Translating Theory into Practice: In-service Teachers’ Reconceptualisation of Curriculum in History Teaching

INTRODUCTION

The relationship of theory to practice has been one of the most enduring debates in education in general and in teacher education in particular. It is more than a century ago that John Dewey first raised the question in his famous essay, *The relation of Theory to Practice in Education* in 1904. The debate has become a conundrum as illustrated by the plethora of metaphors that have mushroomed to describe the relationship. Among these are: teacher as reflective practitioner (Schon, 1987); from practice to theory to theory (Korthagen and Kessels 2001); spaces between theory and practice (Basmadjian, 2007); bridging theory and practice in teacher education (Gordon & O’Brien, 2007); there is nothing as theoretical as a good practical (Fernandez and Thiessen, 2010); theory in practice and practice in theory (Gordon, 2007) and should it be theory or practice or both (Deng, 2004). Whereas Dewey took for granted the existence of the relation between theory and practice, teacher education scholars have interrogated and reinvented this relationship while remaining faithful to Dewey’s prescient postulate that education is both theoretical and practical experience (Dewey, 1966). At the core of these metaphors is the concern that after being presented with a multitude of ideas in pre and in-service programmes many teachers fall into a repetitive pattern of teaching in conventional ways in which they were taught at school (Hoban, 2002; Lortie, 1975). Expressed differently, teachers tend to teach as they were taught, and not how theories in teacher education prepare them to teach. Lortie (1975) coined the phrase the “apprenticeship of
“observation” to describe this phenomenon while Deng (2004) calls it the “transfer problem” in teacher education. The issue is really about whether or not a theory of education learnt during pre-service or in-service preparation makes a difference in the ways that teachers are likely to teach upon completion of their studies (Kennedy, 1998). How such theory gets translated into practice is an inferentially complex conceptual undertaking that cannot be constructed as a purely technological application (Deng, 2004).

This paper is anchored in a reconceptualisation of teaching as both a practical and theoretical activity as foregrounded in Deweyian philosophy (Shulman, 1998) and socio-constructivist theories of learning (Korthagen & Kessels, 2001; Zeichner, 2003). It aims primarily at examining the ways in which a theory of education learnt during an in-service teacher learning programme impacts on the pedagogical practices of the teachers. The paper briefly sketches the background to the problem by providing the context of in-service teacher learning in Zimbabwe within the context of literature on teacher education. It then explores the notion of curriculum as political text and teases out its implications for history teaching. The research approach is outlined and the findings of the study are presented in thick descriptive accounts. Finally, an attempt is made to relate the pedagogical practices described to the theory that the teachers were exposed to during the in-service programme.

Background to the study

In Zimbabwe, the Bachelor of Education degree (B.Ed) is the premier form of in-service teacher preparation and offers diploma holders who are graduates of teachers’ colleges, an opportunity to upgrade their qualifications. Following Fransson and van Lakerveld (2009, p. 74), we define
in-service learning as “an organized intentional learning process for teachers at all school levels, from preschool to upper secondary school, which is supported and facilitated by teacher educators and other professionals.” In-service learning is not compulsory as is the case in Western countries such as Norway and the Netherlands (Fransson and van Lakerveld, 2009), but is quiet popular among teachers who see it as an opportunity to improve their classroom capabilities as well as an entry point to a higher grade within the service. It differs from pre-service teacher preparation in that the teachers bring with them their formed notions of curriculum and classroom habits.

Teacher education in Zimbabwe still reflects the traditional way of thinking about teaching and learning which is based on the assumption that the student teacher has to be taught the theory by an educator and the teacher would at a later stage translate the theory into practice in a classroom (Chikunda, 2008; Ndawi, 2004). Both pre-service and in-service teacher preparation remain trapped within this paradigm and the curriculum offered still emphasizes the traditional foundations of education (Chikunda, 2008; Ndawi, 2004). Curriculum theory as a distinct field of study has tended to be peripheral to teacher preparation, and is often taught as an appendage of philosophy of education. Thus teacher education in Zimbabwe is based on the technical rationality approach and could be described as the “theory-to-practice” approach in that it begins with the exposure of the students to theory within academic institutions and who are then expected to translate it to practice at their places of work.

The technical rationality paradigm, we argue, fails to recognize the complexities that inhere in teaching when it is reconceptualised as an art rather than a craft. Viewed as an art, teacher
professional learning becomes a complex process, which requires cognitive and emotional involvement of teachers individually and collectively, (Alvos, 2011; Fransson and van Lakerveld, 2009). As such, it is a lifelong process (Hoban, 2002; Loughran and Russell, 1997). When it is conceptualized as a profession (Shulman, 1998), an understanding of the theory of education becomes an entitlement for one to be accepted into the profession and a guarantee that one is likely to perform well in the practical activity (Smith, 1992; Deng, 2004). In order to succeed in this complex undertaking, teachers must demonstrate the capacity and willingness to examine where they stand in terms of their convictions and beliefs by practising from their theories as well as theorizing from their practice. It thus cannot be accomplished through transfers of theory from text-book to teacher, and teacher to pupils through a rehearsal of theoretical ideas in decontextulized classrooms (Modiba, 1997; Elliot, 1989). The interest in this study was on how teachers’ conceptualizations of curriculum get transformed and enacted in actual pedagogical practices through an understanding of curriculum as political text. This would be revealed in the ways in which they reconceive and recast school knowledge in the context of the students’ lived realities.

