

Exploring Teachers' Understanding of Skills-Based Teaching Approach in History

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Abstract: This empirical paper explores teachers' understanding of the Skills-Based Teaching Approach (SBTA) in history at primary schools in the Motheo Education District. Prompted by the shift towards skills-based learning, the study addresses the challenges teachers face in interpreting and applying skills such as critical thinking, historical inquiry, and student-centred learning. The research adopts a qualitative approach, utilising a constructivist paradigm and practice architecture theory as the theoretical framework. The case study design employed in this research facilitated the exploration of SBTA in history within the Motheo Education District, with data collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. The significant challenges identified include varying levels of understanding of SBTA, difficulties in balancing content coverage with skills development, and limited professional training. However, successes in promoting active learning and critical engagement were also noted. The study highlights the need for stronger professional development programmes and support systems to better equip teachers. The findings contribute to discussions on enhancing skills-focused pedagogies in history education, offering recommendations to bridge the gaps between policy intentions and classroom practices.

Keywords: Skills-based teaching, history education, critical thinking, historical thinking skills.

1. Introduction

In recent years, educators have increasingly recognised the value of the skills-based teaching approach (SBTA) in history education, as there has been a shift from rote memorisation to actively developing critical competencies. Lee (2023) defines the SBTA as an approach that empowers students through critical thinking and enquiry, helping teachers guide learners in questioning historical narratives and evaluating evidence. Bwembya (2024) builds on this idea, defining SBTA as one that prioritises source analysis, enabling teachers to support students in assessing the authenticity and perspective of historical documents. Chimbunde et al. (2023) also highlight that teaching skills such as chronological understanding and historical literacy can help students contextualise events, which is a vital tool for teachers aiming to develop a comprehensive grasp of cause-and-effect relationships in history.

The SBTA method is fundamental to education because it addresses the shortcomings of traditional teaching methods that rely on rote learning. Critical engagement with content is enhanced by historical thinking skills, which are at the heart of SBTA. Kelezsade et al. (2023) assert that these skills assist learners in making connections between historical events and current issues. These skills are necessary to create well-rounded individuals who can think critically about information, which is vital in a time when information is abundant but often contested. Since studying history is essential for understanding how societies function, teaching students to think critically about history using a skills-based approach is very important.

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In addition, this method of teaching history facilitates the inclusion of more students, adapts to different school settings (from urban to rural), and provides all students with equal learning opportunities (Buck et al., 2023). As the name suggests, the SBTA is a teaching approach that focuses on building specific skills and competencies in students rather than merely imparting facts. SBTA focuses on developing historical thinking skills in history classes, which include examining primary and secondary sources, determining causation, and constructing evidence-based arguments (Lim et al., 2023). Individuals need these skills to understand narratives from the past and how they can be applied in the present.

Haydn and Stephen (2021), Pambudi and Harjanto (2020), and Chimbunde et al. (2023) have researched the benefits of SBTA in history education, but relatively little research has been conducted on how teachers understand and implement this method. Researchers such as Mtshali and Singh-Pillay (2023) have focused solely on student outcomes, neglecting the importance of teachers' understanding of a skills-based programme. This research addresses that gap by assessing teachers' understanding of SBTA in history teaching. Furthermore, there is scant research on the contextual applicability of SBTA in non-Western settings, particularly in rural and underprivileged schools (Buck et al., 2023). This study emerged from the growing recognition of the importance of teaching learners how to think historically. South Africa is among the countries that employ skills-based lessons emphasising critical thinking and problem-solving (Khethwa, 2020).

Filling this gap revealed how teachers' understanding of SBTA affects their teaching and students' learning. It also highlighted the obstacles teachers encounter in implementing SBTA, especially in non-Western and under-resourced educational contexts where professional development and resources are inadequate (Buck et al., 2023). This study contributes to the existing knowledge of skills-based approaches in history teaching to improve teacher understanding, curriculum design, and student engagement. It enhances teaching methods that prepare students to engage critically with historical knowledge.

1.1 Problem statement

History education increasingly employs the Skills-Based Teaching Approach (SBTA) to foster critical thinking and analysis. However, in under-resourced contexts such as South African schools, teachers' understanding and application of SBTA remain inconsistent, limiting its effectiveness (Handoko et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2023). Studies show that many history teachers struggle to evaluate data, recognise historical relevance, and establish cause-and-effect linkages, often reverting to content-focused teaching due to examination pressures and limited professional development opportunities (King, 2025). Despite the benefits of SBTA, few empirical studies in the South African context examine teachers' understanding of the approach, creating a gap that this study addresses. It is essential to explore teachers' conceptualisation of SBTA, as it shapes classroom practice and student engagement. This study examined teachers' knowledge and practices, particularly in under-resourced contexts. The findings will contribute valuable insights to strengthen skills-based history teaching through targeted, context-relevant professional development.

