



# The 'Translation Tool' for Critical Pedagogic Practice in the Classroom: Reimagining the Potential of Curriculum Theory in Teaching

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## ABSTRACT

This paper employs the notion of curriculum potential as a heuristic to rethink an in-service Curriculum theory undergraduate course offered at Great Zimbabwe University in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. The course foregrounds reconceptualist notions of curriculum theorizing to empower students to rethink the dominant technicist pedagogical practices that are associated with the Tylerian rationale of curriculum development. The argument developed is that reconceptualist curriculum theorizing can serve as the translation tool for empowering teachers to engage in critical pedagogical practice. The medium of secondary school History is employed as a subject through which to illustrate the pedagogical opportunities for reframing subject content in ways that are affirming of the students lived realities. The paper concludes that engaging prospective and practicing teachers in the study of Curriculum has potential to empower them to question the historical present and their relation to it, and in so doing, to construct their own understandings of what it means to teach, to study, to become educated.

## Keywords:

Curriculum theory; Translation tool,  
Critical pedagogic practice;  
Reconceptualization of Curriculum;  
History teaching; Great Zimbabwe  
University; Zimbabwe

## INTRODUCTION

*Why are teachers not permitted, indeed, encouraged, to show students that academic knowledge is not self-contained, that it reaches out toward and back from life as human beings live it? Why is not the school curriculum a provocation for students to reflect on and think critically about themselves and the world they will inherit? (Pinar, 2004).*

This paper employs Zongyi Deng's notion of 'curriculum potential' (2011) as an entry point to explore the ways in which Curriculum theory as a foundational course in teacher education in the Zimbabwean education paradigm has potential to empower teachers to engage in what Parkes (2007) calls 'critical pedagogic practice' for transformative learning. It draws on an in-service full semester Curriculum theory course offered at Great Zimbabwe University to re-imagine ways in which teachers can be empowered to transcend the bureaucratic and pedagogical limitations alluded to in the above epigraph, and thus claim the space to be recognised and valued as they engage in curriculum decision making in classrooms, schools, systems and the wider community (Macpherson, 1996). 'Curriculum potential' (Deng, 2011) entails 'an understanding of how content is organized, framed, and transformed for educational, epistemological (or psychological), curricular, and pedagogical purposes within a particular classroom context' (Schwab, 1973; Ben-Peretz, 1990). It requires attending to institutional, programmatic, and classroom meaning and significance in ways that make teachers to be transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 2005) who understand that power and knowledge are deeply imbricated in each other. The process proceeds through four iterative phases as follows: inquiry framing; socio cultural framing; psycho-epistemological framing; and pedagogic translation (Deng, 2011). These are fundamentally curricular in nature and require that they be interrogated through a theory of curriculum that foregrounds the social constructedness of knowledge and its historical contingency in relation to power and hegemony in society.

This study appropriates this notion and broadens its meaning to include teachers' understandings and reframing of school subjects in ways that challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions that are purveyed through the social construction of school subjects (Goodson, 1992). It thus maps the four stages outlined above onto the major themes of the Curriculum theory course in order to tease out its relevance as a conceptual tool for enabling teachers to understand and enact the 'curriculum potential' as they teach. This approach challenges the technicist views of education where content is construed as merely a corpus of facts, concepts and skills for transmission and instead, foregrounds a criticalist approach in which the students' lived realities are brought to bear on what is co-constructed as valid school

knowledge in the Freirean sense of emancipatory pedagogy (Freire, 1990). This is because school subjects as developed by the curriculum developers are not neutral disciplinary bodies but 'alchemies that transmogrify disciplinary thinking into normalizing pedagogies for making the child who he is and who he should be' (Popkewitz, 2007). Thus, in his view the "translation" tools of pedagogy are *not* copies of original disciplinary practices replicated in schools. Pedagogy entails systems of recognition and enactment that are acts of creation' (Popkewitz, 2009).

