be understood as a concept that focusses on the “connection between the interpretation of the past, the understanding of the present and the perspectives of the future” (Thorp, 2014: 21). Across societies, history acts as a cultural and cognitive resource that is used by individuals and groups to interpret their socio-political realities, engage with socio-economic issues and envision their futures. In this sense, historical consciousness is not merely a cognitive process but a deeply social and moral process that uses the past to make sense of the present while also imagining the future. It is also seen as an “intersection between public memory, history education, and citizenship” (Grant & Rogers, 2019: 1). For South African students, particularly those studying to become teachers, historical consciousness acts as an identity-forming framework that informs their professional purpose and the way the future is imagined.

The identity-creating dimension of historical consciousness underscores its pedagogical and civic importance as an identity-creating concept. History education creates a sense of perspective, develops empathy, identity and autonomy (Mazabow, 2003). Similarly, Ahonen (2005) argues that historical consciousness may be defined as a mental construct that allows for multi-perspectivity, enabling individuals to engage critically with diverse narratives of the past. Furthermore, historical consciousness progresses in instances where people may feel confused, helpless or facing some predicament, thereby suggesting that young people's engagement with the past becomes significant in times of uncertainty (Apostolidou, 2013).

In the South African context, students' historical consciousness is individual and collective through their personal understanding of history, which is informed by cultural, political and social influences (Aleen, 2003; Merck & Topcu, 2016). Furthermore, history teaching not only informs learners about the past but also “develops the meanings of the current situations and affairs and plays the major role in the formation of the concepts of the society” (Korostelina, 2008: 25). In this way, individual and collective memory acts as the foundation upon which collective identity and ultimately imaginings of the future are built (Gongaware, 2012).

Theorists such as Schackter and Madore (2016) extend this relationship between memory and identity by defining historical consciousness as a form of “mental time travel” through which individuals can re-experience the past while imagining the future. However, the content of collective memory is often tainted by trauma. According to Lorenz (2010), past experiences are often remembered from a point of trauma or catastrophe. In South Africa, the enduring legacies of colonialism and apartheid continue to shape how young people perceive injustice, inequality and belonging. Therefore, the violent past that South Africans experienced may be a contributing factor to university students and their historical consciousness.

This connection between historical memory and how the future is imagined was vividly expressed in the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall campaigns. These campaigns highlighted the deep dissatisfaction not only with material inequalities but also portrayed a deep sense of historical consciousness rooted in collective memory and post-apartheid disillusionment (Glenn, 2016). Furthermore, these campaigns brought forth an awareness

towards the unfinished project of transformation, a belief that “the dream of equality amongst all citizens in South Africa is still, to this day, not accomplished” (Oelofse & Vries, 2016: 172). In March 2015, university students across South Africa displayed a strong sense of solidarity as some students at the University of Cape Town declared the fall of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, a white coloniser who had donated part of the university land (Nordlinger, 2016). This commemorative act of decolonisation highlights the idea that any “commemorative activity requires an audience” and should agree with the ideas and values of the said audience (Wallis, 2019: 23). After the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, university students across South Africa remained excited and enthusiastic about issues relating to the past and present state of affairs at university.

While the #FeesMustFall movement is often interpreted as a response to economic exclusions, the movement revealed deeper ideological struggles tied to identity, memory and ongoing negotiations. According to Glenn (2016), “several analyses of these movements have seen them as the reaction of the poorest of the poor. But the University of Cape Town had one of the wealthiest student bodies in the country” (Glenn, 2016: 88). Apart from financial constraints, it may be evident that other aspects of student protests included their historical consciousness that reminded them of the legacy of struggle and hardship that people in South Africa faced during the apartheid era. Furthermore, the financial constraints that emerged as a point for protest were, and still are, an aftermath of the apartheid era.

Finally, the persistence of historical wounds and continued salience of race and inequality in post-apartheid South Africa demonstrate that young people’s engagement with history remained anchored in unresolved memories of injustice (Lemon, 2016; Wassermann, 2018). However, it is in crisis periods that we look to the past for guidance and, when ideas are contested, young people often revert to (and hence reinforce) their notions about the past (Wallis, 2019). In a recent study conducted at a South African university, notions of race and ethnicity in first-year participants who had taken history as an elective subject in school were seen as deeply rooted in young South Africans’ narratives of history, despite living in a post-apartheid era (Wassermann, 2018). For South African students, historical consciousness becomes both a lens for interpreting the past and a means for imagining the future.

In summary, historical consciousness acts as a multidimensional construct including cognitive, affective and civic processes to link memory, identity and the imagined future. Furthermore, in a South African context, it serves as a vital framework for understanding how university students imagine their future based on the past and the present.

Building on these insights, the conceptual framework adopts a transdisciplinary orientation that integrates perspectives from history education, critical pedagogy, and theories of historical consciousness. It draws on the work of scholars such as Jörn Rüsen’s typologies of historical consciousness and related South African studies that highlight the intersection of history, democracy, and social justice. This framework provides the analytical lens through which first-year education students’ imagined futures are examined, foregrounding the dynamic interplay between personal narratives, collective memory, and broader societal discourses.

