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Pupils' Voices as Curriculum Critique: Pedagogical Mediation and Knowledge Control in Secondary School History Classrooms in Zambia

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Abstract

Curriculum reforms in sub-Saharan Africa increasingly emphasised learner-centered pedagogy, democratic participation, and critical thinking. However, researches continued to demonstrate a persistent disjuncture between curriculum policy intentions and classroom enactment, particularly in examination-oriented subjects such as History. This qualitative study examined pupils' voices as a form of curriculum critique by exploring how pedagogical mediation and epistemic control shaped the enacted history curriculum in selected secondary schools in Zambia. Situated within Zambian secondary school History classrooms and informed by critical pedagogy, interpretivist curriculum theory, and phenomenology, the study foregrounded pupils' lived experiences as a lens for interrogating how power operated in classroom interactions, knowledge selection, and instructional practices. Data were generated through focus group discussions, in-depth interviews with pupils, and classroom observations, and analysed thematically. The findings revealed that history teaching remained largely teacher-centered, with strong epistemic control exercised through authoritative pedagogical practices and assessment-driven imperatives. Pupils' narratives exposed limited opportunities for dialogue, interpretation, and meaning-making, while simultaneously articulating a desire for participatory and critically engaging history learning. The study argued that pupils' voices offered a powerful lens for understanding curriculum enactment and for rethinking curriculum theory and practice in ways that recognised pupils as epistemic agents. Implications for history education, curriculum theory, teacher professional development, and policy were also discussed.

1. Introduction

Curriculum is not merely a neutral framework outlining what is to be taught in schools; rather, it is a socially constructed and politically mediated process through which particular forms of knowledge are selected, legitimized, and transmitted (Priestley et al., 2021). In school History education, curriculum enactment involves decisions about whose pasts are represented, which narratives are privileged, and how historical knowledge is interpreted and assessed. These decisions are deeply intertwined with power

relations, as they shape pupils' access to knowledge, their opportunities to question dominant narratives, and their capacity to see themselves as legitimate historical subjects. Consequently, History classrooms function as key sites where curriculum, pedagogy, and power intersect.

Within this context, pedagogical mediation plays a central role in shaping how the official History curriculum is translated into lived classroom experience. Teachers act as curriculum mediators who interpret syllabus prescriptions, select content, frame historical narratives, and structure classroom interactions (Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019). Pedagogical choices—such as whether teaching emphasises transmission or dialogue, memorisation or inquiry—profoundly influence how pupils engage with historical knowledge and whether they are positioned as passive recipients or active participants capable of critique.

Critical curriculum theorists argue that knowledge control in classrooms is rarely neutral. In History education, this often manifests through the privileging of official national narratives, textbook accounts, and examination-oriented content at the expense of local histories, indigenous perspectives, and pupils' lived experiences (Aguilar, 2025; Kayman, 2025). Such practices may limit pupils' opportunities for critical engagement and reinforce hierarchical teacher–pupil relationships that constrain dialogic learning.

Scholarship on pupil voice challenges traditional assumptions of pupils as passive recipients of curriculum knowledge. Pupil voice research positions learners' perspectives as a form of curriculum critique, offering insights into how knowledge is experienced, negotiated, and contested in classrooms (Collins & Wood, 2025; Carpenter et al., 2025). In History classrooms, pupils are uniquely positioned to reveal how curriculum mediation and knowledge control operate in practice and to expose tensions between the intended, enacted, and experienced curriculum (Mulenga & Luangala, 2015).

In postcolonial contexts such as Zambia, these issues are particularly pronounced. Despite post-independence efforts to Africanize the History curriculum, classroom practices often remain shaped by textbook-driven narratives, examination pressures, and strong pedagogical control (Mulenga, 2021; Ngoma, 2020). Within such contexts, pupils' voices are frequently marginalised, and there is limited empirical research examining how pupils experience pedagogical mediation and knowledge control in History classrooms. This study therefore foregrounds pupils' voices to examine how pedagogical mediation and knowledge control are enacted in secondary school History classrooms in Zambia and how pupils' lived experiences can inform more democratic and responsive curriculum practices.