The study is informed by the following research question: *What are history teachers' understanding and experiences of implementing the Skills-Based Teaching Approach in primary school history teaching?*

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon the theory of practice architecture developed by Kemmis et al. (2014), which provides a framework for understanding how professional practices, such as teaching, are shaped by interrelated social, cultural, and material arrangements. The theory posits that "educational practices are intricately shaped by various conditions, including language, relationships, and material arrangements" (Mahon et al., 2016). Practice architecture is a contemporary social theory that focuses on understanding how practices are situated within specific social realities (Variyan &

Edwards-Groves, 2025). Initially introduced by Kemmis, the theory underscores the interconnectedness of cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements that influence practices in contexts such as schools and classrooms.

The significance of practice architecture theory to this study lies in its capacity to provide a deeper understanding of how teachers adopt and implement SBTA. By applying this framework, the study examines how language, relationships, activities, and environmental factors either support or impede consistent SBTA implementation. This theory has been effectively applied in analogous education research contexts. For instance, Edwards-Groves et al. (2010) employed practice architecture to investigate how professional mindfulness shapes teachers' pedagogical changes, while Mahon et al. (2017) demonstrated its utility in identifying enabling and constraining conditions in curriculum enactment. Furthermore, Chimbunde et al. (2024) applied the theory within the South African education context to explore how professional learning communities influence history teachers' curriculum implementation. The theory addresses the primary problem by elucidating how external structures and internal factors affect teachers' capacity to engage with SBTA effectively. Additionally, it contributes to the proposed solution by suggesting strategies to enhance teachers' understanding of these influences, thereby improving the development and sustainability of effective SBTA teaching practices. Overall, practice architecture offers a valuable lens for diagnosing challenges in implementation and guiding meaningful interventions to enhance teaching and learning outcomes. In this study, practice architecture facilitates an exploration of how teachers' understanding and implementation of SBTA are shaped not only by their beliefs but also by their working conditions, available resources, and institutional expectations.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Conceptualisation of skills-based teaching approach

The SBTA is an educational framework that emphasises developing specific, transferable skills in students rather than merely focusing on content knowledge (Chimbunde et al., 2023). In the context of history teaching, this approach prioritises analytical, critical thinking, and interpretive skills that enable students to engage deeply with historical content and sources. According to Widiadi (2021), the SBTA shifts the emphasis from memorising facts to fostering abilities such as source analysis, evidence-based argumentation, and historical inquiry, which are crucial for understanding and interpreting historical events and trends. Recent scholarship continues to refine how the SBTA is conceptualised within history education. Mbatha and Moreeng (2024) conceptualise the SBTA as a transformative pedagogy that enhances learners' historical thinking through inquiry and contextual learning, especially when embedded in local history projects. Their study found that teachers recognised the potential of the SBTA to help learners critically investigate historical narratives and construct meaning through source analysis. In a follow-up study, Mbatha and Moreeng (2025) report that although teachers attempt to apply the SBTA, its implementation often remains narrow, relying on familiar histories such as family or school topics. A strong understanding of the skills-based approach is essential for teachers, as it enables them to design lessons that go beyond traditional lecture-based content delivery. According to Nokes (2022), teachers who comprehend the core concepts of this approach are better equipped to create engaging, interactive lessons that foster students' skills in analysing primary sources, understanding historical context, and constructing evidence-based arguments. Teachers may struggle to facilitate meaningful historical inquiry and skill development without a sound grasp of this approach. Studying history demands critical thinking, source analysis, and drawing connections between past events and current societal issues. The SBTA aligns closely with these demands, as it trains students to examine historical sources critically, appreciate multiple perspectives, and develop well-reasoned conclusions.

According to Chu et al. (2021), the approach fosters skills such as source analysis, evidence evaluation, and contextual understanding, all of which students need to engage in historical inquiry.

