

Godsend T. Chimbi & Loyiso C. Jita

Putting the Cart before the Horse: Curriculum Reform Policy and Teachers' Pedagogical Preferences

Abstract

When presented with a new curriculum very few teachers teach in accordance with the prescribed pedagogies. This study reports on how teachers in Zimbabwe selected their teaching methods in response to a new curriculum reform policy. Using a qualitative multiple case study design and the theoretical lens of sense-making, the study interrogated teachers' understanding of a new history curriculum and their compliance to its pedagogical prescriptions. Although teachers were aware of the methodological demands of the new history curriculum, they complained that they were not adequately prepared and resourced to implement the new pedagogical policy. Teachers' pedagogical preferences appeared to be in line with their personal philosophy to history instruction, rather than what reform policy prescribed. It appears policy makers placed pedagogical reform policy in front of the teacher; like the proverbial case of putting the cart in front of the horse. To augment compliance with reform policy, it is necessary to in-service teachers on how to use innovative teaching approaches before asking them to change pedagogical practice. Teacher capacity building on innovative instructional strategies and creating learning communities may reduce the gap between policy demands and classroom practice.

Keywords: curriculum reform policy, history pedagogy, sense-making, pedagogical preferences, reform implementation, classroom practice

Introduction

In many countries policy reformers continue to push for the transformation of classroom practice from teacher-dominated didacticism to learner-centred constructivism. But this change is not yet evident in many classrooms (Sibanda & Young, 2019; Gleeson, Klenowski & Looney, 2020). Prendergast and Treacy (2017, p. 1) report that: "in most schools there is the common mismatch between the intended curriculum prescribed by policy-makers and the implemented curriculum that is actually carried out by teachers in their classrooms". This gap between reform policy and classroom practice is often expected because teachers are often regarded as resistant to change (Harris & Graham, 2019). However, Drake and Reid (2018) argue that, in many countries, there is little professional development on how teachers' knowledge of innovative teaching practices can be improved. This may partly explain why teachers often find it difficult to reform their practice.

The state-mandated New Curriculum for Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe, disseminated into schools in January 2017, advises teachers to use learner-centred pedagogy and desist from treating learners as empty vessels to be loaded with information (MOPSE, 2015). The new History Syllabus states that: "the teaching of History will be accomplished through the use of the following learner-centred and multi-sensory approaches: games and quizzes, simulation, video and

film shows, educational tours, case study, group discussion, discovery, research, debate, role play, projects, folklore and e-learning” (CDTS, 2015, p. 2). The syllabus does not recommend teacher exposition, lecturing, dictation and writing notes on the board.

Purpose of the paper

Globally, history teachers are known for their unimaginative and boring classroom practices (Schul, 2015); despite numerous reform initiatives to transform the subject from a dead collection of facts to a vibrant body of knowledge. Harris and Graham’s (2019) research in England established that history teachers were reluctant to engage in curriculum reform. This paper contributes to the current discourse on why history teachers appear resistant to change in the technology-driven 21st century. As such the research question which undergirds this paper is: To what extent are history teachers in Zimbabwe transforming their classroom practice to align with new pedagogical reform policy?

Review of related literature

Change in classroom practice has always been difficult, slow, complex and controversial. “Trying to change teaching practice is one area of schooling which has proved the most resistant to change”, remarks Desimone (2002, p. 434).

Reform as difficult enterprise

Despite many positive changes in schools in the developed world, teachers continue to face reform implementation challenges. Commenting on the state of history instruction in Europe, Stoel, van Drie and van Boxtel (2015, p. 50) point out that: “classroom practice is out of sync with the policy goal of teaching historical reasoning”. Reese (2013) adds that progressive ideas are easier to proclaim than implement.

When a signal for reform is sounded, very often there is the misleading assumption that teachers will change their teaching methods overnight, simply because they have been told what is good for them and their students (Prendergast & Treacy, 2017). Three decades ago Cohen (1990, p. 323) argued that: “teachers cannot simply shed their old ideas and practices like a shabby coat, and slip on something new... as they reach out to embrace or invent a new instruction; they reach with their old professional selves, including all the ideas and practices comprised therein”. Cohen’s thesis appears valid up to the present day.

History instruction in the USA

Warren (2007) observes that existing literature is full of complaints about secondary school history teachers’ dull and uninspiring classroom practices. Schul (2015) also points out that there is a serious problem with history pedagogy; because it is characterized by the memorisation of names and dates, and monotonous lectures by teachers. Although Warren and Schul were writing on the American situation, the scenario seems no different in many other countries in Southern Africa.