2. Aim of the Study

The primary aim of this study was to explore pupils' voices as a form of curriculum critique in secondary school history classrooms in Zambia, with particular emphasis on how pedagogical mediation and mechanisms of knowledge control shaped pupils' experiences, understandings and interpretations of the history curriculum. The study sought to foreground pupils' perspectives on how history was taught, how knowledge was selected and sequenced, and the degree to which classroom practices enabled or constrained critical engagement with historical content. Ultimately, the research aimed to provide empirically grounded insights to inform curriculum policy, classroom pedagogy, and teacher professional development by centering the lived experiences and voices of pupils.

3. Research Question

To what extent do pupils' voices serve as a critique of pedagogical mediation and knowledge control in secondary school history classrooms in Zambia?

3.1 Sub-Research Questions

1. How do pupils describe their experiences of history teaching and learning in secondary school classrooms?
2. In what ways do classroom pedagogies mediate pupils' access to and engagement with historical knowledge?
3. How do pupils perceive the selection and organisation of history curriculum content in relation to their contexts and lived realities?
4. What forms of control over historical knowledge are evident in classroom interactions, and how do pupils negotiate or resist these controls?

4. Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Framework

4.1 Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is a logically developed structure that explains the key concepts, variables, or constructs of a study and the presumed relationships among them, guiding how a researcher understands, investigates, and interprets a research problem (Curry, 2025; Kazanskaia, 2025).

In research, a conceptual framework serves as a map or lens that links the research problem to existing theories, literature, and empirical insights (Silverman, 2025). It identifies what factors are considered important in the study, how they interact and how they inform the formulation of research questions, methodology, data analysis and interpretation of findings.

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in critical curriculum theory and the sociology of education, with a particular emphasis on understanding curriculum not as a neutral body of content but as a socially constructed and politically mediated process. At the center of the framework is the assumption that what pupils learn in history classrooms, how they learn it and how they interpret it are shaped by complex interactions between curriculum structures, pedagogical practices and power relations. The framework therefore positions pupils' voices as an analytical lens through which these interactions can be examined and critiqued.

The framework conceptualizes the history curriculum as operating across three interrelated levels: the official or intended curriculum, the enacted curriculum and the lived curriculum. The official curriculum refers to policy documents, syllabi and curriculum frameworks developed by the Ministry of Education and the Curriculum Development Centre in Zambia (CDC, 2013). These documents articulate intended learning outcomes, content selection and recommended pedagogical approaches often framed within a competency-based discourse that emphasises learner-centeredness, critical thinking and relevance. However, critical curriculum theorists argue that such documents are themselves products of power, reflecting particular ideological, cultural and political priorities about what counts as legitimate historical knowledge.

The enacted curriculum emerges at the level of the classroom, where teachers mediate the official curriculum through their pedagogical decisions. Pedagogical mediation, as conceptualized in this study, refers to the ways teachers interpret curriculum prescriptions, select and sequence content, regulate classroom discourse, and manage assessment practices. This mediation is influenced by teachers' subject knowledge, beliefs about teaching and learning, professional training, examination pressures, and contextual constraints such as class size and availability of resources. Pedagogical mediation thus becomes a critical site where curriculum intentions are transformed into classroom realities.

Drawing on Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse, the framework understands pedagogical mediation as deeply implicated in processes of knowledge control. Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing are particularly useful in explaining how power operates in history classrooms. Classification concerns the boundaries between different categories of knowledge, such as school history versus pupils' everyday knowledge, while framing refers to the degree of control exercised over the selection, sequencing, pacing and evaluation of knowledge. In many secondary school history classrooms, strong framing is evident when teachers dominate classroom talk, prescribe correct answers and tightly regulate what counts as acceptable historical knowledge. Such practices reinforce hierarchical relations between teachers and pupils and limit opportunities for pupils to question, reinterpret, or challenge historical narratives.