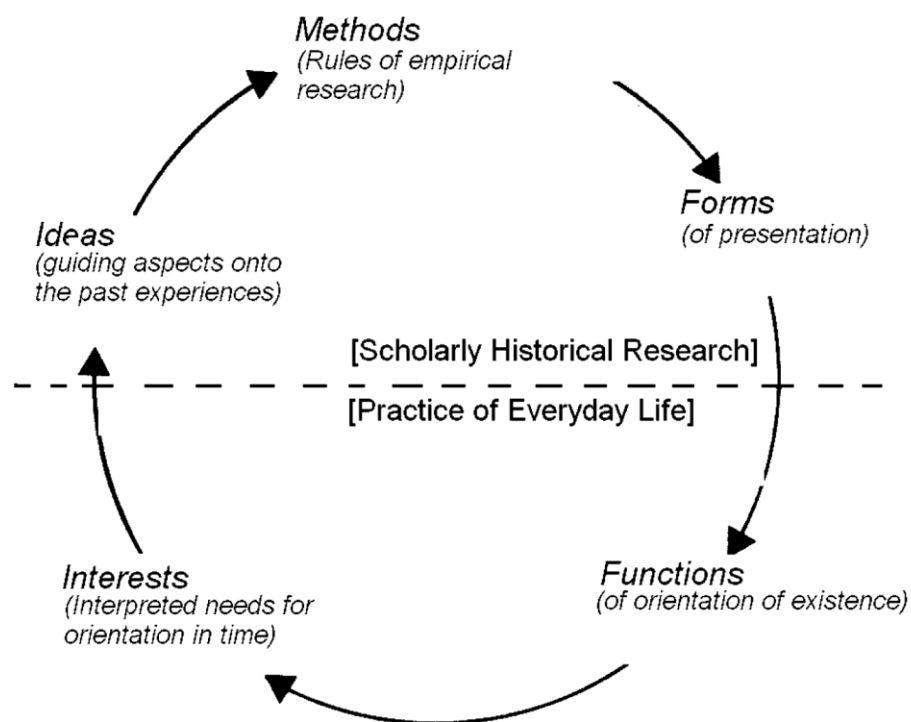
Jörn Rüsen developed the concept of historical consciousness and has since become a central theoretical lens in history education. Rüsen (as cited in Apostolidou, 2013) describes historical consciousness as the capacity of individuals to use knowledge of the past to orient themselves in the present and to imagine possible futures. It involves more than the recollection of historical facts — it is an interpretive and meaning-making process. Grant and Rogers (2019) stress that historical consciousness is embodied, entangled with identity, and

shaped by social and cultural conditions. Seixas (2004) emphasises that historical consciousness entails recognising continuity and change over time, linking individual experiences with broader collective narratives.

Rüsen's process model of historical thought (Figure 1) explains how individuals navigate time by interpreting the tension between expectations and experiences. When the past contradicts present realities or desired futures, people must reconcile these differences through historical reasoning. For first-year education students, whose lives have been shaped by both the promises of democracy and the persistence of inequality, historical consciousness provides a lens for making sense of contradictions between the ideals of equality and the realities of poverty, exclusion, and limited opportunity.

Figure 1

The Process Model of Historical Thought by Rüsen (Körber, 2015, p. 10)



Ahonen (2005) and Lee (2012) elaborated on Rüsen's ideas, identifying four types of historical consciousness:

1. Traditional consciousness– viewing the past as stable, continuous, and unchanging; often reinforcing established traditions and identities.
2. Exemplary consciousness– using historical examples to draw moral lessons for the present.
3. Critical consciousness– questioning and deconstructing traditional or exemplary narratives, highlighting contradictions and silences.
4. Genetic consciousness– recognising change over time and the possibility of transformation, linking past experiences to present challenges and future possibilities

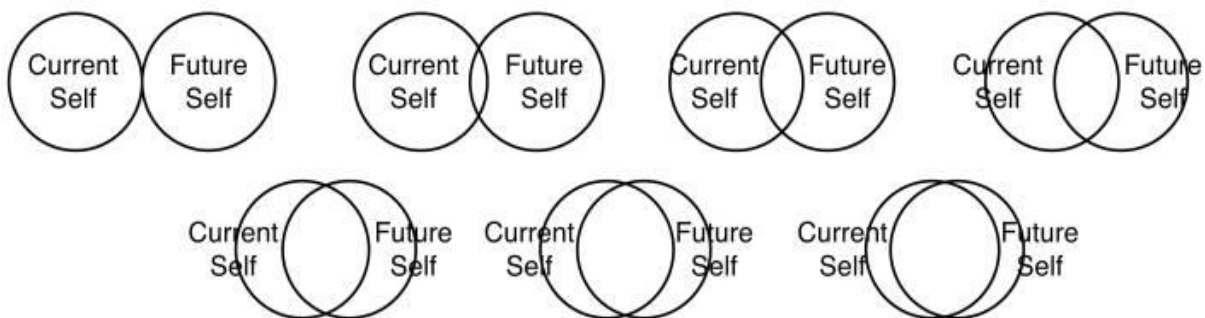
These typologies are not mutually exclusive but represent positions on a continuum. Individuals may shift between them depending on context, personal experience, and societal conditions.