Poor conceptualisation of the skills-based approach can negatively impact teaching practices and students' learning outcomes. Teachers who lack a clear understanding of this approach may resort to traditional, content-heavy teaching methods, limiting students' critical thinking and analytical skills development. Allender (2020) emphasises that such an approach may hinder students from fully engaging in historical inquiry, reducing opportunities for interactive, skills-focused learning. The lack of a solid skills-based framework in teaching could result in students being less prepared to analyse complex historical issues independently. Chimbunde et al. (2023) assert that teachers must integrate critical thinking abilities into their history lessons, as these are essential intellectual competencies that allow students to apply the lessons they learn within the context of their lives.

3.2 Nature of history and the need for skills-based history teaching

The call for a skills-based approach in history education reflects a broader shift in educational theory that prioritises critical engagement, historical interpretation, and inquiry over rote memorisation (Chimbunde et al., 2023). Recent scholarship acknowledges that history education should equip learners with the competencies to critically examine past events, question prevailing narratives, and make informed decisions (Nokes, 2022). In particular, critical historical thinking has been identified as central to fostering students' capacity to navigate complex social and political realities. The skills-based approach emphasises disciplinary thinking, enabling learners to engage with historical sources, analyse evidence, and construct coherent arguments (Nokes, 2022). Research by Martell and Stevens (2020) highlights that such practices deepen historical understanding and promote social responsibility and active citizenship. By encouraging students to interrogate diverse perspectives, history teaching moves beyond the mere transmission of facts towards fostering critical consciousness (Widiadi, 2021).

The application of practice architectures theory further enriches the understanding of how skills-based teaching is enacted within classrooms. According to Wilkson (2021), educational practices are shaped by cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements. These structures influence how teachers implement critical, skills-based approaches, thereby affecting access to resources, language use, and pedagogical freedom. Nwaila et al. (2024) argue that material-economic factors, such as the availability of primary sources and textbooks, play a significant role in either facilitating or constraining investigative learning. Through developing critical inquiry skills, students can engage meaningfully with historical narratives, appreciate diverse experiences, and cultivate a nuanced understanding of continuity and change (Sarangi & Ramachandran, 2024).

Recent studies also caution that without explicit attention to fostering critical skills, history education risks perpetuating passive learning and disengagement (Li et al., 2024). Therefore, a deliberate focus on embedding critical thinking, source analysis, and argumentation skills is necessary to transform history classrooms into spaces of inquiry and democratic learning.

3.3 The value and importance of a skills-based teaching approach in history education

The SBTA holds significant value in the domain of history education, as it prepares students to become critical thinkers capable of analysing past events and applying these insights to contemporary issues. Within history education, SBTA has garnered increasing recognition for fostering critical thinking, analytical skills, and adaptability among students (Bwembya, 2024). Unlike traditional methods that focus on the memorisation of historical facts, SBTA prioritises deeper, analytical engagement with history, enabling students to comprehend historical contexts, understand causality, and develop transferable skills (Chimbunde et al., 2023). By equipping students with such competencies, SBTA emerges as a vital approach in contemporary history education, particularly in a world shaped by rapid technological, social, and political changes (Fakude, 2023). Students engaged in SBTA are more likely to critically assess sources, question biases,

and interpret historical events through a multifaceted lens, moving beyond rote learning towards informed citizenship (Cleovoulou, 2021).

One of the primary values of SBTA in history teaching is its emphasis on critical thinking. According to Fikri (2025), students exposed to skills-based teaching are more capable of evaluating primary and secondary sources, assessing the reliability of information, and understanding complex historical narratives. Nokes (2022) further asserts that these skills enable students to make independent, informed decisions based on historical insights, thus preparing them for civic engagement. Widiadi (2021) supports this perspective, noting that in the digital age, critical analysis skills are indispensable for navigating vast amounts of information and avoiding misinformation.

Additionally, SBTA fosters adaptability and problem-solving skills that are essential for success in the twenty-first century. Sarangi and Ramachandran (2024) argue that skills-based approaches encourage students to critically synthesise evidence and consider multiple viewpoints, thereby preparing them for real-world problem-solving. These abilities align with broader educational goals aimed at cultivating flexibility, resilience, and lifelong learning.

For history educators, understanding the principles underpinning SBTA is crucial for its effective implementation. Blazar and Kraft (2017) suggest that educators must explicitly teach critical thinking strategies to assist students in engaging with complex historical issues and debates. An effective application of SBTA necessitates that educators facilitate active, inquiry-based learning environments, challenging students to engage deeply with historical content rather than passively absorbing information (Sikoyo & Isabirye, 2023).