In rethinking an alternative approach to the technical rationality model, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) argue that what is required in both pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes are processes that prompt teachers and teacher educators to construct their own questions and then begin to develop courses of action that are valid in their local contexts and communities. They (1999) identify three conceptions of knowledge which underpin and define the nature of a given teacher education programme. Knowledge-for-practice seeks to improve
teaching with particular focus on how teachers implement, translate or put in practice the knowledge they acquire from experts outside the classroom via pre-service and professional development. Knowledge-in-practice is based on the idea that knowledge comes from reflection and inquiry in and on practice. It helps teachers to value their ideas based on evidence they collect within their own school or classroom. Knowledge-of-practice implies that both knowledge generation and knowledge use are seen as inherently problematic, where teachers play a central role in generating sites of inquiry. In this nexus teachers link their work in schools to larger issues and take a critical perspective on the theory and research of others.

In this study, the researcher worked with a cohort of in-service teachers who were enrolled at Great Zimbabwe University for the B. Ed degree. This is a two year programme which allows the teachers to remain at work while attending university during school vacations and weekends. The teachers specialize in a particular teaching subject while also attending foundation courses that include curriculum theory as a separate module with sixty hours of contact sessions. The programme has no practicum attached to it since the participants are all experienced teachers with at least two years teaching experience. The curriculum theory course that the researcher taught focused on teachers’ understanding of curriculum as political text (Pinar, 2004). The course foregrounded the reconceptualist notion of curriculum as currere (Pinar, 2004) and posited that its understanding was central to the ways in which teachers addressed students and reframed content in class. In doing so, it was important to recognize that the act of teaching was more than the application of a repertoire of skills learnt from a body of theoretical knowledge. Also, it was recognized that the teachers brought with them significant teaching experience and established classroom habits which could not be ignored. Therefore, the role of
theory had to serve a different purpose to that in pre-service teacher preparation. In this case theory would challenge teachers to critically re-examine their taken-for-granted classroom habits and approaches. As such, there would be no dichotomy between theory and practice but in Gordon’s (2007, p 121) words, theory would “provide teachers with an awesome power to analyze and assess what they and the schools are doing in the often harsh realities of public schools.” This, Freire (1990) called “praxis” by which he meant reflection and action in order to transform the world. Aoki (2005) elaborating on this notion envisions theory and practice not as opposites but as dialectical such that one permeates the other and vice-versa in the act of teaching. In this way the teachers would become curriculum theorizers who practice from their theory and theorize from their practice. Theory and practice are thus twin moments of a teaching process in which “teachers and students can be seen as co-actors acting with and on Curriculum X, as they dialectically shape the reality of classroom experiences embedded in a crucible of the classroom culture of which they are a part and in which they have inserted themselves” (Aoki, 2005, p 121).

**Curriculum as political text**

A social constructionist view of curriculum recognises and highlights the ideological underpinnings of curriculum. It acknowledges that curriculum is not politically neutral and schools are not ideologically innocent (Giroux, 2005). Curriculum is perceived as value laden and thus reflects power and control in ways that make it a site of intense political contestations (Pinar, 2005; Giroux, 2005). Thus reconceiving curriculum as political text implies a fundamental recognition of the fact that teaching and learning occur in social contexts as people negotiate
meanings with one another. This is inevitably a political process, whereby politics is understood as the social jostling of priorities and values. In fact, the curriculum becomes a “political-educational project constituted by a synthesis or an articulation of cultural elements derived from fights, impositions and negotiations amongst different social subjects. These conflicts and negotiations embrace a range of social-political projects and portend how society is to be educated” (De Alba, 1999, p 481). For Kincheloe (2004) this is not surprising as education has always been politicized. He therefore maintains that it is impossible to conceptualize curriculum outside of a socio-political context because in his view no matter what form they take, all curricula bear the imprint of power. Such an understanding of curriculum underlines both its contested nature and its inextricable relationship with the milieu in which it exists. More importantly, it reaffirms the act of teaching as an inherently political undertaking and that teachers have to be aware of how they are positioned as historical and social beings.