Within this framework, knowledge control is not understood merely as the transmission of content but as the regulation of meaning. It determines whose knowledge is valued, whose voices are heard and which interpretations of the past are legitimized. In the Zambian context, knowledge control is also shaped by the legacy of colonial historiography and by examination-oriented schooling, both of which tend to privilege authoritative narratives and factual recall over critical inquiry. As a result, pupils often encounter history as a closed body of knowledge rather than as an interpretive and contested discipline.

The lived curriculum represents how pupils actually experience history education in their everyday classroom interactions. It encompasses pupils' perceptions of relevance, engagement, inclusion, and agency, as well as their emotional and cognitive responses to teaching practices and curriculum content. The lived curriculum is where pupils make sense of the history they are taught, negotiate its meaning in relation to their own identities and experiences, and decide whether to accept, resist, or disengage from the subject. This study conceptualizes pupils' voices as the primary means of accessing the lived curriculum.

Pupils' voices occupy a central position in the conceptual framework, not as supplementary data but as a form of curriculum critique. Rather than treating pupils' perspectives as simple reflections of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, the framework understands pupils' narratives, opinions and silences as analytically rich accounts that reveal how pedagogical mediation and knowledge control are experienced from below. When pupils describe history lessons as boring, irrelevant, or overly exam-focused, these descriptions function as implicit critiques of pedagogical practices and curriculum structures. Conversely, when pupils articulate moments of engagement, dialogue, or connection to lived realities, they point toward pedagogical possibilities that disrupt dominant forms of knowledge control.

The framework also recognizes pupils as active agents rather than passive recipients of curriculum. Even within tightly controlled pedagogical environments, pupils exercise agency by selectively engaging with content, memorizing strategically for examinations, questioning privately, or disengaging altogether. Pupils' voices thus illuminate not only how power operates in the classroom but also how it is negotiated and sometimes resisted. This aligns with contemporary learner voice scholarship, which emphasizes that pupils' perspectives are shaped by power relations but are nonetheless capable of challenging dominant educational discourses (Bonsu et. al., 2025).

Importantly, the framework situates pedagogical mediation and knowledge control within broader contextual influences. These include systemic factors such as national assessment regimes, school culture, resource availability and sociocultural norms regarding authority and participation. In many Zambian classrooms, cultural expectations of respect for teachers may discourage open questioning, thereby reinforcing strong framing and limiting dialogic engagement. Such contextual factors are integral to

understanding why pupil-centered curriculum ideals may not translate into pupil-centered classroom practices.

The conceptual framework therefore operates as an integrative model that connects curriculum policy, classroom pedagogy, power relations and pupil experience. It assumes a dynamic and recursive relationship between these elements: curriculum structures shape pedagogical practices, pedagogical practices shape pupils' experiences, and pupils' experiences when articulated through voice offer critical insights that can inform curriculum reform and pedagogical change. By foregrounding pupils' voices, the framework challenges traditional top-down approaches to curriculum evaluation and positions pupils as legitimate contributors to curriculum knowledge.

In essence, this conceptual framework frames the study as an inquiry into how history education in Zambia is mediated, controlled and lived, and how pupils' voices can be mobilized as a powerful form of curriculum critique. It provides the analytical foundation for examining not only what happens in history classrooms but why it happens and how it might be transformed to foster more inclusive, dialogic and meaningful history learning experiences.

4.2 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is a structured set of established theories, concepts and propositions that provide a systematic explanation of a phenomenon and underpins a research study (Creswell & Poth, 2025). It explains why and how variables or constructs are expected to relate to one another, based on existing scholarly theory.

In research, a theoretical framework grounds the study within recognized bodies of knowledge, guiding the formulation of research questions, the choice of methodology, data interpretation, and the discussion of findings (Curry, 2025). It offers an analytical lens through which the researcher interprets evidence and situates the study within broader academic debates, ensuring conceptual clarity, coherence and theoretical rigor.