Pedagogical practice in Southern Africa

A bird’s eye view of classroom practice in Malawi, Zambia, Botswana, South Africa, Lesotho and Zimbabwe shows that, despite numerous curriculum reform

initiatives, classroom practice has not changed much in the past 20 or so years (Tabulawa, 2013; Sibanda & Young, 2019). History instruction in Zimbabwean secondary schools remains teacher dominated. Chitate (2005, p. 11) observed “the stubborn persistence of traditional methods that went against the grain of the new ‘O’ level history syllabus”. Some six years later, Moyo and Moyo (2011) found that, history lessons were still characterised by lists of dates and strings of names. Mapetere (2013) also established that simple narratives and uncritical reading of text remain the staple of history teaching in Zimbabwe. It appears chalk-and-talk continue to dominate history instruction in Zimbabwe.

Theoretical underpinnings

A critical element, usually neglected in reform implementation studies, is how teachers make sense of new and often complex ideas enshrined in new curriculum policy (Priestley & Philippou, 2018). This paper taps into sense-making as its theoretical framework because teachers are inquisitive about policy prescriptions that seek to change their practices. Sense-making involves gathering, restructuring and reorganising information to build a reasonable understanding about an issue that is puzzling, troubling or confusing (Wheat, Attfield & Fields, 2016). Teachers make efforts to understand new policy in the light of their past experiences, content knowledge and classroom contexts.

We found sense-making appropriate in exploring teachers' understanding and choice of teaching methods in the first year of implementing new pedagogical reforms. “If teachers do not fully comprehend the goals and form of new policy, then their efforts to implement will invariably fall back on existing practices and ways of thinking”, advise Priestley and Philippou (2018, p. 154). By analysing what goes on in the teachers' minds after receiving new pedagogical policy, sense-making provided lens for exploring and explaining why teachers develop certain pedagogical preferences rather than others.

Methodology

Permission to collect data for this study was sought from the University of the Free State in South Africa and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe. Teachers participated voluntarily and to protect their identities, and those of their schools, pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.

The research design selected is the qualitative multiple case study. Each of the four participants was studied as an autonomous classroom practitioner over an eight-week data collection period. The study was conducted in four schools purposively sampled out of 13 targeted secondary schools in one urban district near Harare. Minichiello and Kottler (2010, p. 12) advise that: “qualitative researchers observe people in their natural setting so that they can learn from them about what they are thinking, and more importantly, why they think and act the way they do”. There was no manipulation or interference with the classroom setting and lesson delivery.

The four secondary schools selected were considered to have the best teaching-learning resources. One history teacher was purposively sampled from each school on the grounds that: s/he had a minimum of a degree in history, a diploma in history pedagogy and five years' teaching experience. Curriculum documents collected and

analysed included reform policy frameworks, syllabuses, circulars, research task guidelines and teachers' schemes of work.

Three semi-structured interviews (of approximately an hour long each) were conducted with each participant and audio-taped. These interviews were conducted at the pre-observation, intermittent and exit stages. Intensive non-participatory lesson observations were also made by the first researcher. The plan was to observe each participant teaching the new history curriculum to the same Form 3 class twice a week, yielding a target of 64 lesson observations. However, because of unanticipated interruptions (like staff meetings, invigilation, and cultural festivals), a total of 47 lessons were observed.

Qualitative data analysis techniques used included interpretive content analysis, intra-case analysis, triangulation, thematic aggregation and cross-case analysis.

Findings

Pedagogical demands of the new curriculum

Data from the interviews and informal discussions indicated that all the four teachers were aware that the new history curriculum requires them to use learner-centred pedagogy in their lessons. What differed were the meanings they attached to 'learner-centred' methodology. The theory of cognitive sense-making informs that: "Based on their experiences in the profession, teachers develop a personal system of knowledge and beliefs that act as a cognitive and affective lens through which they look at their job, give meaning to it and act on it" (Marz et al., 2013, p. 15).

In the pre-observation interview Bessie explained that: "The new teaching approach is downloading of notes from the internet, the use of computers, giving pupils some work so that they carry out research on their own using the internet". Computer aided learning appeared to be at the centre of Bessie's conceptualisation of the new curriculum. Angela also recognized e-learning as a major pedagogical innovation in the new history curriculum. She observed that: "The new syllabus requires us to use the internet, computers, interactive boards, white boards, projectors, but all these things are absent... It also encourages learner-centred activities like group work, pair work, presentations, text study and students writing their own notes."