Drawing from the above notions, the course sought to empower teachers to interrogate the ways in which the school curriculum works to subordinate and marginalise certain groups in society while advantaging others. Thus central to the development of this notion was teachers’ understanding of the contestations that abound in curriculum and their role as transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 2005) who work for change in the lives of their learners. While curriculum theory does not speak directly to teaching school history, its epistemological deconstructs impact on the teachers’ epistemological conceptions, forcing them to rethink their conceptions and thus change their practice. It makes teachers aware of the socially and historically
constituted metaphors of curriculum that define what has become legitimated as school knowledge. In this way teachers would understand that school history is not just national and school syllabi, textbooks and objectives, but that complicated conversation in which teachers and students engage each other as well as the vernacular histories that make up their lives. It is on this basis that the teachers would reframe and recast the knowledge they present in ways that recognize its contestedness. Teachers would therefore seek to connect what is taught to the everyday experiences of students, for it is only when such connections have been made that meaningful learning occurs. The ability to do so has added significance in a country where the grammars of the curriculum remain fundamentally undemocratic as a result of colonial classical education (Zvobgo, 1998) and where the trajectory of post independence has sought to silence dissenting voices by stifling spaces and avenues of democratic discourse (Sigauke, 2011). It was therefore deemed important to imbue teachers with a criticalist notion so that they would, in Ellsworth’s words, (1994) perceive their work as a process of constructing presentations of themselves and others in their classrooms. More importantly, they would seek to do so in ways that are responsive to the contexts that they are in and to the constantly shifting power relations among them (1994). The question that arises then is how would teachers who are conscious of the contestations in school history approach history lessons especially in a situation where the democratic space has become heavily contested as is the case in Zimbabwe? The following pedagogical devices were formulated as indicators of attempts to translate into practice a notion of curriculum as political text and history as inquiry:
• Adopting modes of address that reposition learners as knowers and creators of knowledge;
• Presenting historical knowledge as both contested and contestable through the use of multiple sources;
• Engaging learners in dialogue with both the text and among themselves;
• Calling on learners to infer and reinterpret the content in the light their own experiences;
• Challenging learners to move beyond their own theories about the past, reconcile their own and others’ histories, and think critically about the world around them;
• Creating a democratic atmosphere in the classroom.

**Statement of the problem**

The broad aim of this study was to examine how an understanding of curriculum that foregrounded school knowledge as contested empowered history teachers to rethink their pedagogical practices and to re-envision curriculum as emergent possibility during lessons. The central question that the study addressed was: How is the notion of curriculum as political text translated into pedagogical practices during history lessons in secondary schools in Zimbabwe? The following sub-questions were developed in order to answer the above question:

- How do teachers re-select, redefine and reinterpret history knowledge in their teaching?
How do teachers engage learners in an endeavor to re-imagine and reconstruct curricular as an emergent possibility that is socially constructed in the classroom?

What curricular assumptions do the teachers advance to explain their observed classroom practices?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study draws from the reconceptualist movement in curriculum theorizing that is best associated with Pinar, (2003; 2004). At the core of this movement is the reimagining of curriculum as political and autobiographical text. Green (2009, p 1) takes this notion further by suggesting that curriculum is “best understood, first and foremost, as inescapably, always already political – that there is, in effect, nothing outside “curriculum-as political text.” The implications of this is that teaching becomes in Ellsworth’s (1997) words an “undecideability” that can never be predetermined in advance and curriculum itself only an emergent possibility, that is an outcome of the interplay of teachers, learners, the text and the milieu. It implies that teachers recognize and accept both the contestedness of reality and its indeterminacy. Aligned with revisionist history and history as inquiry, it implies that history is “contested dialogue about evidence and interpretation” (Sandwell, 2007: p.22). In order to bring to the fore the contestations that abound in history and its rewriting as an unending dialogue between the historian and his facts (Carr, 1990), the teachers who employ a reconceptualist lens to history teaching, are bound to deploy pedagogical devices that are empowering of their learners and at the same time deconstructive of the grand narratives and hegemonies of schooling. As Sandwell (2007, p 22) points out, the lecture method with its
emphasis on transmission of plain facts is ill-suited to the critical co-construction of history knowledge that students need to engage in if curriculum is to become the political text that it already is. It is in this light that Freirean pedagogy that foregrounds dialogic education, critical thinking and problem posing becomes relevant. Harste; Leland; Schmdt; Vasquez and Ociepka, (2002: p.117) argue, “the discourse we use legitimizes certain perspectives and conceptually positions us” to take certain standpoints. It was hoped that this understanding of curriculum would make teachers rethink their already developed pedagogical practices and move towards reimagining and reenacting curriculum as the lived reality of the students.

Research Approach

This study was conducted as a qualitative, interpretive single case study in the spirit of naturalistic inquiry (Stake, 2005). It targeted secondary school history teachers who were enrolled in the 2008-2009 B.Ed INSET programme at Great Zimbabwe University, in Masvingo. Following the criterion of convenience, only those teachers teaching in the greater Masvingo urban schools were selected to participate in this study as they were within the proximity of the researcher’s work place and could thus be easily visited. Four urban secondary schools involving four teachers participated in the study. The teachers taught history at all levels and were thus perceived as ideally positioned to experiment with the theory that they had been exposed to during the INSET programme. The four had successfully completed their studies (B.Ed) and were therefore under no undue pressure to participate in the research. The ages of the teachers ranged from 30 to 45 and they had worked as teachers for periods ranging from 6 to
21 years. Three were male and one female. Pseudonyms are used to protect their identities and that of their schools.

