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Teachers' troubled interactions with prescribed school history and its national imaginaries: the case of post-Mugabe Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the under-researched case of post-Mugabe Zimbabwe, this article explores the intricacies of teachers' engagement with official curricula and their inherent national imaginaries within prescriptive and constrictive political environments. The article investigates history teachers' interpretation and enactment of curriculum reform and textbook revision in historically marginalised regions of Zimbabwe, centring representations of the country's contentious anti-colonial struggle. Our findings illuminate educators' sense of moral and professional injury in the face of conflict between the values of academic history they acquire through teacher education and their classroom practices, favouring a nationalist collective memory approach, compelled by the spectre of potential sanctions and by high-stakes centralised examinations that act as technologies of control. We conclude by drawing attention to the implications of policy constraints for teachers' wellbeing and for societal vulnerability to the abuse of history, and by calling for further investigation into the feasibility of implementing critical historical inquiry in classrooms where systemic barriers prevail. Ultimately, we warn against unrealistic assumptions about normative, one-size-fits-all approaches to history education that fail to take into account realities on the ground and point out the need for the field to search for effective strategies in support of teachers working in constrictive contexts.

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Introduction

Scholars are increasingly using the descriptor 'state-sponsored history' (Bevernage and Wouters 2018) to pinpoint the preponderant role of states in the manufacture and propagation of national histories as singular, uncontested historical truths. The political instrumentalisation of history teaching in schools has been part of these practices around the world (Ahonen 2017; Apple 2004; Bentrovato 2017, 2018b; Bentrovato, Korostelina, and Schulze 2016; Tupper 2005; Wilschut 2010). Curricula and textbooks have

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traditionally transmitted 'stories chosen or invented about the national past [which] are invariably prescriptive, instructing people how to think and act as national subjects and how to view their relations with outsiders' (Wang 2008, 787). For the purpose of controlling these narratives and the broader pedagogical space, states may develop policy mechanisms and forms of surveillance over curricula, textbooks and practical classroom teaching, turning school-based history education into a 'major site for [the] construction of collective memory in contemporary society' (Stearns, Seixas, and Wineburg 2000) – yet one that is, in its constructed nature, vulnerable to contestation. History curricula and textbooks and teachers' interpretations of them constitute powerful arenas of meaning-making in this context (Apple 1993, 2014; Bentrovato 2017; Williams 2014).

Framed as an interpretive enquiry within a critical qualitative paradigm (Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg 2011), the study detailed in this article draws on the under-researched case of post-Mugabe Zimbabwe. Combining an analysis of curriculum policies, textbook content and teacher voices from historically marginalised regions, it investigates history teachers' engagement with official curricula and their inherent national imaginaries within prescriptive and constrictive political environments. It examines how teachers, in these contexts, interpret and enact curricular and textbook content, probing scholarly questions on teachers' potential to either reproduce or disrupt the discourses embedded in them (Brescó de Luna and van Alphen 2021). The work on the study, conducted between 2023 and 2024, coincided with the implementation of a revised curriculum in the wake of the military-backed transition that, in 2017, ended Mugabe's 37-year autocratic rule and birthed the 'Second Republic'. Hopes for democratic change under the continued rule of Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) quickly foundered. As of 2024, the country remained internationally ranked as 'not free' (Freedom House 2024). It is considered to have a 'restricted civic and political space', with 'impunity for the ruling party ZANU-PF violence, intimidation, harassment, and repression against opposition members and civil society activists' (Human Rights Watch 2025). It is this context of uncertain transition in which the study explores the intersection of teachers' personal and professional beliefs about the subject of history, the syllabus and textbook prescriptions within which they work, and the prevailing regimes of state-propagated historical narratives. The study thus enables a focus, for the Zimbabwean case, on the intertwinements of history pedagogy, selective curricula, and identity politics, and examines how the history taught in schools and its discourse operate as what Foucault (1980) terms 'technologies of power'.

The article commences by situating the Zimbabwean case within the existing body of scholarship on the evolving politics of history and its teaching in the country; we highlight the centrality of liberation history in this context. Such histories represent interesting case studies due to their recency, which, particularly in the Southern African region, has translated into political currency, as 'parties now in power continue to draw much of their legitimacy from their role in [liberation] struggle[s]' (Saunders 2011, 64). The article's theoretical and methodological sections centre a critical historical perspective on our three-pronged analysis of the prevailing curriculum policy framework as defined by the official history syllabus, of a popular state-approved secondary school textbook, its narratives and discourses, and of teachers' perceptions and interactions with these materials following specific training, delivered by the second author, that adhered to the tenets of critical historical inquiry. Focusing specifically on liberation history, we

uncover teachers' management of conflict between their professional beliefs and the exigencies of delivering a history curriculum, which, in simultaneously bearing an explicit nation-building intent and an ostensible commitment to the values of academic history, as we will note, exemplifies the 'tension(s) in which history education is [often] situated' (Van Nieuwenhuyse and Valentim 2018, 1). Our findings illuminate teachers' critique of the curriculum's and the textbook's selective canonised narratives, but also uncover a disjunct between their personal and professional beliefs and their classroom practices within a prescriptive and constrictive environment. In pointing to teachers' limited choices and autonomy under such conditions, our research draws attention to teachers facing the transmission of 'a story', suffused with exclusionary identity politics, that is fundamentally at odds with their understanding both of history as a discipline and of historical facts as experienced and viewed by members of minoritised communities. We found educators, resulting from this, to experience a sense of moral and professional injury. We conclude by pointing out the need for the field to identify effective strategies in support of teachers working in similarly constrictive contexts.