Nevertheless, the implementation of SBTA presents challenges, requiring educators to transition from traditional, content-heavy teaching towards more student-centred pedagogies (Sikoyo et al., 2023). Professional development is thus necessary to equip educators with the strategies needed to successfully apply SBTA principles, particularly in contexts where curricular constraints, resource limitations, and ingrained traditional practices persist (Bwembya, 2024). Nonetheless, when educators grasp the value of SBTA, they can effectively incorporate these skills into their teaching, resulting in a richer, more engaging history curriculum.

4. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach grounded in a constructivist paradigm. Constructivism emphasises the importance of interpreting participants' lived experiences and social interactions, which is crucial in educational research for understanding subjective perspectives (Cekiso et al., 2025). This paradigm aligns with the study's goal of exploring primary history teachers' understanding of the SBTA within their teaching practices. A qualitative approach enables an in-depth, context-specific exploration of a phenomenon within its natural setting. In this study, it was appropriate to investigate how primary school history teachers in the Motheo District understand and implement the SBTA, particularly within under-resourced contexts. It allowed the researcher to examine teachers' professional practices as they are shaped by cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements, as proposed by the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008).

A case study design was adopted, with six primary history teachers from the Motheo District purposefully chosen as participants. This selection included both seasoned and beginner teachers to capture a range of insights into SBTA understanding. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Prior to the primary data collection, pre-interview discussions were held to enlighten participants about the study's goals and to establish rapport. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, maintaining participant confidentiality, and protecting data privacy. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, which is ideal for discovering patterns and themes in qualitative data (Christou, 2022). This strategy enabled a systematic and extensive assessment of

participants' responses. To improve the findings' validity and trustworthiness, member checking was utilised, allowing participants to examine and validate the quality of the interpreted data, ensuring that the conclusions accurately represented their opinions (Motulsky, 2021).

This study followed the ethical requirements of the Department of Basic Education in South Africa and the University of the Free State when conducting the research. Prior to conducting the study, the researcher obtained ethical approval from the University of the Free State (ethical clearance no. UFS-HSD2023/2047) and the Free State Department of Education. All ethical requirements regarding informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality were strictly adhered to.

5. Research Findings

This study explored history teachers' understanding of the skills-based approach to history teaching. In response to the question, "What is teachers' understanding of the skills-based approach?" the central theme that emerged is: *Teachers' Understanding of the Skills-based Teaching Approach*, while the following sub-themes emerged from the responses:

- SBTA in the promotion of critical thinking and analytical skills
- SBTA in the development of historical understanding
- SBTA as independent learning and transferable skills
- Scaffolding as an aid for SBTA

5.1 Promotes critical thinking and analytical skills

History teachers increasingly recognise the SBTA as an educational framework that focuses on developing specific, transferable competencies rather than merely transmitting content knowledge. In the context of history instruction, SBTA emphasises critical, analytical, and interpretive thinking skills, enabling learners to engage meaningfully with historical content, evaluate sources, and construct reasoned arguments (Bwembya, 2024; Widiadi, 2021). Teachers perceive SBTA as a means of fostering students' critical thinking and analytical skills, moving beyond the traditional focus on the rote memorisation of dates and facts. Participant 1 described SBTA as

"More about developing the skills to question and analyse events rather than just knowing dates and facts".

In addition, Participant 2 explained that:

"SBTA enables students to approach history with a critical eye, encouraging them to challenge conventional narratives and consider multiple perspectives".

Participant 3 further observed that:

"SBTA equips students with tools to critically assess the reliability and perspectives of historical sources, enhancing their analytical abilities".

Participant 4 summed it up well by emphasising that

"SBTA not only fosters critical thinking and analytical skills but also cultivates historical empathy".

These participant insights reflect broader scholarly perspectives. According to Nokes (2022), SBTA enhances critical engagement with historical content, aiding students in developing independent judgments. Similarly, Burkholder and Phillips (2022) found that SBTA helps students distinguish between primary and secondary sources, identify bias, and evaluate the credibility of information. Marttunen et al. (2021) emphasise that cultivating historical reasoning through SBTA strengthens inquiry-based learning and equips students to think like historians. This approach deepens learners' understanding of history while fostering their ability to relate past events to present-day issues.