The data was collected using two different approaches. Open-ended interviews were held with the teachers before and after lesson observations. The interviews sought to elicit teachers’ conceptions of curriculum and its implications for history teaching. In the post lesson interviews the respondents listened to the recorded lessons and were asked to clarify the particular pedagogical practices that they had exhibited during lessons. Lesson observation was the second data gathering technique employed. The teachers were observed conducting lessons five times in January and February and once in April. During lesson observations the researcher noted the modes of address that the teachers used, the questions that they asked and how these positioned learners vis-a-vis the texts and historical content presented. The gestures and facial expressions that teachers made were noted as how an utterance is conveyed to others reflects an individual's innerself and the ideological assumptions that the individual holds and seeks to portray in the utterance. As Fairclough (2003) observes, discursive traces inhere in what individuals say and how they convey this through intonation, body language and gesture.

Data Presentation

The data is presented in two sections. The first section presents interview data and teases out the philosophical assumptions that underpin the teachers’conceptualization of curriculum as political text and history as inquiry. The next section presents data based on classroom observations and the field notes that were made. The last section is based on content analysis and presents findings based on teachers’ professional documents. In the discussion section an
attempt is made to weave out the pedagogical practices displayed by the teachers and how they reflected or not, an understanding of curriculum as political text.

**Teachers’ reconceptualisation of curriculum and school history**

The interviews revealed that the teachers to varying degrees appreciated the ideological and political nature of education as well as the contestations that abound in history teaching. They all rejected the notion of history as the mastery of facts and claimed to aim at teaching for understanding rather than memorization of facts. However, the notion of understanding history as a transformative experience in the Freirean sense was with the exception of teacher, not explicitly emphasized in the interviews. The following excerpts demonstrate this.

Teacher A expressed his views thus:

*Since the days of colonialism education has had political goals to make people accept the status quo, and with the coming of independence education has been used to make people accept the new status quo. So the way I approach history is to make sure that the students are aware of their origins, who they are, and why things are what they are. I do not want them to be gullible so I always challenge them to question so-called facts and to also question the writers’ motives. I emphasize issues of bias and empathy in understanding the subject and not just mastery of facts.*

Asked what pedagogical practices he deployed during lessons to achieve the above goals, his response was:
History has been politicized in this country and it has tended to be one-sided in presenting facts. Even the textbooks that we use are not objective and balanced. In fact I would say the history of this country is incomplete. There are gaps and questions that need to be addressed but it is dangerous for me as a teacher because one may be misunderstood and---- (the teacher does not complete the sentence). We need democratic space to undertake the rewriting of the history of this country. So I try to employ as many different sources as possible for the same topic and ask students to discuss among themselves which source they find trustworthy and to explain why. So while I still sort of take the lead in class, I want as much as possible, to involve learners in discussions by posing questions that challenge them to relate issues in history to their context. For example, with the topic on the Rise of Nazism in Germany, we looked at the role of propaganda in the rise of Hitler. The students could easily relate this to the media wars between the official press and the independent media in our country. This is good for history teaching as the subject really becomes alive and relevant and you can see that learners are thinking critically. It is then that I feel satisfied that I have achieved something because history is not just facts but critical thinking. However one has to know when to stop and to handle issues in a way that no one gets offended as this could be dangerous.

Teacher B described his perceptions of education and history as follows:

I have been teaching history for almost twenty years now but when I came to this school in 2000 history was not offered here. At that time I taught commerce. When history
became compulsory I introduced it at this school. At the beginning students and some teachers did not trust me. You know--- it was like I had a hidden agenda and history was not popular. People think history is political but I argue with them and say that it is not history that is political but that the whole system of schooling is political. But people do not see how Maths and science could be political. The politicians just see history as political. You see education in this country is associated with employment and history has been seen as of little relevance to one’s employment opportunities when compared to Mathematics, science and commerce which I used to teach. Therefore, in my lessons I try to demonstrate that history enables us to understand ourselves as a nation and as people living in a global village. For example, the present socio-economic and political challenges that we face in Zimbabwe today must be understood in the context of colonialism in Africa. The difference comes in the way we interpret and use history. Although education and history in particular are not neutral, I try in my lessons to encourage learners to view issues from different perspectives.

As asked to give an example of how he did this in class, he responded:

For example when teaching a topic such as, Colonization of Zimbabwe, when we have finished the topic we analyse it by answering the question: Did the Africans benefit from colonialism? I divide the class into groups with some arguing in favour and others against colonialism. This encourages the skill of empathy as I ask the learners to put themselves in the shoes of the people who lived at that time. At the same time they learn to critically analyse issues. Unfortunately, with this syllabus they no longer write essays
so they do not get to express their views in essays. After this I feel learners would have a better understanding of history as a subject and of themselves as people.