We draw on the above assertion to explore how (or not) Curriculum theory could function as such a 'translation tool' to empower teachers to transcend narrow subject area specialization and perceive the curriculum as 'historical, political, racial, gendered, phenomenological, autobiographical, aesthetic, theological and intentional' whatever the school subject (Pinar, 2004). As Deng (2007) reminds us, the question at the heart of the teaching enterprise is how teachers can go beyond 'the mere discussion of subject that is framed in terms of academic disciplines to a broader conversation enhanced and enriched by curriculum theories and discourses.' Thus the question we address is: how does an understanding of Curriculum theory enhance teachers' understandings of the disciplinary nature of the subjects they teach in ways that are likely to foster critical pedagogic practice? We focus on the forms of curriculum theorizing that have characterized education debate in general and curriculum practices in particular. The argument developed unfolds as follows: the first part explores the conceptual issues involved in Curriculum theory as an 'interdisciplinary field' in teacher education (Pinar, 2004). The second surveys the Curriculum field in Zimbabwe and then focuses on Curriculum theory as a professional development course offered at Great Zimbabwe University. The last part teases out the implications of Curriculum theory for teachers' understandings and enactment of a critical pedagogic practice. First, however we present the conceptual framework that informs this analysis.

## Conceptual framework

This study employs 'reconceptualised critical theory' (Kincheloe et al., 2011) as its conceptual lens. The theory is a philosophical blend of Marxism, Critical theory and post-structuralism whose epistemological and ontological assumptions include, inter alia, that:

- All thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constituted;
- Facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription;
- The relationship between concept and object and between signifier and signified is never stable or

fixed and is often mediated by the social relations (Kincheloe et al., 2011).

In their view, reconceptualism implies the search for hidden meaning in social events and value-laden problems of society. Thus, when applied to this study these tenets help us re-imagine pedagogy as a political and educational encounter that debunks the hidden meanings that occur among individuals and curriculum through which unpredictable possibilities of communication and transformative possibilities are created (Zembylas, 2005). The goal of curriculum in this pedagogical encounter is creating opportunities for the 'as yet unimagined' Ellsworth (1997, 56) to emerge and for the shattering of that which is taken-is taken-for-granted. The next section explores how Curriculum theory as a discipline can serve as such a conceptual tool.

### **Curriculum Theory and pedagogic practice**

Curriculum theory as a field of study has tended to be marginalized in American teacher education (Pinar, 2004) when compared to the more established foundations of Psychology of Education, Sociology and Philosophy of Education. It is for this reason that 'for many practicing teachers, "curriculum" is understood as what the district office requires them to teach, what the state education department (sic) publish in scope and sequence guides. For many prospective teachers, curriculum denotes a course syllabus, perhaps only a list of books you are allowed to read,' (Pinar, 2004). The field of curriculum study as it evolved was predicated on promoting curriculum development as 'the preparation and transmission of knowledge within an institution whose purpose is to educate' (Null, 2008). However, since the reconceptualization of the field in the 1970s the focus has shifted to what Pinar (2004) calls 'curriculum understanding' and not 'curriculum development'. For Pinar, 'Curriculum theory is that interdisciplinary field in which teacher education is conceived as the professionalization of academic freedom, including intellectual dissent, creativity, and self-reflexive, interdisciplinary erudition.' It 'may be the only academic discipline within the broad field of education' which 'has its origin in and owes its loyalty to the discipline and experience of education' (Pinar, 2004). Following this reconceptualization of the field, the purpose of the curriculum is, as Pinar (2004) explains, 'about discovering and articulating for oneself and with others, the educational significance of the school subjects for self and society in the ever-changing historical moment.' When this notion is foregrounded in a criticalist paradigm of teacher education it challenges practising teachers to

ask students to question the historical present and their relation to it. As Connelly and Xu (2008) remind us, Curriculum theory 'grows out of the deliberative resolution of every day, practical curriculum puzzles.' Thus the purpose of teaching following this perspective is to enable students to employ academic knowledge to understand their own self-formation within society and the wider world (Pinar, 2004).