Context of the study: school history and nation-state politics

Research conducted in Zimbabwe in recent decades has demonstrated the long-standing state-sponsored abuse of history and its teaching as technologies of power (Foucault 1980), as channels of dominant narratives that performatively frame discourse as unquestionable reality. Research finds both the colonial state of Rhodesia and its successor, post-colonial Zimbabwe, to have made use of school history teaching as a similarly power-centred technology of a national imaginary. Named after Cecil John Rhodes, its chief architect, the British settler colony of Rhodesia was dominated by a white supremacist ideology. Eurocentric history curricula and textbooks valorised the country's British heritage and the conquest and putatively civilising occupation of its lands by white people while denigrating the indigenous inhabitants as barbarous warring tribes; McGrath (1993, 14) notes how 'Rhodesian history textbooks [. . .] stressed Shona-Ndebele rivalry and the role of whites in bringing peace'. With independence in 1980, the post-colonial Zimbabwean state, headed by Mugabe's triumphant ZANU-PF, set about 're-writing and re-righting' history (Mungwini 2017, 8). Nationalist Zimbabwean historiography, pioneered by Ranger (1967, emphasised African heroic resistance to colonial rule and Ndebele-Shona unity in resistance. New syllabi and textbooks centred African historical agency and deemphasised the ethnic rivalries that accompanied the racial and ethnic bifurcations of the colonial state (Barnes 2004; Barnes, Nyakudya, and Phiri 2016; Bentrovato 2018a; Moyo 2014, 2020). In the early 2000s, a series of elections, whose results were disputed between the ruling ZANU-PF party and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), formed the backdrop to the rise of a 'patriotic' historical account (Ranger 2004). This narrative, echoed in a new, more nation-centred curriculum, effectively sought to legitimise the claim to rule asserted by the liberation movement. '[A] selective rendition of the liberation history' thus found itself 'deployed as an ideological policing agent' (Raftopoulos 2007, 101; see also Helliker and Murisa 2020; Masakure and Nkomo 2023; Rasch, Niemi, and Alexander 2021). History teachers came under severe scrutiny, particularly in high schools located in rural areas, where, especially in advance of elections, veterans of the liberation war

operated as a paramilitary force weeding out perceived opposition supporters (Barnes, Nyakudya, and Phiri 2016, 332; Dombo and Mujere 2021). Chitukutuku (2017, 146) describes a 'period of violence and witch-hunt [during which] primary and secondary school teachers were targeted without being asked to plead or state their loyalty'; the implication here is that of a blanket assumption, at this time, that teachers in general sympathised with the opposition.

In 2015, a far-reaching overhaul of Zimbabwe's education system took effect in the launch of a new National Curriculum Framework (MoPSE 2015a) and the issuance of revised school syllabi including one for history (MoPSE 2015b). The reform was predicated on the notions of a heritage and competency-based education (Bentrovato and Chakawa 2022). In 2017, concomitantly with the commencement of the new curriculum's implementation phase, a 'soft coup' (Hodgkinson 2019) saw the overthrow of the country's long-term ruler and independence leader Mugabe by his erstwhile ally and confidant, Emmerson Mnangagwa. The potential promise of a new dispensation and of hope for a more democratic and robust academic space forms the context of this study, within which we aim to examine present-day textbook authors' and teachers' enactment of Zimbabwe's new national history syllabus as a site of contested memories. In doing so, we centre the First and Second *Chimurenga/Umvukela* liberation wars, canonical episodes in Zimbabwean history and core to its teaching. The first of these wars, in 1896–7, fought by both the Ndebele and the Shona, sought unsuccessfully to overthrow the colonial rule established in the country following the arrival of the 'pioneer column'[1] and the defeat of the Ndebele Kingdom in 1893. The eventual conferment of the term Second *Chimurenga/Umvukela* liberation war on the subsequent nationalist war of the 1970s, as it unfolded, had the purpose of signifying continuity with the primary resistance wars of 1896–7 and evoking the defiant spirit it had inspired. Interwoven with mythical interpretations centring on spirit mediums, *Chimurenga/Umvukela* – terms resonant with connotations of defending the revolution against real and imagined enemies – are for Zimbabwe what Mafela (2021, 54), with reference to Botswana, describes as 'the pervasive authoritative national "epic" narrativ[e]' that essentially gives birth to the nation. Today, the narrative's correct interpretation rests solely with erstwhile participants in the struggle and the political party that is its guardian (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2011). Evidence of the centrality and emotionally charge of this history within Zimbabwe's imaginary appears in the words of its national anthem, with their deliberate reference to the nation as '*Yakazvarwa nemoto wechimurenga*' (rendered in English as 'born of the fire of revolution'); they thus implicitly figure participants in the struggle as progenitors of the nation and instituting an enduring reminder of that nation's emergence 'out of the fire of *Chimurenga* and the abundant blood of the heroes' (Chitando and Tarusarira 2017, 11).

Theoretical framing

This study uses critical historical inquiry[2] to engage with the history classroom as a projection site for national imaginaries in today's Zimbabwe. Critical historical inquiry, as deployed here, builds on and extends established conceptions of history as inquiry and investigation (Bain 2006; Seixas 2009; 2013; Wineburg 2004); it entails 'explicitly interrogat[ing] the canon while simultaneously expanding what counts as valuable

historical knowledge to include counter narratives' (Swalwell and Sinclair 2021, 86). We thus employ this approach as a powerful lens for aiding our perception of the implicit canons that drive school history and the deep embedding of discourses of power in the historical narratives its teaching disseminates (Salinas, Fránquiz, and Rodríguez 2016; Santiago and Dozono 2022). Critical historical inquiry aids the researcher in 'troubling, complicating, countering or resisting narratives that marginalize or omit others from the telling of history' (Salinas 2014, 36). It enables us to understand how, for example, history curricula and textbooks' tendency to represent 'particular constructions of reality' (Apple 2014, 49) is a manifestation of societal power dynamics; how these constructs, as 'selections, premised on questions of nationhood, interest, power and dominance' (Waldron et al. 2021, 23–24), emerge from an 'uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production' (Trouillot 1995, 27); and how curricula's and textbooks' privileging of the transmission of dominant narratives over the practice of history as enquiry perpetuates the 'cultural hegemony' of societally 'dominant group[s]' (Bekerman 2010, 7). The resulting skew in the historical representations brought forth in many classrooms finds support in the tendency for 'textbooks and teachers [to] [. . .] present history's stories as finished and closed to student investigation' (Bain 2006, 2081); the imposition of 'a structure of meaning' ensues, discouraging 'questions about selection and interpretation' (Klein 2010, 614). Critical historical inquiry attempts to break through and break down imposed 'structure-[s] of meaning' by conceiving of history as a partial, incomplete record of the past, open to a critical, interruptive, disruptive, interpretive and never-ending rereading and reinterpretation (Salinas, Fránquiz, and Rodríguez 2016).