Teacher C had similar views although she emphasized the importance of judgment in history teaching. She said,

*In my view education is there to promote certain ideologies and history curriculum serves the ideologies of the ruling class. But I think history should be taught from an objective and disinterested view. For example in the early 1990's a teacher could teach history from whatever perspective he/she chose --- a history teacher is trained to look at historical issues from many perspectives-----however it is becoming very difficult to handle history from a disinterested point of view because history has been really politicized as the current regime seeks to use it to justify their continued governance----.*

*My intention in teaching history is to make students approach history from an internationalistic (sic) perspective---I try to link events in Zimbabwean history to developments around the world--- For example when teaching the land issue in Zimbabwe I try to make students realize that land has always been a contested commodity. Wars have broken out all over the world over land issues right back from feudal times.*

When asked to explain how she promoted this link in class, she responded:

*My observation is that students are quite keen to see linkages between Zimbabwean history and developments in other countries --- but the problem is that in the*
background politicians are keen to know what history teachers are teaching in their classes. As a result when we handle topics on Zimbabwe we tend to present facts and let learners do the interpretation on their own for fear of being misquoted---- I allow learners to make their own interpretations but what is lacking is the authorial voice of the teacher to round up the various perspectives.

Having noted that official textbooks present history from a one-sided perspective Teacher C said she encouraged the students to do their own research and read further on their own. She however noted that problems arose when students read independent newspapers on topical issues and brought their views to contradict official history. This, she found rather unsettling as learners wanted her to pronounce her views on the issues which she found rather sensitive.

“There are many interpretations of history. You can take whichever one you like,” she would advise her learners.

The last participant in the study, Teacher D, displayed a nuanced understanding of curriculum and the agency of both teachers and learners. He responded to the initial question thus;

I have been a history teacher for ten years and the B.Ed degree that I completed a year ago has changed the ways in which I view the purposes of education and of history as a school subject. I now understand that education is really about the maintenance of the status quo and that curriculum, especially, history, is carefully selected by the powers that be to ensure that it is their views that get taught.. I also understand that my role as a teacher is that of an agent of transformation. I try to teach in such a way that students
get to realize the challenges that they face as Zimbabweans and as people and that they have to work for change in their lives and their country.

Asked to elaborate on his philosophy of education, he said:

*Of course, I have read the pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire) and from there we can see that teachers can either help liberate students or enslave them by the ways in which they teach. History provides relevant content for students’ liberation but it must not be presented as just facts. Right now our syllabus regards history as the mastery of facts and not interpretation and evaluation of facts. For example, in the lesson that I will be teaching today, The Colonization of Zimbabwe, the students are expected to know the factors that led to colonization of Africa; the names of European powers that were involved, the raw materials that were available in Africa etc etc. They are not required to analyse these issues and when I challenge them to explain issues they get surprised because they know that if they can just state the names of powers that were involved or the colonies occupied by Britain, they would get marks. So there is little or no incentive for both teachers and learners to engage in serious analysis of historical issues.*

Asked what he would love to achieve through such a topic, the teacher responded:

*I would want the learners to see colonialism as a continuation of the slave trade by other means and that this still continues today through so-called globalization and the unfair trade practices between the developed world and the developing world. What the students should understand is the exploitative nature of each of these systems. We*
should study how the people have resisted each of these forms of exploitation and this would guide present struggles. This is the relevance of studying history- to understand exploitation and oppression and the forms of struggle that we can engage in to eradicate them. --- In practice, this is not always possible because one needs a very democratic system to discuss these issues. You see the school reflects the larger society; most of the students are not used to questioning issues in class because they do not ask questions at home. So it becomes difficult for them to begin to critique issues in class. Our schools are still authoritarian rather than democratic and this is a reflection of our broader society which is intolerant of alternatives views. So in class, students tend to want you, as the teacher, to make judgments on their behalf and that then becomes their view. So I tell them that each people tell their history from their own perspective and it is time that they told their history from their perspective.

The above perceptions of curriculum and history teaching were thus likely to inform the pedagogical practices that the teachers deployed in lessons.

**Classroom observations**

Classroom observations were done in order to look for the operationalization of theory and practice during the act of teaching. Following an observation schedule the classroom transactions were coded into four themes that were deemed to be consistent with pedagogical practices that are informed by an understanding of curriculum as political text. The four themes are:
• the ways in which teachers selected, reframed and presented the content;

• the type of questions that the teachers asked and the responses that they elicited;

• the ways in which the teachers used the sources in class

• dialogue and discussions in lessons

Content selection, reframing and presentation

The selection and sequencing of content tended to follow broadly the syllabus outline. This order was both thematic and chronological. Teachers’ selection of content tended to follow this approach. For example, a Form three class was being introduced to the pre-colonial states as the first topic in a two year long course, while a Form four class was studying World War One in the European history section of the syllabus. It appeared that the approach in all the four schools was that the first year of Ordinary level study was devoted to the study of Zimbabwean history while the second year was reserved for European history. The teachers in the study admitted to having little control over this structure and seemed to have accepted it without interrogating its underpinning rationale. This is partly a result of a centrally planned curriculum that operates in Zimbabwe. While it is accepted that teachers would have little control over such systemic factors as outlined above, they would however, have a degree of freedom in recasting and reframing history knowledge during lessons without losing sight of the requirements of the examinations. Recasting history knowledge implies reinterpretation and re-sequencing of knowledge to challenge the hegemony of the canon and to make the knowledge relevant to the learners. Drawing from selected lessons from each teacher we document the
ways in which the teachers attempted to enact pedagogical devices that were consistent with an understanding of curriculum as political text and history as inquiry.