Curriculum theory when taught to teachers becomes the means by which teachers can go beyond 'the mere discussion of subject that is framed in terms of academic disciplines to a broader conversation enhanced and enriched by curriculum theories and discourses' (Deng, 2007). Its value as a theory 'lies in its power to get in the way: to offend and interrupt' (MacLure, 2010) the taken-for-granted assumptions that define the grammars of the school subjects and our world. It achieves this by enabling teachers to view the curriculum not as the prescribed text to be implemented in schools but rather as 'the site on which the generations struggle to define themselves and the world'; and 'an extraordinarily complicated conversation' that teachers and students engage in (Pinar, 2004). It also recognises the contestedness of curriculum as a socio-historical construct thus empowering teachers to deconstruct and reconstruct curricula in ways that are affirming of the students' lived realities. The following section reviews the Curriculum field in Zimbabwe.

### **The Curriculum field in Zimbabwe**

The field of curriculum studies in Zimbabwe has evolved along the British tradition of curriculum theorizing rather than the US tradition. As such it is dominated by traditional curriculum theorizing associated with the Hirstian (1970) notion of the seven 'forms of knowledge' as the basis for the selection of valid knowledge. Dennis Lawton's (1974) notion of curriculum as a selection of the culture of a society has informed both colonial and postcolonial debate in this country. These theories tend to privilege neoclassical British canons of scholarship (Maravanyika 1990). Stenhouse's (1975) critique of Tyler's objectives model is drawn on to re-imagine alternative forms of curriculum theorizing in opposition to the Tyler rationale (Ndawi, 2004; Ndawi and Maravanyika, 2011). Independence ushered in radical forms of curriculum theorizing that drew from Marxist and Neo-Marxist philosophy with calls for an emancipatory education founded on praxis as both a pedagogical and political weapon to challenge the inherited traditions of the colonial system (Chung and Ngara, 1985). Table 2.3 below summarizes the trajectories of the field in this country.

**Table 2.1: Overview of the Curriculum Field in Zimbabwe**

| Theorist                                          | Notion of curriculum                                  | Philosophical tenets                          |
|---------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Tyler's Rationale 1949                            | Objectives as the basis of curriculum planning        | Technicization of education                   |
| Hirst 1970;                                       | Seven forms of knowledge                              | Propositional knowledge<br>traditional canons |
| Lawton 1979                                       | Curriculum as selection from the culture of a society | Cultural universals                           |
|                                                   |                                                       |                                               |
| Stenhouse 1975                                    | Disciplinary power of subjects                        | Teacher as researcher model                   |
| Postcolonial curriculum theorizing (Paulo Freire) | Critical emancipatory curriculum                      | Praxis; Poly-technic education                |

Postcolonial curriculum theorizing has according to Jansen (2003) followed six themes as follows:

- anticolonial curriculum theorizing that is a critique of the inherited curriculum;
- post-colonial curriculum innovations such as Education with Production;
- advocacy writings about what knowledge, ideas, and values the new education system should reflect after colonialism studies on the politics of curriculum;
- studies of school subjects, their nature, design, organization, effects on learning and teaching; and
- the administration of education and how patterns of administration influenced curriculum planning.

It is in the light of the above developments that Jansen (2003) observes that, while curriculum writing had a strong political focus under and against colonialism, it appears to have lost this quality at independence 'in favor of more staid technical and administrative accounts of curriculum change and innovation.' For this reason, curriculum theorizing has perpetuated the notion of curriculum as delivery with teachers viewed as purveyors and implementers of state-mandated knowledge. It is thus not surprising that Ndawi and Maravanyika (2011) focus on what they call the 'building blocks' and 'concepts and principles of curriculum' and not 'curriculum understanding and curriculum creation' as a co-evolving trajectory with potential to serve as the 'translation tools' to change disciplines into school subjects (Popkewitz, 2007). The imagery of a well-built wall with bricks neatly and systematically arranged on the jacket of their book belies the complexity of curriculum development that is salient in Taba's (1962, 6-7) assertion that 'curriculum development is a complex undertaking that involves many