While historical consciousness focuses on the relationship between past, present, and future, the theory of future self-continuity complements it by emphasising individuals' psychological connection with their future selves. Hoyle and Sherrill (2006) argue that those who can vividly imagine their future selves are more likely to engage in present actions that support long-term goals. Ersner-Hershfield et al. (2009) (Figure 2 below) add that individuals with stronger future self-continuity demonstrate greater self-regulation and resilience in the face of challenges.

The theory of future self-continuity indicates that one needs to cultivate and nurture the relationship with one's future self (Robson, 2022). Furthermore, people with a vivid sense of their future self-act in ways that make their present and future easier. The future-self continuity scale uses a Venn diagram overlay to show that the more intertwined one is with their future self the higher the chance of their current actions and habits supporting their relationship with their own imagined future (Hoyle & Sherrill, 2006). Those with a sense of self-continuity may be highly problematic in that they will find themselves at school and realise that it may not be what they imagined it to be, thus seeing their career as dim and grim.

Figure 1

Future Self-Continuity Scale (Ersner-Hershfield, Garton, Ballard, Samanez-Larkin & Knutson, 2009:282)



When combined, these theories suggest that students understand the past (historical consciousness) and how they relate to their future selves (future self-continuity) co-produce their imagined futures. A student with genetic historical consciousness and strong future self-continuity may envision a transformative role as a teacher who reshapes education. In contrast, a student with fatalistic consciousness and weak self-continuity may struggle to imagine agency or meaningful change.

Scholarship on historical consciousness in South Africa remains limited but growing. Angier (2017) highlights that young South Africans' engagement with national histories is uneven, shaped by the continuing salience of race, inequality, and identity. Wassermann (2018) shows that first-year education students' narratives of South African history are deeply marked by experiences of marginalisation, exclusion, and structural inequality, raising important questions about how such perspectives might inform their imagined futures.

The post-apartheid higher education landscape itself is deeply embedded in historical struggles. The Education White Paper 3 (Department of Education, 1997) articulated the need for transformation, equity, and redress, yet progress has been uneven (Badat, 2009). The #FeesMustFall protests (2015–2016) demonstrated that for many students, higher education continues to reflect colonial hierarchies and exclusions (Glenn, 2016). The Daily Maverick

reports on young people's frustration with unemployment (Brooks, 2021), distrust in the state (Sikhakhane, 2024), and demand for meaningful work (De Lannoy & Surianarain, 2024), further illustrating the social context within which students imagine the future.

Beyond history education, transdisciplinary scholarship emphasises that understanding complex societal issues — such as inequality, decolonisation, and democratic citizenship — requires integrating insights from multiple fields (education, sociology, political science, cultural studies). Stuart Hall's theory of representation offers a critical lens to examine how historical narratives are constructed and contested, shaping identities and future possibilities (Rojek, 2009). Engaging with such theories fosters a more critical and transformative historical consciousness for education students, equipping them to challenge dominant narratives and encourage learners to imagine inclusive futures.

In addition, posthumanist perspectives (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008) remind us that historical consciousness is about human agency and the entanglements of humans with technology, environment, and non-human actors. For students who imagine technologically advanced futures (Theme 2), posthumanist theory helps explain how digital tools, AI, and virtual platforms become part of their future-oriented consciousness.

In sum, the literature suggests that historical consciousness provides a powerful lens for understanding how young people navigate the tensions between South Africa's past, its present realities, and their imagined futures. However, the voices of South African education students remain underexplored — a gap this study seeks to address. By examining the narratives and thematic patterns that emerge, this study seeks to understand pre-service history teachers' imaginings of the future based on past injustices and present realities. In doing so, it also addresses the gap in scholarship on historical consciousness in the global South and contributes towards teacher education in South Africa.

Method

Research Method and Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach along with interpretivism, with an in-depth focus on social constructivism as the research paradigm to investigate how first-year education students at the University of Pretoria imagine the future through their historical consciousness. A qualitative approach was appropriate given the study's focus on meaning-making, subjectivity, and interpretation (Liamputtong, 2010). By adopting a qualitative approach, this study attempts to engage with participants in their natural setting while examining real-life events and situations as captured in their responses (Goodman, 2011).