With its foundations in both critical theory and critical pedagogy (Blevins and Salinas 2012), critical historical inquiry aligns with calls for social justice and narratives that support and affirm it. In the context of history pedagogy, it requires teachers and learners to recognise and acknowledge multiplicities of points of view and the interpretability of history; to be alive to the workings of power and ideology upon historical discourses and narratives that themselves act as frames; and to critically interrogate the past via multiple sources in order to decentre existing canons. It calls upon teachers' and learners' capacity to adopt a position of distance towards official curricula and textbooks and the narratives and norms they transport and, alongside and through this, to identify the 'power structures [that] underlie' these narratives and '[w]ho is privileged by them, and who is not' (Segall, Trofanenko, and Schmitt 2018, 283). The work of critical historical inquiry thus opens up pedagogical spaces for the recovery of subjugated knowledges and their validation as affirming pedagogies. As such, it naturally requires an enabling framework that is supportive of teacher agency in interpretating and re-interpretating history; it requires an enabling framework that allows and empowers teachers to embrace pedagogies of interruption and disruption as opposed to pedagogies of silence and avoidance (Baker and Joseph 2024; Blevins, Magill, and Salinas 2020).

Materials and methods

This study employs an in-depth, qualitative case-study research design (Yin 2011). It sought to produce dense descriptive accounts of how a contentious historical topic – the *Chimurenga/Umvukela* wars of liberation of 1896–7 and 1965–79 – is represented in

a state-sanctioned textbook and how selected teachers, our respondents, engage with and interpret this topic and textbook for use in history classrooms as they enact curriculum policies as framed in the national school syllabus. This narrow thematic focus enabled detailed analysis of what we read as a defining historical episode in the imagination of Zimbabwean nationhood and its status as discursive practice, with significant implications for history pedagogy.

We drew our data from key sources selected through both purposive and convenience sampling (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018). To understand the policy framework that informs history teaching and learning in today's Zimbabwe, we analysed the national *History Syllabus F1–4* 4040 (2015–2022) (MoPSE 2015b). This policy document determines the content of textbooks, which, in settings including Zimbabwe, constitute 'the bedrock of history teaching, the foundation upon which most teachers build their curriculum' (Bain 2006, 2082). In selecting a textbook for analysis, we were cognisant of the requirement for the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) to approve textbooks prior to their use in schools, and therefore sought to choose a textbook that is readily available and in widespread current use. Our choice fell on *Focus on History Book 3* (Gwezhira, Mafara, and Sadziwa 2018), written by three (Shona) former secondary school history teachers, and published by the Zimbabwean company College Press shortly after the political transition of 2017.

Our sample of interview participants comprised nine practising history teachers (six female, three male). At the time of the research in 2023 and 2024, they were either registered or former students of an in-service teacher education programme at a university in south-western Zimbabwe with an intake of students from across the country. Six of them were or had previously been engaged in an in-service Bachelor of Education degree and three in a Post-Graduate Diploma in Education with a history specialism. Their length of teaching experience ranged from two to seven years and they worked in four of the country's ten provinces: Masvingo, Matabeleland North and South, and Midlands. Located to the south and west of the capital Harare, these provinces are home to various ethnic groups that include the Sotho, Venda, Kalanga and Tonga, as well as the Ndebele and the Karanga as a Shona subgrouping. They share a sense of marginalisation by the national government which, until 2017, was seen as dominated by the former president's ethnic group, the Shona sub-grouping Zezuru (Muzondidya and Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2007; Raleigh 2020). Research participants, then, were primarily from marginalised sections of the population or had lived in their area long enough to be sympathetic to the narratives of marginalisation prevalent in these regions.

The participants had, as part of their course requirements, studied the module 'Pedagogic Studies in History', delivered by the second author of this article. The module exposed them to processes of historical thinking and inquiry, including issues around the politics of history curricula and textbooks and contestations of their content and narratives. Foregrounding notions of critical historical inquiry as outlined in the theoretical framework to this article, it drew on a critical, transformative paradigm with an emphasis on human agency in the construction and reconstruction of knowledge. The module exposed the participants to Freirean notions of dialogic education and Apple's concept of curricula as never socially or historically neutral. It challenged them to invoke their agency and positionality in their engagement with school history narratives as they sought affirmation and validation in the knowledge acquired by their learners. This

background gave us confidence in the respondents' likely capacity to reflect critically on narratives as discursive practices in pedagogical contexts. In keeping with ethical research standards, their participation was voluntary throughout and based on informed consent. The politically charged atmosphere in contemporary Zimbabwe and the consequent reluctance of many to take part in qualitative research (Musasa 2021, 115) meant that great care was warranted in protecting our respondents' identity. Our analysis anonymises them and refers to them by numbers (1 to 9). When we cite or quote a participant, we will use the singular 'they' as their pronoun, to avoid revealing their gender. For similar reasons relating to the participants' protection and safety, we were cautious in framing our questions, making only implicit reference to the politics of history. Drawing on the Freirean 'teacher-student' dialectic (Freire 1995, 81), we sought to develop a relationship of mutual trust and critical friendship with the students and later interviewees, aiming to give them assurance that their views were valued. As the interviews unfolded, any presumption of supposed authority of the lecturer/interviewer resultingly ceased to hold any relevance to valid arguments; this process therefore overcame power dynamics that might otherwise have impacted the interviewees' responses.