kinds of decisions.' It also contrasts sharply with the photograph on the cover of the Sage Handbook of Curriculum which is a 'close-in shot of snow-covered tree branches. Without showing a trunk (hence a base) or where each branch eventually ends (hence an ending), this image of a 'multi-tentacled' organism aptly reveals the curriculum field - with all of its larger and smaller inquiries, winding possibilities, and abundant offshoots,' (Uhrmacher and Moroye, 2009).

### **Curriculum theory at Great Zimbabwe University**

The Great Zimbabwe University has an established faculty of education with Curriculum Studies as its largest department. The university was established to provide in-service teacher education to upgrade the qualifications of mainly primary school teachers who had qualified with certificates and diplomas from colleges. A Bachelor's degree in-service course for secondary school teachers was launched in 2007 to expose teachers to rigorous intellectual activity associated with university education while also deepening their mastery of school subjects.

The degree is offered on a part-time basis over three years and includes a compulsory module in Curriculum theory. The module is designed to challenge narrow traditionalist conceptions of curriculum and promote critical perceptions by developing the teachers' understanding of curriculum as political text that is subject to ideological and political contestations. The introductory topics to the course include: Introduction to Curriculum: definitions and key concepts; and Foundations/factors of curriculum planning, design and development. To acquaint the teachers with the history of the field the following phases are studied:

- Traditionalists : 1918-1960s
- Conceptual empiricists: 1960-1970s

- Reconceptualists: 1969-1990s
- Post-reconceptualists: 2000-

Teachers have to reflect on and think critically about the tenets of each phase and its implications for curriculum practice at the school level. The phases are taught to highlight the historical forces that have shaped the purposes of schooling in each phase. The teachers address the following questions in seminars, lectures and discussions:

- What are the differences between the technocratic and critical conceptions of curriculum?
  - How do schools function in the legitimation and reproduction of values, beliefs and world-views?
  - Whose social interests are embodied in the knowledge forms that get legitimated as official knowledge?
  - Who benefits?
  - What notions of curriculum theory speak to an empowering pedagogy?
  - How may such tenets be enacted in actual classroom settings?
- (Moyo and Modiba, 2013).

The compulsory readings include Michael Apple's *Ideology and Curriculum* (1980) and William Pinar's, *What is Curriculum Theory?* (2004). In addition, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1990) was foregrounded as the theoretical underpinning of the course. This is intended to promote teachers' notions of what transformative pedagogy seeks to do. In particular, Freire's concepts of 'banking education' and 'emancipatory education' are used to illustrate the different conceptions of curriculum and the implications for teaching thereof.

The intention is to help the teachers understand that a curriculum is not a warehouse of knowledge merely to be passed on to waiting customers, but more importantly, is a configuration of knowledge, social relations, values that represents an introduction to and legitimation of a particular way of life (Giroux, 2005). The implications of this theory were further clarified by teaching the following topics:

- Models of curriculum design
- Theories of curriculum implementation
- Forms of curriculum evaluation
- Curriculum change and evaluation
- The reconceptualization of curriculum theory.

The topics are taught to enable teachers to understand how the curriculum is embedded in societal values and thus reflects where power and control lie in a society. The last topic on the reconceptualization of curriculum theory explores the notion of 'currere' as autobiographical and historical to clarify why it is important to connect what goes on in the schools to what goes on in the world. It also

deals with the agential role that teachers play in teaching as Freire (1990) reminds us that to teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge. The next section teases out the implications of this notion of curriculum for critical pedagogic practice.