The interpretivist paradigm, focusing on social constructivism, guided the inquiry, recognising that knowledge is socially constructed through interactions and experiences (Maree, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, interpretivism seeks to create meaningful understanding based on people's experiences. Concerning this study, meaning is created through the experiences of first-year Faculty of Education students at the University of Pretoria and their historical consciousness. By situating the research within social constructivism, the study acknowledged that students' historical consciousness is not formed in isolation but is shaped by familial, cultural, educational, and political influences. This paradigm enabled the researchers to foreground participants' voices and perspectives while critically reflecting on how historical legacies intersect with contemporary contexts.

Population and Sample

A descriptive case study design (Maree, 2019) was adopted to provide a nuanced understanding of first-year education students' imagined futures within a specific institutional and societal context. The case study focused on one Faculty of Education at a large South African university, allowing for an in-depth exploration of students' perspectives while situating them within the broader post-apartheid educational landscape.

Of 736,820 learners who completed the National Senior Certificate examination in 2017, 208,661 entered public universities in 2018 (Statista, 2022). Eight hundred first-year students completed the survey within the selected Faculty of Education, and 155 responses were purposively selected for analysis. The sampling strategy combined purposive and random elements to ensure diversity of perspectives while maintaining analytical depth (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Non-probability purposive sampling was used as the data sampling technique for this study. Purposive sampling is used to gain insight, discover and understand something about the participants of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, "participants in purposive sampling are selected as they are seen to represent characteristics that are of interest to the research topics at hand" (Maree, 2019: 389). Through purposive sampling, participants completed open-ended surveys to allow the researchers to harvest information-rich sources related to this study. Participants consisted of students from one university, one faculty, and one campus and were all enrolled to become teachers.

Data Collection Tools

Data was gathered through an open-ended questionnaire administered to all first-year students in the Faculty of Education in 2018. The questionnaire comprised 12 questions, as developed by one of the authors of this study, but for this article, the analysis focused exclusively on Question 8: "Tell me, how do you see the future of South Africa?" This question was selected because it explicitly invited students to engage with the concept of an imagined future, thereby providing a fertile site for examining the interplay between historical consciousness and future self-continuity. The questionnaire, as part of a larger study, looked at issues related to Information Technology, Social Justice, Historical Voice and the future.

In qualitative research, grounded in interpretivism and social constructivism, validity and reliability of the study are approached through the criteria of trustworthiness. This study uses criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure the study remains trustworthy. These criteria include credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. To ensure credibility in a study, mechanical means to record the data should be used (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). In this study, credibility was ensured through the electronic transcription of the data without any alterations to it, with all grammatical and spelling errors. Similarly, the study remains dependable as the data were transcribed and recorded transparently and authentically (Tong & Dew, 2016). The open-ended questionnaires minimised researcher influence, thus supporting confirmability, which ensures that participant views are not influenced by the researcher in any way. Transferability refers to the ability to include detailed descriptions of the location, context, and people while making sure that the researcher is transparent about trustworthiness and analysis (Gunawan, 2015). This was ensured by providing an account of the research context and participant characteristics. While the findings remain context-bound, this transparency allows for the determination of the applicability of insights to similar contexts.

Analysis of Data

The analysis of data related to the historical consciousness of university students regarding the imagined future made use of an inductive thematic analysis using open coding as recommended by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2016) and revealed five themes. Responses were read multiple times, and descriptive codes — defined as short phrases capturing the essence of a text segment — were applied. Codes were then grouped into categories and refined iteratively until data saturation was reached. This process led to identifying five themes that captured the range of students' imagined futures: Romantics, Pragmatists, Fatalists, Realists, and Avoiders.

Multiple researchers were involved in coding to enhance inter-coder reliability. Reflexive journals were kept to acknowledge the positionality of the researchers as history education scholars who share, to varying degrees, in the South African context being studied. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Pretoria (EDU 120/21), and participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity.

Theme 1: Romantics. This theme reflected an idealised, hopeful vision of a future characterised by endless opportunities and progress. The participants imagined a future that would not contain the difficulties of the past or present, and could be envisioned as bright, great, and successful. Theme 1 comprises 3 subthemes; the first subtheme relates to togetherness and unity, while subtheme 2 imagines a world filled with endless opportunities. The third subtheme consists of participants who imagined the future as better than before, without mentioning any real-life challenges that they may face in the future.

Theme 2: Pragmatists. Participants in this theme imagined the future with guarded hope, recognising that positive change depends on factors such as advancements in technology and access to education. This theme reflects a more grounded historical consciousness where the future is seen as attainable but conditional. In this theme, participants imagined future destinations but also emphasised that certain key conditions would be necessary for them to be realised. Some examples of these great destinations include good education and improved technology in the future.