5.2 Develops historical understanding

Historical understanding refers to making sense of the past by examining cause and effect, continuity and change, significance, perspective, and historical evidence. It involves more than just knowing facts; it requires interpreting events, analysing sources, and understanding how and why historical

developments occurred (Turner et al., 2023). This depth of engagement equips learners to critically investigate the past and relate it to present-day issues. The SBTA supports this process by focusing on developing analytical, critical thinking, and interpretive skills. Rather than rote memorisation, SBTA promotes source analysis, historical inquiry, and argumentation, allowing students to evaluate historical narratives and construct reasoned conclusions. According to Lee (2023), SBTA enables students to link historical content to broader contexts, enhancing their historical thinking abilities. Bwembya (2024) further argues that these skills are essential in equipping learners with tools to understand the complexities of change over time, continuity, and cause-effect relationships. By embedding historical thinking skills into teaching, SBTA fosters deeper historical understanding, allowing learners to explore how past events shape the present and how historical knowledge can inform responsible citizenship (Burkholder & Phillips, 2022).

Teachers perceive SBTA as a valuable way to help students understand complicated historical concepts such as causation, continuity, and change. According to Participant 4:

"SBTA helps students develop important critical thinking skills. It encourages them to look beyond the facts and to think about cause and effect, continuity, and change."

Participant 5 noted that:

"SBTA encourages students to view history as an interconnected web, allowing them to explore how certain events set the stage for future developments."

Participant 3 summed up by emphasising that:

"SBTA not only deepens students' understanding of cause, effect, and context but also empowers them to apply historical insights to contemporary issues."

The above aligns with Kiciman et al. (2023), who argue that understanding causality and contextual links is central to historical reasoning. SBTA encourages students to view events not in isolation but as interconnected developments shaped by broader forces (Chimbunde et al., 2023). By fostering analytical engagement and connecting the past with present-day issues, students can better interpret change over time, which helps build historical consciousness and enhances their ability to apply historical thinking across diverse contexts.

5.3 Fosters independent learning and transferable skills

The SBTA fosters independent learning by encouraging students to take active responsibility for their own knowledge construction through inquiry, analysis, and reflection. Instead of passively absorbing information, learners are guided to interrogate sources, form evidence-based conclusions, and solve problems autonomously. This approach cultivates transferable skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability. These competencies extend beyond the history classroom, preparing students for real-world challenges that require independent judgment and continuous learning (Mbatha & Moreeng, 2024). By embedding such skills into historical inquiry, the SBTA ensures that learners are academically proficient and equipped for lifelong learning across varied contexts. Teachers recognise the SBTA as a powerful approach that equips students with critical thinking, problem-solving, and evidence-based reasoning skills applicable beyond history (Bwembya, 2024). Constructivist learning theories emphasise active knowledge construction, where students engage with historical sources to develop analytical abilities (Zajda, 2021). The SBTA fosters independent learning, enabling students to navigate complex information and construct well-reasoned arguments. Participant 2 highlighted that:

"SBTA gives learners a set of skills that they can apply not only in history but in other subjects and real life."

Beyond the history classroom, SBTA cultivates essential skills such as evaluating information, recognising bias, and making informed decisions—skills that are critical in today's information-rich

world (Bunt & Warnich, 2021). However, scaffolding remains necessary to support students with diverse learning needs. Participant 4 remarked:

"I believe SBT helps students develop important critical thinking skills. It encourages them to look beyond the facts and to think about cause and effect, continuity, and change."

This aligns with Lesh (2023), who argues that understanding historical continuity and change is fundamental to historical reasoning. SBTA enables students to see historical events as interconnected, helping them draw connections between past and present. Participant 2 reiterated:

"SBT gives learners a set of skills that they can apply not only in history but in other subjects and real life. It is more about skill development than content retention."

Sharp et al. (2021) support this view, emphasising that SBTA fosters historical consciousness, enabling students to contextualise current events within broader historical narratives. SBTA encourages meaningful engagement with historical material by prioritising skill development over memorisation. Teachers conceptualise SBTA as a framework that promotes critical thinking, analytical skills, and historical understanding (Ahsan, 2025). While SBTA enhances students' ability to interrogate sources and construct informed perspectives, its effectiveness depends on teachers' capacity to implement scaffolding strategies. Ultimately, SBTA prepares students to "think like historians" by analysing evidence, asking critical questions, and constructing meaningful interpretations.