The theoretical framework for this study is anchored in critical pedagogy and interpretivist curriculum theory, two complementary traditions that foreground power, meaning-making and human agency in educational processes. Together, these theoretical lenses provide a robust foundation for examining how history knowledge is constructed, mediated and contested in secondary school classrooms and for understanding pupils' voices as legitimate and critical forms of curriculum knowledge.

Critical pedagogy provides the normative and political orientation of the study. Rooted in the work of Freire, Giroux, and other critical theorists, critical pedagogy views education as an inherently political practice shaped by relations of power, ideology, and domination (Alordiah & Arisi, 2025). From this perspective, schooling is not a neutral process of knowledge transmission but a site where social inequalities are reproduced or challenged through curriculum content, pedagogical practices and assessment regimes. In the context of history education, critical pedagogy draws attention to whose histories are taught, whose voices are silenced and how particular interpretations of the past are legitimized while others are marginalized.

Central to critical pedagogy is Freire's critique of the "banking model" of education, where learners are positioned as passive recipients of knowledge deposited by teachers. This model is particularly relevant to the analysis of history classrooms in which authoritative narratives and factual recall dominate pedagogical practice. Such approaches limit learners' capacity to question historical accounts, critically engage with sources, or relate historical knowledge to contemporary social realities. By contrast, critical pedagogy advocates dialogic, problem-posing education that positions pupils as co-creators of knowledge

and encourages critical consciousness (Askari, 2025). Within this study, pupils' voices are theorized as expressions of critical consciousness that reveal how pupils experience, internalize and sometimes resist dominant pedagogical practices and historical narratives.

Critical pedagogy also foregrounds the concept of knowledge as socially constructed and ideologically embedded (Corbett, 2021). Historical knowledge, in this view, is not a fixed account of the past but a selective reconstruction shaped by cultural, political and institutional forces. In postcolonial contexts such as Zambia, critical pedagogy is particularly attentive to the lingering effects of colonial epistemologies in school history curricula. These effects may be evident in the privileging of Eurocentric narratives, the marginalisation of indigenous histories, and the continued emphasis on authoritative accounts over local and experiential knowledge. By engaging pupils' voices, the study draws on critical pedagogy to interrogate how such epistemological hierarchies are reproduced or challenged in classroom practice.

Interpretivist curriculum theory complements critical pedagogy by providing an epistemological and methodological lens for understanding curriculum as lived experience. Interpretivist approaches reject positivist assumptions that curriculum can be fully understood through objective measurement or policy analysis alone. Instead, they emphasise the subjective meanings that individuals attach to curriculum experiences and the ways these meanings are constructed through social interaction (Kusenbach & Pfadenhauer, 2025). Curriculum, from an interpretivist standpoint, is not merely a plan or document but a dynamic process that unfolds in classrooms as teachers and learners interpret and negotiate its meaning.

Within interpretivist curriculum theory, the concept of the lived curriculum is particularly salient. Scholars such as Mbhiza (2024) conceptualised curriculum as a "complicated conversation" that involves personal histories, social contexts, and cultural narratives. This view aligned closely with the study's focus on pupils' voices, as it recognised pupils as central participants in the construction of curriculum meaning. Pupils' accounts of their experiences in history classrooms were therefore understood not as peripheral opinions but as essential data for interpreting how the curriculum was enacted and experienced.

Interpretivist curriculum theory also highlighted the role of meaning-making in pedagogical mediation (Rowe, 2024). Teachers' interpretations of curriculum policy and pupils' interpretations of classroom experiences were shaped by their beliefs, identities, and contextual realities. This theoretical orientation allowed the study to examine how pupils made sense of pedagogical practices such as lecturing, questioning, assessment, and discussion, and how these practices influenced their understanding of history as a subject. By attending to pupils' meanings, the study sought to uncover the implicit assumptions and power relations embedded in everyday classroom interactions.