In a lesson on the agrarian revolution conducted by Teacher A, the students’ lived experiences of traditional farming practices were not foregrounded as the basis of new knowledge. Once the teacher had introduced the topic and defined the key terms, even using the local language to make sure that students had a clear picture of the concepts, he based lesson development on the text and ignored students’ vernacular knowledges that he had invoked in the local language. Students read and picked examples from the text and were not challenged to relate these to their own experiences. In doing so, the teacher presented the agrarian revolution as a purely European phenomenon that is remote from students lived experiences. In an important way the teacher had failed to recast knowledge on the basis of students’ lived experiences. As was suggested to him in the post lesson interview, the ongoing land reform in the Zimbabwe could have been used as the basis of introducing the lesson and the teacher would then have created those vital backwards and forwards movement in content that allow students to see the continuities and connections that are consistent with the notion of history as inquiry.

In a lesson on The Responsibility of the Powers for World War One conducted by Teacher B, the teacher introduced the concept through a metaphorical example of a fight between two boys. The students then worked in groups to debate the degree of guilt of each of the powers. The teacher encouraged the students by declaring that there were no wrong or correct answers in the discussions. This representation of the belligerent powers in the war as quarrelsome youth who deny responsibility for their actions on the basis of their narrow national interests was a
recasting of historical knowledge in ways that students could easily identify with. It dereified history in such way that students could understand the motives of the powers on the basis of their own personal experiences. In this way they could use their personal experiences to reinterpret history and formulate valid historical judgments. Such pedagogical practices in decentring the canon reflected a re-enactment of school history as contested and contestable.

Teacher C conducted a lesson on the colonization of Zimbabwe centred on the question: Did Africans benefit from colonization? The lesson was an exercise in critical analysis and students were challenged to evaluate historical phenomenon on the basis of their lived experiences. In doing so, students reframed history and challenged both the dominant narrative of the missionaries as agents of civilization and the nationalist narrative of colonialism as a horrendous exploitation of African resources. In this way, the contestations that characterize school history were made apparent to the students. However, the textbook loomed large in the background as the teacher insisted that students support their arguments with facts. Thus while the hegemony of the canon was being challenged by the students on the basis of their lived experiences, the teacher was demanding that students draw their arguments from the text. This unfortunately, reinforced the notion of history as that which is written and not the emerging dialogues that the students engage in.

Teacher D conducted a lesson on pre-colonial states in Zimbabwe with particular focus on the Ndebele State. Recast as political text, the content had the potential to bring to the fore issues of ethnicity which have been the bane of postcolonial states. At the outset of the lesson the teacher made explicit his own ideological orientation by rejecting the word “tribe” in favour of
ethnicity and thus brought to the fore the divide between western historians and progressive scholars. However, students were not invited to understand the connotations of the term “tribe” and how it positions African people in history studies. The teacher presented this as a taken-for-granted assumption. In introducing the history of the Ndebele, the teacher drew on the vernacular histories of the students by inviting students of Ndebele origin to narrate their folklores of origin. This was an attempt to recast history and reframe it on the basis of students’ everyday experiences—what is termed vernacular histories (Weldon, 2007). As the lesson progressed, the teacher said, “Let’s turn to our textbooks and find out what history says about the Ndebele.” In so doing the teacher had unwittingly invalidated the vernacular histories of the students and re-established the textbook as the sole definer of what is the valid history of a given people. This confirmed that while teachers attempted to recast content they still turned to the textbooks to legitimate and validate it as school knowledge.

Questions asked and the responses that they elicited

Questioning analysis was used to categorize the questions that the teachers posed during lessons according to Blooms’ Taxonomy of knowledge. Table I below summarizes the types of questions that the teachers asked in all the lessons observed. The questioning technique was used extensively by the teachers to elicit students’ responses. Simple recall questions accounted for 62% of the total number of questions asked by the four teachers whereas higher order questions accounted for 38% of the total. This resulted in a relatively high level of participation as students attempted to answer the questions. Such questions did not in themselves engender discussion as they were of a lower order and thus reduced history to
regurgitation of facts and not inquiry. As one of the teachers explained, the syllabus and the examinations have prioritised the mastery of facts; hence teachers find little incentive to foreground critical thinking when it is no longer central to the examinations. An understanding of curriculum as political text and of history as inquiry requires that teachers pose higher order questions that call for critical analysis of issues. As Sandwell (2007) argues, history should not just allow students to learn lessons from the past but must offer critical thinking to enable students to understand our contemporary world.

Table 1

TYPES OF QUESTIONS USED BY TEACHERS

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<tr>
<th>TEACHER</th>
<th>NO OF LESSONS</th>
<th>LOWER ORDER %</th>
<th>HIGHER ORDER %</th>
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<td>5</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Use of sources

In order to promote an understanding of history as a process of inquiry students need to be exposed to multiple sources for them to dialogue with the various perspectives presented in
the text. Teachers, therefore have to deploy both primary and secondary sources in lessons. Table II below summarises the various sources that the teachers used in each of the lessons that were observed.