We designed and used two sets of instruments for gathering data, both centring the sampled topic of the *Chimurenga/Umvukela* wars of liberation. The first, an analytical guide for the syllabus and the textbook, helped us examine how educational policies and media manage the enduring tensions between a nationalist collective memory and analysis-based historical accounts of key past events, and identify the extent of agency conceded to their users. The analysis of the data used aspects of critical discourse studies, as an extension of critical discourse analysis as set out by Fairclough (2012; it 'addres[sed] [phenomena of] visibility or representation, agency, dominant discourses, and hegemony' (Smith and Sheyholislami 2022, 48) in its aim to ascertain these documents' potential use as vehicles for a desired national imaginary and related values and norms (see also Bentrovato 2024; Dozono 2020, 2023; Joyce and Abdou 2023). As set out above, we deliberately placed our focal emphasis on the sections of the syllabus and textbook that referenced liberation history, in which marginalising discursive practices are arguably most evident. We did this in order to highlight what we perceive as the construction of national historical narratives to sustain a hegemonic overarching narrative, and in order to demonstrate this narrative's potential susceptibility to contestation and disruption through critical historical inquiry.

The second instrument of data collection was an open-ended interview guide for eliciting respondents' views on the syllabus and on state-sponsored textbooks such as the one we sampled, and their implementation in the classroom. We interviewed each participant twice via an encrypted WhatsApp call, each interview averaging forty minutes; in the interviews, we prompted participants to express their views on the syllabus' and textbooks' representations of the *Chimurenga/Umvukela* narrative and explored the extent to which they perceived resemblances and differences between textbook content and what they effectively taught in the classroom on this topic. We further intended to establish teachers' thoughts on the feasibility and desirability of adopting critical historical inquiry and multi-perspective approaches in the prevailing pedagogical space.

We strengthened our analysis via engaging in 'reflexivity' (Ide and Beddoe 2024), that is, critical awareness of our own implicatedness in formulating and interpreting historical narratives that have the potential for bias towards particular interpretations. We, the

authors of this article, share a passion for the politics of history education and their pedagogical implications in post-colonial Africa. We both work within a transformative paradigm informed by critical theory and critical pedagogy, and perceive in history education the potential for interrupting and disrupting the silences and omissions of dominant narratives. We bring to the study our differing identities, backgrounds and experiences, and, specifically, different degrees of embeddedness, which enable us, in our collaboration, to balance the advantages and limitations of our respective positionalities. The first author is a white female European Africanist historian and history didactician with two decades of research experience across the continent and beyond, including Zimbabwe. The second author is a Black male Zimbabwean history educator and curriculum studies specialist from Matebeleland, a region that arguably bears the brunt of the marginalisation inflicted by hegemonic Shona narratives. Our continuous exchanges during our work on this project, over a two-year period, allowed us to confront and mitigate our individual subjectivities and biases in framing the research and interpreting the data, and ultimately strengthened the study's validity and credibility.

Findings

We detail the findings of the study under three sub-headings, engaging with the syllabus, the sampled textbook and teachers' voices respectively.

The syllabus

Our analysis of Zimbabwe's curriculum policy reveals an over-prescriptive and constrictive framework for teaching (and learning) in which the History Syllabus 4044 currently in force, alongside the National Curriculum Framework 2015–2023, constitutes an all-embracing 'grid of specifications' (Luke, Wood, and Weir 2012, 2) for teachers to implement. The syllabus maps in detail the knowledge considered important and valued in delineating stated overall aims and specific lesson objectives for each topic and providing detailed schemes of work for teachers to follow (MoPSE 2015b, 3–40). This prescriptiveness becomes explicit in official descriptions of the syllabus as 'a major curriculum document which prescribes what [the] government would like to see taught in all schools as spelt out in the curriculum framework' and in accompanying reminders to teachers that 'you are required to teach from the Syllabus since Examinations are set from the syllabus' (MoPSE 2015c, 7). The state thus constrains the discursive space for teacher agency and interpretation, setting a framework for the reproduction of desired narratives as predetermined by policy while likely inhibiting teachers' professionalism and autonomy.

The prescriptive tone of the syllabus is set in its principal aim, being to 'instil patriotism', with a view to the long-term goal of the 'sustenance of nationalism and patriotism through an appreciation of Zimbabwe and other countries' struggles for political and economic emancipation' (MoPSE 2015b, 1). Alongside this essentially nationalist approach to historical content, the syllabus provides a framework above all for the teaching of what Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive skills defines as lower-order competencies (Anderson, Krathwohl, and Bloom 2001; Seixas 2011). The lesson objectives relating specifically to the First *Chimurenga/Umvukela*, for instance, include 'list[ing

its] causes', 'describ[ing its] course', 'outlin[ing] the role played by chiefs and spirit mediums', and 'explain[ing its] results' (MoPSE 2015b, 15). While the syllabus does reference the 'analys[is], interpret[ation] and evaluat[ion]' of 'historical evidence' and 'points of view' elsewhere in the syllabus (41), the requirements made of learners in relation to liberation history do not appear to support such higher-order competencies. Similarly, they do not train learners' capacity to comprehend historical concepts and use historical skills for argumentation, detect bias and make reasoned judgements. The syllabus evidences no direct or indirect attempt to posit history as contingent or contested. This treatment of history turns it into a 'received' subject, presenting learners with an unproblematised account as fact (Haydn 2012, 276).

Textbook discourse

Our analysis of the textbook we sampled evidences its clear alignment with national curriculum policy and its predominant approach to the study of history. The back cover of *Focus on History Book 3* states expressly the book's intent to support the content, aims and objectives of the official syllabus. The textbook, then, echoes and reinforces a treatment of history as a single, uncontested story. Its adherence to the collective memory approach that underpins the syllabus is apparent in an opening chapter entitled 'Conceptualisation of History', which defines history as 'a story that accurately depicts human development' (Gwezhira, Mafara, and Sadziwa 2018, 2); this notable use of the singular – 'a story' – is indicative of an approach that would prioritise a sole, unified or standardised narrative over multiple interpretations and perspectives. The authors elsewhere acknowledge that history is a reconstruction undertaken through evidence and various sources, and invite learners to engage with a variety of sources beyond the textbook (94). This said, they do not emphasise that the historiographical process is fraught with controversy and contestation, and therefore effectively preclude any critical perception of the textbook by learners and teachers.