The integration of critical pedagogy and interpretivist curriculum theory in this study enabled a nuanced analysis that was both interpretive and critical. While interpretivism provided the tools to understand pupils' subjective experiences and meanings, critical pedagogy situated these experiences within broader structures of power and inequality. This theoretical synthesis allowed the study to move beyond description toward critique, examining not only how pupils experienced history education but also why these experiences took the forms they did and whose interests they served.

In practical terms, this theoretical framework positioned pupils' voices as both epistemic and political. Epistemically, pupils' perspectives contributed to knowledge about how the history curriculum was lived and understood. Politically, these voices challenged traditional hierarchies that privileged adult, expert, or policy-level perspectives over those of pupil. By foregrounding pupils' voices, the study aligned with democratic and emancipatory educational ideals that sought to redistribute power within educational research and practice.

The theoretical framework also informed the study's methodological orientation. Grounded in interpretivist assumptions, the research prioritized qualitative methods capable of capturing rich, contextualized accounts of pupils' experiences, such as interviews, focus group discussions and classroom observations. At the same time, critical pedagogy guided the analytical lens through which data were interpreted, prompting attention to issues of power, control, voice and resistance within classroom discourse and curriculum structures.

Ultimately, grounding the study in critical pedagogy and interpretivist curriculum theory allowed for a holistic understanding of history education in Zambian secondary schools. It positions the classroom as a contested space where knowledge, power and meaning intersect and where pupils' voices could serve as powerful critiques of pedagogical mediation and knowledge control. By bringing these theoretical traditions into dialogue, the study contributed to broader debates on curriculum justice, learner agency and the transformative potential of history education in postcolonial contexts.

5. Review of Related Literature

The review of related literature for this study was organized around the interrelated bodies of scholarship on pupil voice, curriculum enactment, power and epistemic control and history education with particular attention to African and postcolonial contexts. Together, these literatures provided the conceptual and empirical grounding for understanding pupils' voices as a form of curriculum critique and for situating classroom practice within broader social, political and epistemological frameworks.

5.1 Pupil Voice and Democratic Curriculum Discourse

The concept of pupil voice has emerged as a significant strand within critical and democratic education scholarship, challenging traditional views of pupils as passive recipients of knowledge. Early work on pupil voice conceptualized it primarily as a means of improving school effectiveness and classroom practice by incorporating pupils' feedback into decision-making processes (Ali & Khan, 2025). However, more recent scholarship expanded this understanding, framing pupils' voices as a matter of educational rights, epistemic justice, and democratic participation (Amoakwa et. al., 2025; Bonsu et. al., 2025).

From a critical perspective, pupil voice is not simply about listening to pupils but about recognizing them as knowledgeable subjects whose experiences constitute legitimate forms of knowledge. Tamala & Rucker (2025) argued that pupils' perspectives disrupted dominant power relations in education by challenging adult-centric assumptions about teaching and learning. Similarly, Smith & Ahmed (2025) situated pupil voice within a broader project of democratic education, emphasizing dialogue, reciprocity and shared authority between teachers and pupils. These perspectives moved beyond instrumental uses of pupil voice and positioned it as a transformative practice capable of reshaping curriculum and pedagogy.

Despite its theoretical appeal, research indicated that pupil voice initiatives were often constrained by institutional power structures and accountability regimes. Even where pupils were invited to express their views, their contributions may have been filtered, ignored, or incorporated only superficially into decision-making processes (Kayman, 2025). This suggested that pupil voice must be understood within the broader context of power relations that shape schooling. Without addressing these structural conditions, efforts to amplify pupil voice risked becoming tokenistic rather than transformative.