Table II: Types of sources by frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEACHER</th>
<th>LESSONS OBSERVED</th>
<th>PRIMARY SOURCE</th>
<th>SECONDARY SOURCE</th>
<th>ADDITIONAL MATERIAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is significant to note that none of the teachers used primary sources in all the lessons observed. As one teacher explained in the post lesson interview, primarily sources pose challenges for both teachers and students. In her view, students have to grapple with historical
jargon that abounds in primary sources and this tends to kill their enthusiasm for the subject. Also, the teachers themselves lack adequate historical skills of analysing primary sources as this is not really prioritized during their training. The dearth of primary sources in all the lessons observed is further explained by the fact that none of the teachers prepared their students to answer source-based questions in the examination. As was expressed by a veteran teacher of twenty years experience,

“It was because of the source-based questions that history became unpopular in schools and teachers were opting for a different syllabus that did not have source-based assessments.”

Asked whether he did not think primary sources offered students and teachers an opportunity to engage with history as a process of inquiry, he explained that while this was indeed true, the teachers were ill-prepared to teach such skills and the schools often did not have the necessary resources for this. All four teachers employed secondary sources in the lessons and actually read or asked students to read relevant sections of the text. In all the lessons the sources used were the officially prescribed textbooks. In 40% of the lessons observed the students were challenged to compare sources while in 60% there was no conscious effort at a critical reading of the text or texts. The additional material availed during lessons such as the atlases were not exactly historical resources that could lead to alternative readings of historical content.

**Dialogue and discussions in lessons**

As argued in the literature review, dialogue and class discussion are key definers of a pedagogy that foregrounds the notion of curriculum as political text and history as inquiry. The teachers
were aware that the lecture method has been discredited as being ineffectual and ill-suited to the development of history as a process of inquiry. Thus, the teachers avoided lecturing to the students by asking questions and directing them to relevant sections of the text to find the answers. This resulted in a form of dialogue as students had to respond to the teachers’ questions. It was however a superficial engagement that did not involve a critical reading of the word and the world in a Freirean sense.

Group work was fairly popular with the teachers as illustrated by the frequency with which they employed it in lessons. As one of the teachers explained:

*Group work is important in that it offers students an opportunity to interact among themselves. We call it pupil to pupil interaction --- it makes me not use the lecture method which becomes monotonous as it would be just my voice alone in class. With group work different voices are heard and this makes students want to listen.*

The notion of student empowerment through articulating and interrogating what is learnt in the Frereian sense of praxis was not explicit in this teacher’s notion of group work. Table III below summarizes the frequency of group work in the lessons observed.
Table III: Frequency of Group work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME OF TEACHER</th>
<th>NO OF LESSONS</th>
<th>FREQUENCY GROUP WORK</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In all the lessons the groups were randomly organized on the basis of proximity of learners. There was evidence of preparation for group work as different tasks were prepared for each group. Teacher D who employed group work the most also varied approaches with group work interspersed throughout the lessons. Teacher A employed group work the least and appeared to reserve it for the final lessons of each topic.

On the occasions that the teachers directly encouraged students to discuss issues the response of the learners was very poor. This is partly attributable to the type of questions that the teachers tended to ask. Even the higher order questions asked tended to elicit explanations and not provoke discussions. For example, questions such as “what do you think, or can you suggest?” did not in themselves constitute provoking issues that the students could respond to.
As a result the discussions that occurred in class were often among group members as students sought to consolidate their points in the reform of a report back to the class. In all the lessons observed, the teachers did not directly encourage the various groups to engage each other in discussion. They were content to summarize the points from each group and make the students take down the points as notes. Also, no group wanted to pose questions to the other groups on the basis of their reports.

**Discussion**

The interview data illustrated the varying degrees to which the teachers had understood the notion of curriculum as political text and history as inquiry. However the ways in which they conducted the lessons cannot be attributed solely to the theory that they were exposed but to other inherent factors that making teaching such a complex undertaking. As Deng (2004) argues educational theories usually take the form of a set of propositions or principles that are generalized, while classroom practice is context-specific, uncertain and complex. It is herein that emerges an apparent dichotomy between theory and practice or as Basmadjian, (2007) says, the spaces between theory and practice. How teachers navigate these spaces is illustrated in the positions that the teachers found themselves in. For example in this study, while the teachers explained clearly notions of history as inquiry they did not always translate this into practice because of systemic factors among other issues. Thus an understanding of theory is not a guarantee for its operationalization. It is herein that Barrow’s (1990) distinction between good theory and bad theory becomes relevant. In his view, teachers often fail to operationalize a theory when it is perceived to be inadequate or irrelevant to the demands of practice. They
are therefore more likely to implement a theory that serves the immediate needs of the school context. Thus, does it mean that the instances when the teachers failed to operationalize theory imply that the theory we worked with was bad for the context?

The above question is best answered in the context of the role of theory in teacher education. Theory, as Barrow (1990) points out, does not prescribe what happens in the classroom but presupposes conceptual as well as empirical understanding, and demands the integration of empirical considerations in research. Theory is best understood not in a technological sense (Barrow, 1990; Deng; 2004; Gordon; 2007). Instead, it should be seen in a perspectival, interpretative, normative, and ethical sense of how it transforms and empowers practice (Deng, 2004). Theory therefore cannot be applied in decontextualized classrooms but through, as Shulman (1998) argues a process of judgment within a particular context. This, in his view, requires taking into account the various concerns and “negotiating between the general and the specific, as well as between the ideal and the feasible” (p, 159). In what ways can it be argued that the teachers in this study took into account the contextual factors in their country when reconceiving curriculum as political text?