For David, learner-centred pedagogy meant students carrying out research on their own and going on educational tours. "I really liked the aspect of research because we are training our students to be historians at a very tender age. And this idea of trips has brought a lot of interest in my students because working indoors becomes monotonous and boring", he remarked. For Emmy, learner-centredness meant students taking a leading role in a variety of learning activities with the teacher as a facilitator. "We just facilitate and students take the leading role, they can co-ordinate themselves with minimum supervision. There is no room for dictation in the new curriculum", she explained. Each teacher interpreted the curriculum the way s/he understood it.

Classroom practice during reform implementation

After the pre-observation interviews, the first researcher went on to observe each teacher teaching the new history curriculum. Ten lessons were observed in

Angela's Form 3A, 13 in Bessie's Form 3B, nine in David's Form 3D and 15 in Emmy's Form 3E. All the lessons were 35 minutes long each except for David's lessons which were 70 minutes long each. The teachers' efforts to reform classroom practice met a number of setbacks, except for Emmie.

In her lessons Angela tended to start with text study and discussion, showing attempts to align practice with the new pedagogical policy. But she always ended up dictating notes or summarizing them on the chalkboard. Similarly, Bessie started her lessons with some attempts to engage students in teacher-guided discussions or question-answer sessions. But once students failed to answer her questions or engage in any fruitful discussion she would rhetorically ask: "So you don't want to talk? Then take the following notes." A lesson which started with some learner-centred activity ended with Bessie writing notes on the chalkboard. Many such lessons were observed in Bessie's Form 3B. She complained that the class was of below average ability.

But students in David's Form 3D were eager to participate in individual and group presentations, debates and class discussions. They could articulate and justify their ideas in fluent English. This gave credence to David's claims that the 20 students doing history in this class had freely chosen to do history (instead of biology) and were of above average ability. David encouraged students to take notes during class discussions. After the discussions, David dictated notes to reinforce what had emerged from the students. David insisted that: "Making students write their own notes is like leaving your students in the wilderness... Even if students are to write their own notes, it's not everything which is found in the school textbook." David strongly believed that: "History teachers cannot totally do away with exposition and dictation, no matter how progressive they may want to be... In history the teacher remains the master of the subject."

But Emmy's practice contradicted David. All the 15 lessons observed in Form 3E were learner-centred; corroborating what Emmy had said in the pre-observation interview: "Even before the new curriculum, I had already moved from the teacher-dominated approach". She declared that: "To me the new methods are old. I have been using them before the new curriculum, so it's just a continuation. The coming in of the new curriculum doesn't change anything."

Discussion

Liu and Wang (2019, p. 1) remark that: "teachers' classroom pedagogies are found to reflect neither the official curriculum ideas nor their own espoused beliefs". Liu and Wang's findings seem to speak to Bessie's classroom practice. Her teaching methods did not reflect the constructivist teaching methods recommended by the new pedagogical policy, nor did they reflect her own claimed belief that she had changed her practice to learner-centred pedagogy since her return from university. In the pre-observation interview Bessie claimed that: "My attitude was changed by going to the university. Prior to that, I gave pupils notes and sometimes never cared to explain... But when I came back beginning this year (2017), I started to see the teaching of history with another eye..."

Although Bessie talked of fundamental changes in her teaching methods, the lessons observed did not reflect much change in her classroom practice. She continued to dictate and write notes on the chalkboard. Tyack and Cuban (1995, p.

40) observe that there is often a wide gap between ‘policy talk’ and ‘policy action’. Bessie appeared to engage more in policy talk than policy action.

But Angela insisted that: “Methods have not really changed because of inadequate materials... So we are still resorting to our traditional teaching methods – lecturing and dictation.” Angela’s classroom practice seems to speak to Drake and Reid’s (2018, p. 32) observations that: “There is little professional development around the capabilities or knowledge of innovative teaching practices”. David’s classroom practice also reflected that he was not empowered with the innovative teaching methods that reform policy expected him to use. Although David made efforts to change his classroom practice towards learner-centred pedagogy, he always found himself reverting back to traditional practices, partly because the curriculum reformers had introduced new pedagogical policy before in-servicing teachers on how to use innovative methodologies. The reformers had placed the cart (reform policy) in front of the horse (the teacher), before harnessing and training the horse to pull the cart.