The textbook's linear and factual presentation of history likewise buttresses the single-story approach, giving a linear narration of successive *chimurengas* and national unity in resistance (see also Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2008, 56). The narrative begins with the forcible occupation of the territory through 'treacherous' dealings orchestrated principally by Rhodes with the complicity of missionaries, described as 'one of Rhodes's most useful tools' (Gwezhira, Mafara, and Sadziwa 2018, 86). It further relates the occupation of Mashonaland and of the destroyed Ndebele state following the 1893 Ndebele war, and describes the ensuing harsh and brutal colonial rule of the amalgamated territory named Rhodesia. It contentiously celebrates the First *Chimurenga/Umvukela* of 1896–7 as a 'nationwide confrontation' (118); this despite historical accounts arguing that the Ndebele started the war and were close to defeat by the time war began in Mashonaland (Beach 11994; Cobbing 1977; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2008, 56). The narrative culminates in the attainment of independence in 1980 following the Second *Chimurenga/Umvukela*, which the book claims to have 'derived its inspiration from the first united Shona and Ndebele War' (Gwezhira, Mafara, and Sadziwa 2018, 163).

The textbook's narrative of *Chimurenga/Umvukela*, operating as a 'technology of national inclusiveness' while masking unequal power relations, manifests in aspects of the book such as the emphases and implicit silences characterising its use of terminology,

images and text. The dual nomenclature *Chimurenga/Umvukela* that the textbook adopts in line with the syllabus – in Zimbabwe's two dominant languages respectively – supports the nationalistic narrative of unified Ndebele-Shona resistance across the first war of 1896–7 and the later armed struggle of 1965–1979. The origins of the term remain contested. *Chimurenga*, in the Shona language, is derived from the name of Murenga, whom oral tradition holds to be a son of the founder of the people called Mbire before the colonialists named them Shona. Murenga's repute for fighting and bravery endowed *Chimurenga* with connotations of righteous rebellion. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2011, 7), Murenga was the name of a spirit medium who provided ideological support to the African fighting forces in the 1896–7 war of resistance. Today *Chimurenga* is synonymous with fierce, uncompromising and freedom-loving resistance to any form of oppression, to the death if required; a *Chimurenga* war is, by definition, a just war. The literal translation of *Chimurenga* into its less widely used Ndebele equivalent *Umvukela* (Bentrovato and Chakawa 2022) signifies nationalist historiography's intentions to promote the national imaginary of a unified Zimbabwean nation state. It invokes the idea of a protracted, tenacious and, centrally, shared African struggle against imperialist and colonial domination (Bentrovato 2018a, 188). This significantly notwithstanding, the master narrative engaged by the effectively officialised dual term excludes references to the Ndebele wars of resistance of 1893 and 1896, referred to in Ndebele as *Imfazo 1* and *2* respectively – the word denotes the death of several people during a conflict. Similarly, it does not use the terminology of Ndebele historiography, *Impi Yehlok'elibomvu* (The War of the Red Axe), for the 1896 *Chimurenga/Umvukela* (Clarke and Nyathi 2010; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009). The analysis of our chosen textbook thus lends credence to the assertion by Kriger (2003, 74) that the historicisation of the Zimbabwean nation is 'characterised by the use of Shona pre-colonial heroes and historical monuments [. . .] while Ndebele heroes and history were marginalised'.

The textbook narrative of national unity is reinforced through the countering of inflammatory depictions of inter-ethnic relations that reprise the divide-and-rule tactics of British imperialism. The authors, for instance, explicitly dismiss missionary reports of Ndebele terrorising the Shona as 'human rights rhetoric to justify the imperial destruction of the Ndebele State' (Gwezhira, Mafara, and Sadziwa 2018, 86). Simultaneously, however, the textbook's reliance on the colonial visual archive undercuts this intent; the narrative entangles with and may on occasion realise colonial uses of language and image. Colonial historiography had corrupted the descriptor '*impi*', which in the Ndebele language means 'war', to refer to a regiment or detachment, in an attempt to emphasise the supposedly violent dispositions of the Ndebele army. Our textbook contains an image of a Ndebele Impi regiment with spears in the air in a mock attacking formation (113). Left uncontextualised and with no request to learners to critically examine it, this image undermines a careful avoidance of reproducing stereotypes about Ndebele as 'cruel warriors' (Lindgren 2002, 60).

A certain bias also emerges, for instance, in the textbook's treatment of the 1963 split, during the Second *Chimurenga/Umvukela*, of the hitherto united nationalist movement. Led by Joshua Nkomo -- a Kalanga from Matabeleland and therefore seen as a Ndebele leader -- the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) split into two factions following the formation of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) by a predominantly Shona-speaking section of the movement's leadership. Mlambo (2009, 113) avers that

'debate on why the split occurred, and who was to blame, remains unresolved'. The textbook's authors appear concerned, in this context, to avoid engaging with this incomplete nature of the debate; they instead seek a closed and clearly defined narrative of this controversial schism, presenting a partial and selective account that appears biased against Nkomo. They trace the split to the fact that '[t]here were people who no longer supported [Joshua] Nkomo's leadership' as '[t]hey thought he was compromised and had lost credibility due to his initial acceptance of the 1961 Constitutional proposals [which amounted to less than majority rule]' (169). In this context, the textbook, for instance, fails to mention scholarship arguing that the entire nationalist leadership at the time 'had concurred with the decision [to accept the Constitutional proposals]' and that '[t]hey were to repudiate the Constitution only later, when they came under fierce criticism from party supporters' (Mlambo 2009, 112).[3]

Augmenting the effect of the dominant single-perspective approach, underpinned by the putative factuality of the textbook narrative, the authorial voice is notably invisible, or withholds its subjectivity; this impersonal and truth-telling style of writing, indeed typical of school textbooks, may cause students 'to see these texts as authoritative and look at history as a discipline based on a linear accumulation of factual knowledge not open to debate' (Honig and Porat 2019, 620; see also Paxton 2002). The assertion of interpretations as self-evident or of particular accounts of events as indisputable fact manifests, for instance, in the textbook's threefold use of the expression 'It was clear' in a short paragraph on the Grobler Treaty (1887) between Lobengula, the last king of the Ndebele state, and the Grobler brothers, representatives of the Transvaal Republic, which had earmarked Lobengula's territory as its sphere of influence (Gwezhira, Mafara, and Sadziwa 2018, 85).[4]