Theme 3: Realists. This theme represents a middle ground between optimism and pessimism as participants recognise historical injustices and acknowledge the uncertainties of the future while expressing cautious hope for the future. The future of South Africa was imagined through lenses of hope, in which participants envisioned a positive future for the country but also acknowledged that this could not be taken as certain. Within this theme, subtheme 1 is using the wounds of the past to imagine a better future, and subtheme 2 is hoping that the future will be better than the past and the present

Theme 4: Fatalists. Participants in this theme imagined the future as one that was filled with despondency. Their narratives foregrounded aspects such as unemployment, violence, poverty, and racism as part of the future. In the first subtheme, participants imagine doom and despair through unemployment and lack of education. Similarly, subtheme 2 speaks of participants who imagine racism, violence and poverty as key aspects that will destroy the future of South Africa. Throughout theme 4, there is a general sense of doom and despair, as participants blame the government (subtheme 3) and fellow young South Africans (subtheme 4), and the education system for destroying their futures.

Theme 5: Avoiders. The final theme comprises participants who did not answer any question and those who chose to remain silent about the way in which they imagined the future of South Africa. These silences can be seen as a form of disengagement, perhaps signalling

uncertainty or disillusionment in articulating the future based on their historical consciousness. Theme 5 is made up of two subthemes: those that did not answer the survey question (subtheme 1) and silences, which are key aspects that are missing from the data (Subtheme 2).

Results

The analysis revealed five broad thematic orientations in how first-year education students imagined South Africa's future. These themes illustrate the diversity, complexity, and contradictions in their historical consciousness and future self-conceptions. The researchers' areas of expertise include historical consciousness, imagined futures, youth, and history, and they contribute to the thematic analysis of this study.

Theme 1: Romantics

Nearly half (47%) of participants fell into the Romantics category. These students envisioned the future in highly optimistic, sometimes idealised terms, often overlooking structural constraints. Their responses reflected a belief that unity, peace, prosperity, and education are key to transformation. In this theme, participant responses suggest that South Africa's future is successful and exceedingly bright. These responses do not anticipate any challenges or real-life issues when envisioning the future of South Africa, thereby romanticising it.

Subtheme 1: Unity, Peace, and Togetherness. Through romanticising the future, participants generally envision unity, peace, and standing together. Participant 114 noted: "I see the future of South Africa as a united country striving for the protection and loving our nation as a whole." And participant 059, who wrote: "I see a unity standing together" when imagining the future.

Both responses do not provide context as to what in the future would embody unity and whether this unity could be achieved in the future. However, this longing for unity may be tied to wanting a better future than the past or the present.

Unity, standing together and peace were further imagined by participant 113 who imagined the future by stating that "I see the future of South Africa so bright and shining, I see peace, from all different races, cultures, traditions. I see people coming together as one, and jobs being available". Furthermore, another participant imagined the future as "very positive and very diverse". These imaginings romanticise the future by highlighting ideas of a bright, shining and peaceful future. Moreover, another participant continued to romanticise the future through economic prosperity, where there will be jobs for everyone. These responses reflect a historical consciousness that looks backwards at apartheid-era divisions and forward toward reconciliation and collective belonging. The romanticisation of unity demonstrates an aspiration to overcome historical fragmentation.

Subtheme 2: Opportunities and Progress. Within the theme of romanticising the imagined future, a second group of participants emerged who imagined the future as full of opportunities and possibilities.

Participant 027 imagined "a good future with many possibilities and work opportunities." Such statements indicate a belief in education and professional mobility as vehicles for personal and societal advancement. Here, students draw on exemplary historical consciousness, projecting forward from the sacrifices of previous generations to a future of opportunity. Another participant imagined South Africa to be a better place in the future, where growth has taken place, thus alluding to opportunities and growth as part of the imagined

future. Participant 072 also imagined South Africa as flourishing towards a different future. In this theme, participants not only mentioned their desired futures but also highlighted aspects that they wish to see less of in the future. Participant 109, for example, imagined the future through “less poverty and more love”.

Another participant also imagined the future as full of opportunities, as they indicated that “South Africa will be a well-developed and stable country in the future.” By mentioning stabilisation in the future, this participant longs for a country that will develop or stabilise without explaining further how this development will take place and rather romanticises opportunities for all South Africans.

Subtheme 3: Education as the Key to Success. Several participants identified education as central to national progress. Participant 024 envisioned “a future that will be stepping into another level educationally. I see it having a bright future because of the bright teachers it will have.” This reflects an optimistic linkage between their own career trajectory and the broader educational transformation of society.

While uplifting, such romantic projections may risk oversimplifying complex social realities. The Romantics’ visions often lacked recognition of structural challenges such as inequality, unemployment, and governance failures. Their orientation suggests a weaker sense of future self-continuity, in that the imagined futures resemble dreams of progress rather than actionable pathways grounded in present struggles.

Theme 2: Pragmatists

Approximately 20% of participants were identified as Pragmatists. Unlike the Romantics, Pragmatists acknowledged that achieving a better future required addressing structural conditions, particularly through education and technology. Participants in this theme imagined that the future would be good, but that certain key aspects are necessary for a good future to be realised. In this theme, the future is not detached from present-day reality and focuses on advancing current-day issues like education and technological development in South Africa.