### Implications for practice

This section identifies in very specific ways the pedagogical instances in which an understanding of Curriculum theory is likely to impact on the ways in which teachers can utilise the curriculum potential in the subjects they teach to enhance critical pedagogic practice in their classrooms. First, is that Curriculum theory empowers teachers to move from curriculum development, which is largely bureaucratic and procedural, to curriculum understanding which is theoretically sophisticated and devoted to hearing the voices of the marginalized groups (Pinar, 2008). As Giroux and McLaren (1996) explain, this understanding is necessary in order to affirm and demonstrate pedagogical practices that are required in 'rupturing disciplinary boundaries, decentering authority, and rewriting the institutional and discursive borderlands in which politics becomes a condition for reassessing the relationship between agency, power and struggle.' In this way, teachers are liberated from what Ben-Peretz (1990) calls the 'tyranny of the text' and become transformative intellectuals who view schools as sites of struggle and possibility (for resistance) rather than as simply seamless sites of oppression (Giroux, 2005). This is what Deng (2011) calls inquiry framing and describes it as framing content for cross-curricular and issue-based inquiry.

Second is that an understanding of curriculum theory enables teacher to problematize and foreground different claims on the formations of subject matter; to understand their epistemological bases and their teleological assumptions about the purpose of schooling and education; to identify whose and which versions of knowledge, practice, and experience are entailed; and to understand the educational and intellectual, social and cultural bases and consequences of these particular selections (Deng and Luke, 2008). This implies that they have to problematize subject matter through questions such as:

- how the content in subject curricula are selected and structured;
- how certain knowledge structures are privileged while others are excluded;
- how particular worldviews are explicitly or implicitly communicated;
- how various desires and sentiments are instilled or inculcated; and,
- how specific forms of cultural imagination are induced.

Posing the above questions is, in our view an imperative, as teachers ought not only to be subject specialists but

rather be 'private- and public intellectuals who understand that self-reflexivity, intellectuality, Interdisciplinarity, and erudition are as inseparable as are the subjective and the social spheres themselves.' By applying these skills, teachers and students are better able to investigate both their own subjectivities and the ways in which their social situations affect their beliefs and attitudes about their immediate educational experiences. Deng (2011) calls this socio-cultural framing of curriculum potential which involves framing content with reference to socio-cultural contexts. Its focus would be on how different perspectives can be brought to bear on addressing curriculum issues with regard to the students, the society, and the world. It would also require that teachers engage with what attitudes and values are worthy of cultivation (Deng, 2011).

Third, is that Curriculum theory enables teachers and students to begin questioning the kinds of underlying organizing structures presented by Tyler's curriculum principles. For example, how teachers perceive school subjects and thus frame their pedagogical practices is determined by their understandings of what curriculum is. Rather than Perceive subjects as bodies of knowledge to be taught, teachers ought to reconceive the subjects as a conversational form of discourse that includes a variety of voices. For example, with regard to the teaching of History, the challenge for teachers is to enable students to 'enter history rather than simply observe it from a distance' (Slattery, 1998). This requires that teachers decanonize the subjects that they teach while, at the same time, they remain faithful to the disciplinary power of subjects. Doing so is particularly important in Southern Africa where 'school subjects remain a powerful organizational reality in postcolonial institutions despite various initiatives for integration of subjects or interdisciplinary curricula,' (Jansen, 2003). For example, in Zimbabwe studies of school subjects are often conducted by specialists within the subject area with the result that the forms of theorizing tend to reflect the 'insular discourses of the discipline and not the broader dynamics curriculum politics in a postcolonial state' as they focus 'on technical limitations or deficiencies in teaching, learning, curriculum, and assessment within the context of a particular school subject or discipline' (Jansen, 2003). This aspect theorizing the curriculum is what Deng (2011) calls the psycho-epistemological framing which implies framing content with reference to the curricular or knowledge context of students. At this stage of theorizing the curriculum teachers will be guided by such questions as: what prerequisite knowledge and skills are needed for learning the issues and concepts? and how might the key issues and concepts connect with what students learn in other school subjects or from other learning experiences in the curriculum? The importance of these questions lies in their power to shape the pedagogical activities that will be undertaken in class. For example, teaching and learning activities such as group discussion, debate, role-play, project work, and independent inquiry will be decided upon on the basis of the above questions. The resources to be used in the

lesson will be decided in the same way. It is in this way that classroom teachers interpret and transform the content of the school subject so as to disclose and actualize its educational potential.