Conclusion

Far-reaching structural changes are necessary in Zimbabwe’s education system if fundamental changes are to take place in teachers’ pedagogical preferences. Teachers must be involved in the process of formulating reform policy in order to reduce the yawning gap between those who decide and those who implement the decisions. Teacher capacity building on innovative teaching strategies is necessary if constructivist pedagogy is to be successfully enacted. Future studies can explore students’ perspectives on the learning methods they like. More often than not, students are the forgotten factor in the politics of curriculum change; although they are the ultimate beneficiaries, or victims, of policy reform.

References

- Chitate, H. (2005): Post-independent Zimbabwe’s new ‘O’ Level History Syllabus 2166: A crisis of expectations. *Zimbabwe Journal of Educational Research*, 17(3), 1-30.
- Cohen, D. K. (1990): A Revolution in One Classroom: The Case of Mrs Oublier. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 12(3), 311-329.
- Curriculum Development and Technical Services (CDTS) (2015): *History Syllabus 4044 Forms 1-4*. Mount Pleasant, Harare: CDTS.
- Desimone, L. (2002): How can comprehensive school reform models be successfully implemented? *Review of Educational Research*, 72(3), 433-479.
- Drake, S. M. & Reid, J. L. (2018): Integrated curriculum as an effective way to teach 21st century capabilities. *Asia Pacific Journal of Educational Research*, 1(1), 31-50.
- Gleeson, J., Klenowski, V. & Looney, A. (2020): Curriculum change in Australia and Ireland: A comparative study of recent reforms. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 52(1), 1-21.
- Harris, R. & Graham, S. (2019): Engaging with curriculum reform: Insights from English history teachers’ willingness to support curriculum change. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 51(1), 43-61.
- Liu, W. & Wang, Q. (2019): Walking with bound feet: teachers’ lived experiences in China’s English curriculum. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, DOI: 10.1080/07908318.2019.1615077.

- Mapetere, K. (2013): The new history concept. *Greener Journal of Educational Research*, 3(3), 134-137.
- Marz, V., Kelchtermans, G., Vanhoof, S. & Onghena, P. (2013): Sense-making and structure in teachers' reception of educational reform. A case study on statistics in the mathematics curriculum. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 29, 13-24.
- Minichiello, V. & Kottler, J. (2010): An overview of the qualitative journey: reviewing basic concepts. In V. Minichiello & J. Kottler (Eds.) *Qualitative Journeys: Students and Mentor Experiences with Research* (pp. 11-32). New Delhi: Sage.
- Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MOPSE) (2015): *Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education 2015-2022*. Harare: MOPSE.
- Moyo, T. & Moyo, S. (2011): An Evaluation of the 'New History' Phenomenon. *Zimbabwe Journal of Educational Research*, 23(3), 302-313.
- Prendergast, M. & Treacy, P. (2017): Curriculum reform in Irish secondary schools – a focus on algebra. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 50(1), 126-143.
- Priestley, M. & Philippou, S. (2018): Curriculum making as social practice: Complex webs of enactment. *The Curriculum Journal*, 29(2), 151-158.
- Reese, W. J. (2013): In search of American progressives and teachers. *History of Education*, 42(3), 320-334.
- Schul, J. C. (2015): Pedagogical triangulation: The mergence of three traditions in history instruction. *The Social Studies*, 106, 24-31.
- Sibanda, L. & Young, J. (2019): Towards a postcolonial curriculum in Zimbabwe: A critical review of the literature. *Africa Education Review*, DOI: 10.1080/18146627.2018.1507622.
- Stoel, G. L., van Drie, J. P. & van Boxtel, C. A. M. (2015): Teaching towards historical expertise: Developing pedagogy for fostering casual reasoning in history. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 47(1), 49-76.
- Tabulawa, R. T. (2013): *Teaching and learning in context: Why pedagogical reforms fail in sub-Saharan Africa*. Dakar, Senegal: Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa.
- Tyack, D. & Cuban, L. (1995): *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of public-school reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Warren, W. J. (2007): Closing the gap between authentic history pedagogy and everyday classroom practice. *The History Teacher*, 40(2), 249-255.
- Wheat, A., Attfield, S. & Fields, A. (2016): Developing a model of distributed sense making: A case study of military analysis. *Informatics*, www.mdpi.com/journal/informatics.

Acknowledgments

This paper is generated from an unpublished PhD thesis: Chimbi, G. T. (2018). Patterns of classroom practice and the history curriculum reforms in Zimbabwean secondary schools. University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa.
<https://scholar.ufs.ac.za/xmlui/handle/11660/9979>

Dr. Godsend T. Chimbi, University of the Free State, South Africa

Prof. Dr. Loyiso C. Jita, University of the Free State, South Africa