Subtheme 1: Education as an Enabler of Change. This subtheme highlights the role of education in imagining the future, as participants believe that becoming a teacher will contribute to a better education for all. This is because there would be more professionals trained to assist other South Africans, leading to a better education system. Participant 004 stated: “We can have a good future as long as those studying now are willing to make a difference.” This reflects a strong sense of future self-continuity, where current effort and sacrifice are directly connected to the possibility of an improved collective future. Education is seen not just as personal advancement but as a tool for societal transformation.

Even though some participants did not explicitly mention a good future, their responses suggest that education is key to imagining a better future. For example, Participant 085 believed in “more young people getting the chance to go to school and succeed”, and Participant 045 explained that “the future of South Africa is looking bright. More people are eager to learn and empower themselves with education”. Another participant also mentioned “better schools, with better education” in the future, associating good education with a better imagined future. Participant 053 also felt that “firstly, most South Africans are now educated, so I can surely say that in the future we will have South Africans who will love education and make our country a better place”. Thus, the idea was that better schools and an improved education system were what was needed to cater to those who wanted to learn, as more access to schooling should lead to an overall improvement of South Africa.

Subtheme 2: Technological Advancement and Modernisation. Participants in this subtheme imagine the future to be great, but only if there were improved technologies. The technological advancement ranges from the betterment of current facilities to better accessibility. For example, one participant envisioned “a future full of technology, where cars can fly, and everything is more accessible.” While imaginative, such responses also reflected awareness of global technological trends and aspirations for South Africa to participate fully in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Here, students situate their future within a broader global narrative of modernisation.

Participant 058's imaginings are a case in point. They saw “the future of South Africa with no physical labour, I see computers everywhere”, indicating that the way in which South Africa could be great was through the use of 4IR technology. This thinking was echoed by Participant 060, who saw the future of “SA as a ‘smart country’ where almost everything will be taught with some sort of technology”.

The Pragmatists demonstrate genetic historical consciousness, recognising that change is possible but contingent on concrete conditions such as quality education, technological innovation, and good governance. Their perspectives align with global policy discourses around education for sustainable development and the skills needed for the 21st century.

Theme 3: Realists

In this theme, reality is foregrounded as participants in this theme use contemporary social and economic issues such as poverty, racism, inequality and other social ills to imagine the future. Through social issues, the aftermath of the past and the tempered reality of the present are used to imagine the future. Therefore, participants are rooted in reality as they look backwards to the past to make sense of their present realities in order to imagine their future.

For example, Participant 040 stated that “if we do not fix the situation, it is a dark future, but if we talk about the problems and open the wounds to let it heal, it would be bright” thereby alluding to South Africa's troubled past, current democracy and the wounds left behind that must heal in order for the future to be bright. Another explicit example of the lingering effects of apartheid can be seen through participant 092 who imagined the future of South Africa as “one where racism is not given or received from any race to any race. I see a SA where there is a small wage gap, and where education is of an equal standard across the country”. Participant 154 also imagined the future of South Africa as one where maybe things would be better by emphasising that “there is change, but it's on a slow pace; maybe in the future things are going to be better”, thus indicating that the process was cumbersome, but there was hope that the future would bring change.

Theme 4: Fatalists

A significant 16% of participants expressed Fatalistic views, imagining South Africa's future as doomed, bleak, and largely beyond their control. These students often drew directly from negative experiences of poverty, unemployment, crime, and government corruption.

Subtheme 1: Youth as a Source of Decline. Participant 012 lamented: “I think the future of South Africa is doomed. The youth does not care about education; they are only concerned with feeding their addictions...” This reflects a traditional historical consciousness where the past and present hardships are projected into the future without the possibility of meaningful change. The impact that the youth of South Africa have had on the imagined future was further highlighted by Participant 090 who stated, “I don't see a very good future and we as the youth need to be the change that we would like to see”, thereby alluding to the idea that only the current youth of South Africa could bring about change. This was further highlighted by

Participant 122, who argued: “I really hope for a great future for South Africa, and I hope the new generation will make South Africa a better place, because if things will be going on as they are now, I honestly can’t foresee a good future for SA.”

Subtheme 2: Distrust of Political Leadership. Participant 030 argued: “If the government, at the present moment, does not change for the better, South Africa will have difficulty coping...” This points to disillusionment with the post-apartheid political settlement and the perceived failure of leaders to address systemic issues.

Participant 126 also believed that “the future of SA is going to be a hard place to live in because of the political problems and also money problems”, thus indicating that politics and political and economic instability hindered imagining a good future for South Africa.

Subtheme 3: The Persistence of Racism. The Fatalists illustrate the danger of a truncated historical consciousness: rather than seeing history as open to transformation, they perceive continuity only negatively. However, paradoxically, their awareness of social ills may equip them with insights that could, if nurtured, be mobilised.