5.4 The role of teacher scaffolding in supporting diverse learners with SBTA

Scaffolding is crucial in supporting the implementation of an SBTA by providing structured guidance that helps learners gradually develop complex historical thinking skills. Through techniques such as modelling, prompting, and questioning, teachers offer temporary support that is slowly withdrawn as students gain confidence and competence in tasks like source analysis, argumentation, and interpretation. This method aligns with SBTA's goal of fostering autonomy and deeper understanding, enabling learners to engage with challenging content while building critical and analytical skills (Bwembya, 2024). Scaffolding thus ensures that learners are not overwhelmed; instead, they are progressively empowered to think and act like historians.

Teachers play a multifaceted role in SBTA, acting as facilitators, guides, and mentors to support students in developing critical thinking and analytical skills. Beyond scaffolding, teachers are responsible for fostering an inquiry-based learning environment, encouraging students to engage deeply with historical sources (Blazar & Kraft, 2017). Effective SBTA requires teachers to balance structured guidance with opportunities for independent exploration, ensuring students develop autonomy while receiving the necessary support (Boudreau, 2022). Participant 3 noted:

"Students who are motivated thrive with SBT, but those who struggle often require more guidance."

The above highlights the need for differentiated instruction, where teachers tailor their approach to accommodate varying levels of motivation and ability. Teachers also serve as mediators, helping students navigate complex historical narratives and evaluate sources critically. By modelling analytical reasoning and questioning techniques, teachers empower students to construct well-supported arguments (Kraft et al., 2019). Participant 4 observed:

"Students can connect historical events to contemporary issues when provided with initial guidance."

This underscores the teacher's role in contextualising historical content, making it relevant to students' lives (Harvard Bok Center, 2025). Teachers must also foster a classroom culture that values discussion, debate, and evidence-based reasoning, ensuring students feel confident expressing their interpretations. However, Lee (2023) cautions against excessive scaffolding, arguing that an over-

reliance on teacher support may hinder students' ability to develop self-sufficiency. While structured guidance is essential, teachers must gradually reduce assistance to encourage independent learning (Boudreau, 2022). Ultimately, teachers in SBTA must navigate the balance between providing necessary support and fostering autonomy, adapting their strategies to suit each learner's needs. Teachers play a crucial role in ensuring that SBTA effectively prepares students for both academic and real-world challenges by facilitating inquiry, modelling critical thinking, and promoting engagement.

6. Discussion of Findings

Positive and evolving conceptualisation of the SBTA. Teachers perceive SBTA not merely as a method but as a pedagogical shift that centres on developing learners' analytical, interpretive, and independent thinking skills. Their perceptions align with a growing body of scholarship that views SBTA as crucial to equipping students with historical thinking skills such as evidence evaluation, source analysis, causality, and empathy (Chimbude et al., 2023).

The study shows that teachers conceptualise SBTA primarily as a framework for promoting critical and analytical thinking, which they see as essential in shifting students from passive memorisation to active engagement. Participants described SBTA as enabling learners to question dominant narratives, evaluate evidence critically, and approach historical sources with a reflective mindset. For example, one teacher emphasised that SBTA "gives learners a set of skills they can apply not only in history but in real life." This sentiment reinforces the idea that SBTA fosters transferable competencies, a key feature highlighted in recent literature (Mbatha & Moreeng, 2024).

Teachers also perceive SBTA as a tool for deepening historical understanding. Participants articulated that SBTA allows learners to grapple with core disciplinary concepts such as cause and effect, continuity and change, and the complexity of historical narratives. These perceptions mirror academic arguments that SBTA enhances students' ability to form historical connections, relate past events to present issues, and build historical consciousness (Nokes, 2022). One participant remarked that SBTA helps students "look beyond the facts" and "explore how certain events set the stage for future developments."

The theme of independent learning and skill transferability also emerged strongly in teachers' responses. Participants noted that students become more self-directed and capable of engaging with information critically across disciplines. Thus, SBTA prepares learners for academic and real-life problem-solving, reflecting constructivist principles where learners construct knowledge through active inquiry (Khethwa, 2020). Teachers believe this shift empowers students to navigate an increasingly complex, information-saturated world with confidence and discernment.

Despite their positive perceptions, teachers acknowledged practical challenges in implementing SBTA. Several mentioned the need for scaffolding to support learners with varying levels of motivation and ability. One teacher observed that "motivated students thrive, but those who struggle often require more guidance," pointing to the importance of differentiated instruction and sustained teacher support—insights that echo research by Lee (2023) and Nokes (2022), who caution that without thoughtful scaffolding, SBTA may not be equitably accessible to all learners.