Fourth, as Deng (2011) reminds us, teachers are curriculum makers in the sense that they interpret and transform the written curriculum into learning experiences using their personal practical knowledge, in consideration of curriculum commonplaces - the teacher or self, students, subject matter, and milieu. It is for this reason that the teacher 'is imaged as a responsible curriculum maker who is grappling with the most basic how, what, and why questions around curriculum content in a classroom, with respect to broad institutional goals or ideals and to the programmatic curriculum embodied in curriculum materials. How teachers can honestly fulfil their role as curriculum makers without thorough grounding in a theory of curriculum is to expect the impossible from the teachers. Thus teachers' roles as curriculum makers involves what Deng (2011) calls pedagogic translation that is translating content into teaching and learning activities and selecting instructional resources.

Finally, is that Curriculum theory 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 subjects are not just national and school syllabi, textbooks and objectives, but that 'complicated conversation' (Pinar, 2004) in which teachers and students engage each other as well as the vernacular knowledges that make up their lives. As Jarvela (2000, 148) asserts, 'what we need to achieve as teachers is critical self-reflection: a clear goal, a decolonizing mindset which gives us the will and the courage to educate our students, and ourselves, for critical consciousness.' Curriculum theory thus becomes a way for curriculum practitioners to reflect on and theorise about their curriculum practice; to articulate their own curriculum theory and knowledge; to engage in professional development as an ongoing and integral part of their curriculum practice; and to use this ever-evolving professional growth as a platform for transforming their curriculum practice (Macpherson, 1996). Thus, when teachers are exposed to this theory, it constitutes a bridge between self and society, and between the academic disciplines of the school and the lived realities of the students. As a theory of teaching, Curriculum theory is therefore likely to attempt to restore thoughtful or critical inquiry in the classroom activities. In the words of Pacheco (2009) it provides the contemplative moment with which students interrupt their taken-for-granted understandings, enabling them to ask questions that practical activity silences.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated the curriculum potential for critical pedagogic practice that lies in the study of

Curriculum theory as a foundational course in teacher education. It has argued that as a theory it acknowledges the disciplinary power of school subjects and at the same time empowers teachers to engage in that critical pedagogic practice that is both transforming and affirmative of the students' lived realities. For as Deng and Luke (2008) assert, the foundational philosophic, epistemological, and cultural challenges of curriculum theory provide the only possible grounding for the ostensibly practical tasks of curriculum development, implementation, and practice. The content choices of the Curriculum theory course at Great Zimbabwe University are specifically intended to foster such abilities in the teachers. For it is at the intersectionality of disciplinary knowledge and Curriculum theory that curriculum potential that is inert in the materials is brought forth to bear on what happens in the very act of teaching. It is therefore imperative that teacher education strives to weave together Curriculum theory and curriculum practice into one coherent interdependent landscape that empowers teachers for critical pedagogic practice that is so necessary for an understanding of what it means to educate in our times. For to study the field of curriculum is, in the words of Connelly and Xu (2008) to enter:

*a place of intellectual debate on the most pressing educational and social issues in society, where on-the-ground predilections for describing, understanding and improving schooling, public policy and political curriculum discourse are encouraged, where the critical spirit is nurtured with access to the most powerful conceptual frames from the social sciences, humanities, and arts, and where habits of abstraction and theorizing are welcomed.*

We hope that in engaging prospective and practicing teachers in the study of Curriculum, theory we empower them to enter this field of debate in which they 'question the historical present and their relation to it, and in so doing, to construct their own understandings of what it means to teach, to study, to become "educated"' (Pinar, 2004) in a post-colony such as Zimbabwe. This may well constitute a basis for further research into how (or not) the potential of Curriculum theory as discussed herein is being enacted in the classrooms.

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