Participant 031 wrote: “I do not see that racism will ever be a thing of the past...” Here, the persistence of apartheid legacies informs a bleak future vision in which inequality and racial division remain insurmountable. Participant 037, who indicated that “the future of South Africa is looking very bad as our people cannot live in peace or accept each other”. Participant 078 stated, “How I want to see it and how I see it are not the same. I want SA [to] let go of the past and people to be kind and nice with each other, but I feel, because of apartheid, I don’t think it is going to change quickly”. This indicates that how they saw South Africa’s future and how they wished to see it were not the same, which alludes to a double consciousness.

Theme 5: Avoiders

In this theme, silences within the data are foregrounded as it refers to those who did not answer the questionnaire but also to the issues that did not emerge through participant responses. These issues are relevant to the future of South Africa but were not mentioned by participants.

Subtheme 1: No Answer is An Answer. In this subtheme, the absence of answers to the questionnaire is discussed. The participants may not have answered the question due to being unaware of the questionnaire, while others may not have had the skills, competence or willingness to answer the question. Other participants may not have been motivated to think about the future of South Africa (Langkamp et al., 2010). Participants in this study may also display a lack of future self-continuity and were not able to use their historical consciousness to imagine the future of South Africa.

Subtheme 2: Silence Speaks a Thousand Words. In relation to the question not being answered, silences emerged from the data. These silences highlight key elements that did not feature in the imagining of the future of South Africa for example, the future of South Africa was not imagined in relation to Africa and the rest of the world and was rather seen as an inward geopolitical construct. Furthermore, the role of women in the future was not given much thought despite the fact that most of the university students enrolled to become teachers are women (Wassermann, 2022). Therefore, feminist views and ideas should have come through strongly in the data, yet it was absent.

Conclusion

This study has explored how first-year education students at a South African university draw on their historical consciousness to imagine the future. The findings reveal a spectrum of orientations: Romantics who envision utopian futures of unity and prosperity; Pragmatists who recognise the role of education and technology in shaping progress; Fatalists who foresee decline rooted in persistent inequality, poor governance, and racism; Realists who balance acknowledgement of historical wounds with cautious optimism; and Avoiders who remain silent, reflecting uncertainty or disengagement. Together, these themes illuminate the diverse and sometimes contradictory ways young people navigate the entanglement of past, present, and future. Theoretically, the findings extend Rösen's typology of historical consciousness by demonstrating how orientations toward the past intersect with the psychological concept of future self-continuity. Students' ability or inability to connect their present selves with their imagined futures significantly shapes whether they adopt romantic, pragmatic, critical, fatalistic, or avoidant positions. Moreover, by integrating insights from representation theory and posthumanism, the study shows how students' imaginaries are also shaped by broader cultural narratives and by their engagement with technology, ecology, and global discourses.

This study set out to explore how first-year education students in South Africa imagine the country's future through the lens of their historical consciousness. The findings show that students' perspectives are situated along a continuum ranging from deeply romantic idealism to fatalistic despair, with pragmatic, realistic, and avoidant positions in between. This continuum highlights the interplay of Rösen's typology of historical consciousness with the psychological dimension of future self-continuity, and it underscores the importance of considering both historical and prospective orientations when analysing youth perspectives (Lee, 2012).

The five themes identified in this study reflect varying degrees of alignment with Rösen's four types of historical consciousness. The Romantics draw on a traditional and exemplary orientation. Their narratives highlight continuity, unity, and moral lessons from the past, yet often lack engagement with the structural barriers that continue to constrain South African society. In contrast, the Pragmatists demonstrate elements of genetic consciousness, recognising that change is possible but conditional on education, professional commitment, and technological innovation. The Realists, meanwhile, adopt a more balanced approach characteristic of critical and genetic consciousness: they acknowledge the deep scars of colonialism and apartheid but retain belief in collective healing and democratic collaboration.

The Fatalists reflect a restrictive traditional orientation, where past and present injustices are projected indefinitely into the future. Their perspectives resonate with Oelofse and Vries's findings (2016), who noted that young South Africans often experience "shame" when confronting apartheid history, which may foster despair rather than agency. The Avoiders embody a form of suspended historical consciousness, where silence signals either disengagement, fatigue, or a lack of tools to grapple with the enormity of South Africa's challenges.

The concept of future self-continuity (Hoyle & Sherrill, 2006; Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2009) helps explain why some students could imagine positive futures while others could not. Those who felt a strong connection between their present selves and future identities — particularly Pragmatists and some Realists — envisioned themselves as teachers actively shaping an improved society. They understood their current studies as investments in the future, consistent with the idea that a vivid sense of "future self" encourages present-day perseverance.

Conversely, Fatalists and Avoiders exhibited weak or fractured connections with their future selves. For them, present hardships, systemic barriers, and ongoing social crises overshadowed the possibility of meaningful transformation. Their narratives suggest a pressing need for educational interventions that strengthen students' capacities to imagine themselves as agents of change rather than passive victims of history.