Furthermore, the study reveals that teachers see themselves as facilitators and mediators of historical inquiry rather than mere content transmitters. This shift in teacher identity and role is central to the success of SBTA. Teachers highlighted the importance of modelling critical analysis, fostering open discussion, and creating a classroom culture that encourages inquiry. This aligns with practice architecture theory, which suggests that educational practices are shaped by individual agency as well as social, cultural, and material conditions (Grootenboer & Edwards-Groves, 2024; Kemmis et al., 2014). Thus, the successful enactment of SBTA depends on teacher understanding, institutional support, resources, and time.

In the authors' view, the findings affirm that history teachers are not resistant to pedagogical innovation. They are, in fact, open to rethinking their roles and strategies when properly supported. However, their ability to apply SBTA effectively is mediated by structural constraints such as curriculum overload, limited access to source-rich materials, and inadequate training. This supports the call for robust professional development programmes and restructured curricula that prioritise depth over breadth. SBTA can potentially transform history education in South Africa, but only if teachers are empowered to implement it meaningfully.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated how history teachers understand and implement the Skills-Based Teaching Approach (SBTA) in their classroom practices. The findings revealed that teachers generally have a positive perception of SBTA and associate it with fostering critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and independent learning. The study addressed the research question by demonstrating that teachers conceptualise SBTA as an approach that goes beyond content delivery to cultivate learners' historical reasoning skills. Teachers highlighted SBTA's value in deepening historical understanding, promoting transferable skills, and encouraging student-centred learning. However, the study also found that structural limitations—such as insufficient resources, time constraints, and a lack of professional development—affect teachers' capacity to apply SBTA effectively. Therefore, the study concludes that teacher understanding of SBTA is critical but requires support from systemic interventions for it to be effectively implemented in the classroom.

7.1 Recommendations of the study

Based on the findings of this study, several actions are recommended to strengthen the implementation of the Skills-Based Teaching Approach (SBTA) in history classrooms. First, learners require improved access to resources, particularly first-hand historical accounts that enhance their ability to engage in historical thinking. Schools and education authorities should invest in SBTA-specific teaching materials, including digitised collections of historical documents that are accessible to all schools. Second, history teachers need ongoing, large-scale professional development programmes focused on SBTA. Such programmes should not only train teachers to integrate skills-based learning effectively but also equip them with strategies to support learners struggling to adapt to this approach. Sustained mentorship and peer-support structures are essential. Third, curriculum organisation should be reviewed to allow more time for the development of historical thinking skills. The current emphasis on rapid content coverage limits deep engagement with skills-based pedagogy. Shifting the focus towards skill development rather than breadth of content could facilitate more effective SBTA implementation. Finally, teachers should adopt differentiated instructional strategies to ensure that all learners benefit from SBTA, regardless of background. This includes targeted support for learners with difficulties in critical thinking or independent study, as well as increased opportunities for collaborative learning and structured assistance.

On the other hand, the findings and limitations of this study suggest several areas for further investigation. First, future studies could expand the sample size to include a wider range of schools across urban and rural areas, as well as in different regions or countries. This would provide a broader understanding of how SBTA is conceptualised and implemented in diverse contexts. Second, longitudinal research is needed to investigate the long-term impact of SBTA on learners, particularly in relation to their historical thinking skills, academic performance, and critical thinking beyond the classroom. Third, further studies could explore how technology can enhance SBTA implementation. Digital tools can increase access to first-hand sources and interactive learning activities, making skills-based teaching more feasible in resource-constrained environments. Such research would be particularly valuable in addressing the financial and infrastructural challenges identified in this study.

7.2 Limitations of the study

Although this study sheds light on instructors' understanding of SBTA, its limitations must be acknowledged. The limited sample size of six participants may not adequately represent the range of history teachers' experiences and viewpoints in diverse educational situations. Thus, the findings may not apply to all history teachers, especially those in different locations or educational systems. Another drawback is the focus on instructors' views rather than classroom practices. The interviews provide rich qualitative data but do not reveal how SBTA is implemented or how it affects student learning. Future studies could include classroom observations or student assessments to gain a better understanding of SBTA's efficacy. Finally, the study was conducted in a unique geographic and educational setting, which may limit its applicability to other locations or nations with distinct educational systems. Cultural and institutional variables may influence SBTA adoption, so further research is needed to determine how it functions in varied environments.

8. Declarations

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