Teachers' voices

In the interviews we conducted, participants expressed their views on Syllabus 4044 and the depiction of the *Chimurenga/Umvukela* narrative in the textbook discussed above, which was in common use, and provided insights into their enactment of policy in the classroom. The study found unanimity among the respondents on the biased, partial and one-sided nature of the syllabus and the textbook's 'straightforward account' (P2) of the *Chimurenga/Umvukela* liberation wars. Highlighting questions of power and ideology that are central to critical historical inquiry, the teachers were quick to exemplify subjugated knowledge, that is, knowledge that has become part of the 'excluded' or 'null curriculum' (Flinders, Noddings, and Thornton 1986). They did so as they deconstructed a 'dominant' so-called national history, which they perceived as being narrated from a particular – Shona and ZANU – perspective. Our participants pointed to the silences and misrepresentations this narrative encompasses and their exclusionary effect, appearing to read the silences as intentional acts of exclusion (P6); this perception they held highlights a deep sense of marginalisation and an urge for recognition and validation. Linking the textbook's contents to the official version of liberation history and its omissions, one teacher working at a school in Matabeleland South remarked that 'the locals believe that their role in the liberation war is not fully acknowledged' and that '[t]hey are itching to be recognised' (P6).

Participants, for instance, regarded the syllabus' and textbook's presentation of the First *Chimurenga/Umvukela* as ethnically biased in favour of the narratives associated with Mbuya Nehanda and Sekuru Kaguvi, revered Shona spirit mediums credited with leading the war and celebrated today in statues and names of buildings. A participant observed that the textbooks 'falsely portray [them] as the spirit [medium]s for the whole country' and contrasted this depiction with the scarce attention to 'the Ndebele uprisings' and 'Ndebele religious leaders' roles' therein (P3). Similarly noting the textbook's prominent 'Shona perspective' and its 'ignor[ing of] the role played by some Ndebele figures' in the first *Chimurenga*, Participant 1 added a gender perspective in denouncing the authors' silence on Lozikeyi Dlodlo. As Queen Regent of the Ndebele state after King Lobengula's death, she played a critical role as *de facto* military commander in the war, as a focal point of Ndebele opposition to British rule, and as a key player in the peace negotiations that followed (Clarke and Nyathi 2010; Mamvura 2021, 26; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2004, 107).

With regard to the Second *Chimurenga/Umvukela*, one teacher referred to a 'history narrated from a ZANU perspective', which 'ignores the role played by ZIPRA [ZAPU's military arm]' and which 'labels politicians outside ZANU [effectively] as sell-outs' (P6). This participant specifically referred to Ndabaningi Sithole (Ndebele/Ndau from Matabeleland), whom Mushakavanhu (2023 calls the 'forgotten Founding Father'; he was the first leader of ZANU following its formation in 1963, until his deposition by internal coup in 1975 and his replacement by Mugabe. Criticising the use of a skewed liberation war history 'to settle political scores', another teacher observed the textbooks' tendency to portray ZANU and ZANLA 'as the dominant political party and military wing [of the struggle] respectively despite being offshoots of ZAPU'; they spoke of seemingly 'deliberate moves to portray the liberation struggle as [. . .] started and dominated by a certain ethnic group[,] ignoring the fact that every citizen of Zimbabwe actively participated'. This participant rejected, for example, the textbook's assertion, in line with the official history, that the war was started by ZANLA, with the Chinhoyi battle of 1966. They specifically invoked academic historiography and pointed to inconsistencies between research and the textbook's content as they commented that 'further research reveals that there were already incidences of armed conflict in parts of Matabeleland before then' (P5). This teacher pointed to a further aspect of ethnic bias in this narrative by noting the use of *Chimurenga/Umvukela* in textbooks 'as if to mean that the war was for the Shona and Ndebele' only (P5); while praising the terminology as an improvement on the reference in some previous textbooks to *Chimurenga* alone, the participant considered that *Chimurenga/Umvukela* 'still leaves out many other groups that participated [in the war]'.

Participant 6 added to this critique by emphasising the silencing of ordinary people's voices in the textbook narrative of the war. They referred to its section 'Role of war collaborators during the armed struggle', containing short sentences such as 'The war collaborators assisted liberation fighters by carrying their loads of war materials from one area to the other', or 'War collaborators cooked food for the liberation fighters and moved this food from protected villages to guerrilla camps' (Gwezhira, Mafara, and Sadziwa 2018, 173). This teacher considered such matter-of-fact statements too vague to enable learners to undertake informed alternative readings of ordinary people's experience of the war, including controversial questions around their possible subjection to

coercion and abuse by combatants. The respondent perceived such accounts as designed to present an undisputed singular narrative with an appearance of factuality, avoiding any aspects of the events that might engender counter-narratives. An ideal textbook account would, following this participant's view, 'have the war collaborators tell their own experiences of how they participated in the war' – a strategy that would effectively interrupt and disrupt the master narrative.

Alongside these considerations, we noted the view of one participant that the textbook represented a typical manifestation of monoperspectivity, 'tel[ling] more of one side of the story'. The interviewee observed here a continuation of a textbook tradition of 'history being told from the point of view of the winners' that had characterised Zimbabwe since before independence; they described a shift, in that time, from a tale of 'glorified conquest' by the 'Whites' to the 'champion[ing of] African struggles and the leadership in power' (P8). This participant nuanced their critique by making a realistic acknowledgement of the inevitable triumph of a victor's history, resulting from the textbook's embeddedness in an over-prescriptive and constrictive environment and not necessarily reflecting the actual views of its authors. In this context, this teacher expressed sympathy with the textbook's authors and the 'difficult choices' they had to make – 'either to include conflicting views and risk not getting their book published or to avoid controversial issues and get the book published' (P8).