As described above in all the lessons observed the official textbooks were ubiquitous. Given the centralized nature of the school curriculum in Zimbabwe and the politically sensitive environment in which teachers work (Sigauke, 2011) it would have been highly risky for the teachers who understand the contestations in history to have brought additional materials of their own apart from prescribed official documents. Recasting history as students’ lived experiences, calls for an abandonment of the ubiquitous textbook, (Vansledright, 2009) but as
has been shown above teachers were not ready to take the responsibility of generating and recreating new histories on the basis of students’ experiences. As it is, teachers find psychological safety in foregrounding what they teach in the official texts because these present an already sanitized version of what students have to learn. Thus, an understanding of the contestations that abound in school history which are likely to be promoted by the availing of multiple sources is sacrificed on the altar of the physical and psychological safety of the teachers. This is corroborated by one teacher who in the interview said that there is need for democratic space for teachers to rewrite the history of the country from various and more inclusive perspectives. As Sigauke’s (2011) recent study confirms, the space for democratic discourse and rational disputation on matters that are deemed to be politically sensitive does not exist in Zimbabwe’s classrooms. This has also impacted on the students who have become accustomed to this culture of silence. Thus, the rate of class of discussions in lessons must be understood in this context of political insecurity and not as an indicator of bad theory or failure to translate it into practice.

Lortie’s (1975) notion of the apprenticeship of observation partly explains the degree to which teachers are likely to conduct lessons. As Kennedy (1990, p 17) puts it “Teachers acquire seemingly indelible imprints from their own experiences as students and these imprints are tremendously difficult to shake.” It is likely that the teachers in the study may have retained some of the ways in which they taught. They would no doubt have been exposed to the lecture method during their university studies and now find they have to abandon it in the classroom. It is thus likely to reinvent itself as teacher exposition. As was put by one teacher, “I make the
facts available to the students. When they cannot get them from the text I tell them. This is also what the examination will require of them.”

An interesting point that emerged in this study was the way in teachers sought to make the students the focus of the learning activities. In doing so they appeared to conflate group work with dialogic practice. In a sense there are similarities between the two but in the Freirean sense, dialogic education involves an interrogation of what is learnt in ways that are critical and transformative of students’ lived experiences. Working in groups certainly afforded students the opportunity to interact among themselves and with the content but was not inherently transforming as the content was not recast and reinterpreted in ways that enabled students to name and rename the world in their own ways. In the end the textbook remained central and thus the hegemony of the canon was not challenged. Furthermore, group work in Zimbabwe is encouraged as part of a learner-centred pedagogy that is espoused in official documents. Thus the frequent use of group work by the teachers cannot be attributed solely to their understanding of curriculum as political text and history as inquiry. The importance of theory in this regard is that it empowers the teachers to reflect on their practices on the basis of the tenets of the theory and thus seek to improve practice.

Conclusion

This paper began by reference to a series of metaphors that have evolved to describe the relationship between theory and practice. It may as well end by highlighting one metaphor that best encapsulates the relationship between theory and practice that the teachers in this study exhibited. The teachers in the study were by no means a homogenous group therefore it would
be simplistic to attempt to create a blanket term that accurately represents their practices. It would also be to deny the complexity of teaching that this paper has foregrounded. Gordon’s (2007) metaphor, theory in practice and practice in theory, is in our view the best descriptor of how teachers can work to operationalize a theory that they have been exposed to in a backwards and forwards movement along a continuum. Because it is conceptualized as a continuum there would be no dichotomy between theory and practice. As Gordon (2007, p 120) explains,

> educational theory is, therefore, often aimed at clarifying and justifying some kind of practice or action that teachers are engaged in. The practice of teaching, on the other hand, provides the context, material, and testing ground for educational theory. In teaching there is no doubt that theory and practice are interrelated-each influences and is influenced by the other.

The operationalization of a theory is therefore not an event that can be accomplished over a space of time but a process of life-long learning in which ideas will continue to be clarified and refined on the basis of experience. Each of the teachers in this study are thus on a journey in which they are continuously moving forwards and backwards with theory and practice in a dialectical relationship. The instances identified during lesson observations where teachers failed to demonstrate an understanding of curriculum as contested are really what Basmadjian, (2007) calls the spaces between theory and practice. It is into these spaces between theory and practice that teachers will grow as they rethink and refine their practices. Thus as to the question of whether it should be theory or practice, the answer is a reaffirmation of Dewey’s
postulate that theory and practice are mutually dependent. Each can inform the other and be used to evaluate the other. Thus the way forward is to as Barrow (1990) suggests encourage teachers to conduct their own theorizing about their own experiences in an informed and disciplined way. In this way teachers will become curriculum theorists who theorize from their practice and practice from their theory.
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