The findings must also be read against the backdrop of post-apartheid education policy. The Education White Paper 3 (DoE, 1997) explicitly positioned higher education as central to achieving equity, development, and democratic citizenship. More recently, DHET initiatives, including the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP) and the articulation of digital learning competencies, aim to promote inclusivity and prepare graduates for an uncertain, technology-driven future. However, the students' responses in this study reveal a disconnect between policy aspirations and lived experiences. The persistence of inadequate schooling in many communities and the challenges of financing higher education undermine young people's ability to imagine equitable futures.

This disconnect underscores the urgency of embedding historical consciousness and future studies within teacher education curricula. By explicitly engaging students with the legacies of apartheid and colonialism, and by connecting these to contemporary policy debates — such as the decolonisation of curricula, the imperative of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), and the skills agenda of the World Economic Forum (WEF) — teacher education can provide students with critical tools for interpreting their contexts and imagining alternative futures. Such approaches align with calls in South African higher education for transformative pedagogy (Badat, 2009) and with global initiatives to prepare students for complex social and environmental challenges.

The analysis also highlights the value of a transdisciplinary framing for understanding and cultivating historical consciousness. For example, the Romantics' emphasis on unity resonates with sociological and philosophical debates about social cohesion. The Pragmatists' optimism about technology links directly to educational technology research, including emerging innovations seeking to democratise learning access in resource-scarce contexts. The Fatalists' concerns about governance and inequality intersect with political science analyses of state legitimacy and youth marginalisation (Sikhakhane, 2024).

Furthermore, Stuart Hall's theory of representation (Hall, 1997) provides a critical lens for understanding how young South Africans position themselves within narratives of the nation. Students' perceptions of racism as an enduring feature of the future suggest that dominant narratives of a "rainbow nation" may ring hollow when lived experiences contradict official discourses of reconciliation. Similarly, posthumanist perspectives remind us that imagined futures are about human agency and ecological and technological entanglements — a theme evident in participants' aspirations for a technologically advanced South Africa. Incorporating these transdisciplinary frameworks into teacher education could encourage students to approach history not as a static account of the past, but as a dynamic resource for imagining inclusive futures. This would strengthen their capacity to guide learners in thinking critically about continuity and change and develop agency within complex social systems.

The findings suggest several implications for the design and practice of teacher education: 1. Curricular Integration of Historical Consciousness: Teacher education programmes should deliberately incorporate historical consciousness as a pedagogical tool, enabling students to connect past injustices with present realities and future possibilities. 2. Emphasis on Future-Oriented Pedagogy: Courses on curriculum studies and pedagogy should include modules on futures literacy, equipping future teachers to help learners imagine

alternative futures and to see themselves as active agents of change. 3. Transdisciplinary Learning: Embedding insights from sociology, psychology, political science, and cultural studies within history education can deepen students' understanding of the complex contexts they will teach in Support for Student Agency: Given the prevalence of fatalistic and avoidant orientations, teacher education institutions must invest in mentorship, psychosocial support, and career guidance to nurture resilience and future self-continuity among students. 4. Policy Alignment: Teacher education should align with national policy imperatives, including DHET's transformation agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, linking classroom practice to broader social justice and development aims.

From a policy perspective, the results underscore the ongoing tension between the aspirations of post-apartheid education policy and the realities experienced by students. The Education White Paper 3 (DoE, 1997) envisioned a higher education system that would redress inequalities and foster democratic citizenship, yet many students continue to experience exclusion and disillusionment. Addressing this requires more than material redress; it demands deliberate pedagogical work in developing students' historical consciousness and future literacies. Doing so will ensure that future teachers are not only conveyors of knowledge but also facilitators of critical reflection and imagination.

For teacher education, the implications are profound. Programmes must engage with students' orientations toward the past and future as part of their professional formation. By fostering critical and genetic historical consciousness, education faculties can help students move beyond fatalism and romanticism, equipping them to cultivate agency and hope in their learners. Embedding transdisciplinary approaches and linking teacher education explicitly to national transformation agendas and global educational priorities (such as the SDGs and Education 4.0) will further ensure that graduates are prepared to address complex social challenges.

The imagined futures articulated by first-year education students reveal both the fragility and resilience of youth perspectives in South Africa. While some students project despair, others articulate visions of unity, technological progress, and educational transformation. Recognising and nurturing these diverse orientations is essential if higher education is to fulfill its transformative mandate. Future research should extend this inquiry across faculties and contexts, comparing how different groups of young people imagine their futures in relation to history. Such comparative work, particularly across African and broader Global South contexts, would illuminate the ways in which historical consciousness and future self-continuity operate in diverse settings.

Ultimately, the study affirms that historical consciousness is not only about interpreting the past but also about imagining alternative futures. For future teachers, cultivating a critical and transformative historical consciousness is essential, as it will shape how they guide learners in understanding the past, navigating the present, and envisioning more just, inclusive, and democratic futures for South Africa.

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