Such realism was in evidence across the interviews. While participants recognised that 'differing narratives are unavoidable [particularly] on such a hot topic as the war', they admitted that '[t]eaching in Zimbabwe is guided by the syllabus and the only [legitimate] narratives are those that the syllabus gives' (P3). Our interviewees noted that teachers are often overwhelmed by a tendency to conform with the official history as given in the textbook. The centrality of national examinations appeared to be a key consideration in this regard. Participant 7 noted that 'the textbook is recommended by the ministry and some of the questions and content found in the textbook [are] also found in ZIMSEC [Zimbabwe School Examinations Council] question papers'; this results, in this participant's view, in a situation where 'deviating from the textbook content may lead to learners failing the subject since our curriculum is exam oriented'. Participant 2 gives an eloquent account of the strain on the historian's values exerted by the state's definition of a good student of history, that is, one attaining high grades, as a student who reproduces the single narrative embodied in the textbook as closely as possible: 'the textbook is useful in preparing learners for their examinations as it provides the facts that they need to pass, but it does not challenge them to think in historical terms and make those scholarly arguments I associate with history'. Another participant, referencing their experiences administering ZIMSEC's national history examinations as an examiner, pointed to the implications of a widespread pedagogy of conformity and avoidance: 'I see this happening at marking sessions. People decide to avoid controversial issues. When a candidate includes [them] they tend to be penalised' (P8).

Participant 6 recognised the prevailing implications of rejecting conformity to the one-sided, politicised view of history set forth via the official curriculum. They did, however, appear to wrestle with the 'rather simplistic and even misleading' official narrative, to the extent that they risked 'deviating from the textbook content to encourage critical thinking'. In an ideal scenario, as envisaged by this teacher, learners would work and think as historians do, seeking to make meaning from primary evidence and then

form narratives that the evidence justifies. There is a sense almost of moral and professional injury about the unavailability of this route to Participant 6 on the basis of the syllabus and textbook as they stand: 'I feel so inadequate when I am unable to make learners see both sides of the story'. These words powerfully encapsulate how teachers' troubled interactions with prescribed school history and its national imaginaries see their disciplinary ideals fundamentally undermined.

Discussion

The findings reported above present a holistic picture of the curricular space in which history teaching and learning occurs in today's Zimbabwe. We consider them to provide an illustrative case study of how history fares in a politically charged setting in which a prescriptive, centralised education system intertwines with nationalist narratives of the past. Data triangulation, in the context of critical historical inquiry, finds Zimbabwe's schools to deliver a history education far removed from that ideal interpretive space that enables learners to engage in authentic critical historical inquiry – what Waldron et al. (2021, 21) describe as the 'signature pedagogical approach in teaching history'. Pedagogical practice in post-Mugabe Zimbabwe appears trapped in a conception of history whose single-story narrative of *Chimurenga/Umvukela* is both restrictive and constrictive.

Taken together, Zimbabwe's overarching, centralised education system and the nationalist historiography of Syllabus 4044 constitute a highly regulated regime of teaching and learning in which, we argue, readings and engagements outside those stipulated in the policy document are unlikely to occur. This regime's implications are significant: the syllabus sets the stage for the teaching of a one-sided, linear and unproblematised representation of the past, presenting it as simplistically objective and free from power dynamics. In this way, it forestalls students' understanding of, and engagement with, 'the multiple perspectives and experiences characteristic of human societies, the provisional and contingent nature of historical knowledge and the positionality of historical texts, including textbooks' (Waldron et al. 2021, 21). Its emphasis on lower-order skills of 'recall' and 'list[ing]' further aligns with a collective memory approach that promotes uncritical memorisation and memorialisation, turning history into a 'received' subject (Haydn 2012, 276). As a masked discourse of power embedded in the national curriculum, school history in Zimbabwe, as in many other countries, appears intended to 'inculcate students into particular narratives about national histories and identities' (Anson 2025, 165) with the aim of raising a loyal and patriotic citizenry. Concomitantly, it closes the pedagogical space to the recovery of subjugated knowledges and their validation through affirming pedagogies, and obscures existing societal clefts that undermine the ideal of national unity.

Our analysis of school history in Zimbabwe as a technology of power and national exclusiveness found resonance in our interviews with teachers. The participants expressed varying levels of dissatisfaction with the current state of history education in the country. Their disillusionment appeared to stem from the discrepancy between their ideals of what constitutes history teaching and learning and the prevailing context in which they had to operate. Overall, participants described state-approved textbooks such as the one we sampled for this study as being adequate for meeting national examination

requirements. This notwithstanding, they felt that the books' selective accounts of *Chimurenga/Umvukela* fell short of the teachers' own conceptions of history education as a field entailing attention to inherent complexities and to multiple and contesting viewpoints and interpretations. Our respondents critiqued the reproduction, in *Focus on History* and other textbooks, of a historiography suffused with exclusionary identity politics; they unanimously referenced a narrow national imaginary which writes some groups and regions out of the national narrative in favour of a politically hegemonic group. We may consider this historiography to constitute a manifestation of 'a form of ethnic nationalism' (Mamvura 2021, 20) that arguably compromises the capacity of all learners, and teachers, to recognise themselves in stories of the nation and thus feel affirmed by the history they encounter in schools (see Muzondidya 2004; Muzondidya and Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2007). We thus note a clear disjunct between the textbook's intent of providing an inclusive account of the nation and the perceptions of both this intent and the book's effects held by the teachers who use it and who are cognisant of the power dynamics in which it is embedded and which it reflects.

Initially, teachers appear, going by our findings, to experience a nurturing of their disciplinary ideals via professional development premised on critical history and subsequently to find their day-to-day classroom practices forcibly separated from these ideals by the overriding effects of a constraining political and policy environment. History teachers around the world often face the choice of either enacting the monoperspectivity that is characteristic of nationalist imaginaries or being daring and ambitious in pursuit of critical historical inquiry (McCully and Kitson 2005). Our study calls attention to a case of such constraint that mainstream international educational research often overlooks: a case in which teachers experience significant restrictions on their agency and a particularly narrow radius of classroom action (cf. Bentrovato 2021; Skårås and Bentrovato Forthcoming). On the basis of a study conducted in an urban area in 2010, Barnes, Nyakudya, and Phiri (2016, 336) suggest that teachers in Zimbabwe survive pedagogically in 'treacherous political waters by wholesale avoidance of the teaching of colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwean history'. Fourteen years later and under a 'new' political and curricular dispensation, we identified an avoidance among our participants that is not evidently 'wholesale'; we did, however, note that their pedagogical choices appear to be selective in ways that enabled their conformity with the official history as materialised in the syllabus and the textbook. This demonstrates the particular discursive power of state-approved textbooks, which, constituting the 'real curriculum' (Apple 2014, 10) in Zimbabwean schools, effectively enact a canonisation of the knowledge and narratives they contain (see also Bain 2006; Bentrovato 2017, 2021; Fuchs and Bock 2018).

The research allowed us to pinpoint some of the institutional conditions and key mechanisms that determine teachers' pedagogical choices in Zimbabwe. Our study revealed a continuation of the surveillance practised in the Mugabe era and typical of centralised education systems that sustain and promote dominant discourses and norms. We were able to infer that the participants, in being constantly cautious around what they said during lessons, acted in a manner that suggested their awareness of a form of the Foucauldian panopticon gaze (Foucault 1977). Teachers found their freedom of action paralysed by the fear of incurring sanctions for educational practices perceived to challenge or subvert the national interests and agendas of policymakers; such

repercussions potentially included ostracisation and, in extreme circumstances, forced transfer to remote schools. In this context, central public examinations appeared to serve as a powerful technology of control, coming to determine and drive classroom practices. Through the primacy of examinations, the state confers the accolade of 'good at history' on students who repeat most precisely the privileged narrative, thus redefining 'history' itself in tension with teachers' disciplinary principles. Teachers' partial avoidance of contemporary Zimbabwean history on the basis of its susceptibility to manipulation in support of a partisan patriotic narrative reinforces in turn the shift in what 'history' means in such contexts.

The findings of this study, finally, point to important ramifications of policy constraints for teachers' practices as well as their well-being, as evident in their experience of dilemmas and discomfort in negotiating the political landscape while attempting to adhere to their professional values. In our view, these constraints have implications for the broader field of history education that extend well beyond the Zimbabwean context. The study shows how the professional challenge of infusing the teaching of history with the principles of critical historical inquiry – which research widely recognises as a common experience among teachers in many different contexts – becomes a *de facto* impossibility in the systemic conditions of restrictive political contexts. Such impracticality derives from conditions that, as mentioned above, make the history teacher profession one fraught with danger; one involving challenges that go beyond oft-mentioned factors such as insufficient time, training and resources, and assessment models expecting students to reproduce single narratives (Stradling 2003; Wansink et al. 2018). Our study found that, under such circumstances, the conflict between ideals and practice that emerges from this experienced impossibility may manifest as professional and moral injury to teachers, a hurt educators in Zimbabwe appear willing to incur for their own and their students' safety. Teachers experience external constraints as preventing them from teaching in accordance with their core beliefs and values; this inability to act upon their judgement around the most valid pedagogical practices and to fulfil what they consider their responsibilities as history educators gives rise to a sense of distress emerging from this perceived violation of their agency and their professional, and moral, integrity; they regard themselves as powerless to give voice to any dissent from the prevailing policy environment.

The implications of this situation extend beyond the impact on individual teachers, or indeed the teaching profession. They entail a collective societal incapacity, facilitated through teachers' forced cooption by the state as its mouthpieces, to safeguard itself from the short- and longer-term effects of monolithic histories. Upcoming generations are thus denied the opportunity to appreciate the complex, nuanced, interpretative, subjective and contestable nature of history. They lose the possibility of learning how 'to judge and compare the validity of different narratives [including their own and unfamiliar perspectives] using disciplinary criteria' (Wansink et al. 2018, 496). This may arguably exacerbate citizens' vulnerability to the abuse and misuse of history and the risk of reinforcing authoritarianism and solidifying the marginalisation of groups whose voices the privileged narrative does not incorporate.

Conclusion

Having delineated key elements of the politics of history education in today's Zimbabwe and teachers' troubled interactions with prescribed school history in this constrictive context, we conclude by calling for further research into their implications for Zimbabwe and comparable cases, and into possible ways forward. Particularly, while calling for system-wide support for teachers as they confront these challenging undertakings, we believe that the findings we set out in this article could prompt further research into the feasibility of implementing critical historical inquiry and multiperspectivity in classrooms where systemic barriers currently prevail, and into teachers' distinct experiences in such contexts. Notwithstanding the indubitable value of such pluralistic approaches to the study of history and to the furthering of societal inclusivity and democracy, it is vital for scholarship and international guidance to refrain from making unrealistic assumptions about normative, one-size-fits-all approaches to history education that fail to take into account realities on the ground. Bearing this in mind, one particularly urgent concern of researchers in this context might be to examine effective strategies for supporting teachers working in less open and democratic environments as they seek to adhere to their professional values and negotiate the impracticality of presenting evidence and interpretations in the classroom that may challenge official historical claims. Researchers could gain useful insights in this context from investigations into how the application of such critical approaches might affect the study of less politicised and less sensitive historical topics. Transferring such findings into support for teachers would, ideally, entail not the imposition of a top-down ideal, but rather a recognition of the difficulties associated with the context alongside an endeavour to protect teachers from moral injury in the immediate setting and uphold the professional principle of critical historical inquiry in the longer term.

Notes

1. White men recruited by Rhodes to settle at an early stage in the occupation of Mashonaland.
2. We prefer the construct 'critical historical inquiry' to 'historical inquiry', although we acknowledge Santiago and Dozono's (2022) view of the false dichotomy between historical inquiry and criticality.
3. The textbook's partial and selective account, while biased against Nkomo, is, however, not as emphatically hostile to him as early post-colonial historiography, which had frequently depicted him as weak, vacillating and lacking commitment to the armed struggle. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017) suggests that the creation of Nkomo's repute for weakness may have served to cover ulterior motives involving ethnicity and thus enabled the breakaway party to masquerade as a genuine nationalist movement.
4. 'It was *clear* that that the trickle of concession seekers was steadily increasing. It was *clear* that this treaty was a subtle attempt at colonisation [. . .] This is *clear* from the fact that hunters and traders from the South African Boer Republics would be allowed [. . .] (Gwezhira, Mafara, and Sadziwa 2018, 85).

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