In the context of secondary education, pupil voice was particularly significant because adolescence was a critical period for identity formation, critical thinking and civic development. Studies showed that when pupils were excluded from meaningful participation in curriculum processes, they were more likely to experience disengagement and alienation from learning (Piazuelo & Rivero, 2025). Conversely,

participatory pedagogies that valued pupils' voices were associated with increased motivation, deeper understanding, and a stronger sense of belonging. These findings underscored the importance of examining how pupil voice was enabled or constrained within specific subject areas, such as history.

5.2 Curriculum Enactment and the Lived Curriculum

The reconceptualization of curriculum as enactment represents a significant shift in curriculum theory, moving away from linear models of implementation toward more interpretive and practice-oriented perspectives. Traditional curriculum models often assumed that curriculum policy could be faithfully implemented through teacher compliance. However, curriculum enactment theory challenged this assumption by highlighting the active role of teachers and learners in interpreting and mediating curriculum texts (Carpenter, et. al., 2025; McGulloch, 2025).

Curriculum enactment foregrounded the distinction between the intended curriculum, as articulated in policy documents, and the enacted curriculum as experienced in classrooms. This perspective emphasized that curriculum meaning was produced through social interaction and was shaped by contextual factors such as institutional culture, assessment regimes and resource availability. Ali & Khan (2025) and Harris & Haydn (2021) further extended this idea by distinguishing between curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived, arguing that the latter was constituted through the everyday experiences and interpretations of pupils and teachers.

Empirical studies of curriculum enactment consistently demonstrated that teachers exercised significant discretion in shaping classroom practice. This discretion was influenced by teachers' beliefs, subject knowledge, professional identities and perceptions of accountability (Piazuelo & Rivero, 2025). In examination-driven systems, teachers often prioritized content coverage and test preparation even when curriculum policies advocated pupil-centered approaches. As a result, the enacted curriculum may have reproduced traditional pedagogies despite progressive policy rhetoric.

Pupils were increasingly recognised as active participants in curriculum enactment rather than passive recipients. However, their role in shaping curriculum meaning was often constrained by classroom power relations. While teachers may have interpreted curriculum texts, pupils' interpretations were frequently marginalised or disregarded. This asymmetry highlighted the need to examine curriculum enactment not only from the perspective of teachers and policymakers but also from that of pupils whose experiences provided critical insights into how curriculum operated in practice.

5.3 Power, Pedagogical Mediation, and Epistemic Control

Power was a central concern in curriculum studies, particularly in analyses of how knowledge was selected, organized and transmitted. Smith & Ahmed (2025) and Chisholm (2018) argued that curriculum was never neutral but was always implicated in relations of power that reflected broader social, cultural and political interests. In classrooms, power was exercised through pedagogical mediation, encompassing instructional strategies, interaction patterns and assessment practices.

Bernstein's (2000) theory of pedagogic discourse cited by Bennett & Torres (2025) provided a powerful framework for analyzing epistemic control in educational settings. Bernstein conceptualized pedagogic power in terms of classification and framing, where classification referred to the boundaries between knowledge categories and framing referred to control over the communication of knowledge. Strong framing gave teachers control over what was taught, how it was taught, and how learning was evaluated, while weak framing allowed greater learner participation and negotiation.

Research applying Bernstein's framework to classroom practice demonstrated that strong framing often characterized examination-oriented subjects where teachers tightly regulated discourse to ensure coverage

of examinable content. Such regulation limited pupils' opportunities to ask questions, challenge explanations, or introduce alternative perspectives. Epistemic control was thus maintained through pedagogical routines that privileged authorized knowledge and marginalized pupil contributions.

Rodriguez (2025) extended this analysis by arguing that contemporary education systems increasingly prioritized qualification and measurement at the expense of subjectification and democratic participation. From this perspective, strong epistemic control not only shaped what pupils learnt but also who they became as pupils and citizens. When pupils were positioned as passive recipients of knowledge, their capacity for critical judgment and democratic participation was undermined.

Critical pedagogy further illuminated the relationship between power and pedagogy. Freire's (1970) critique of the banking model of education highlights how authoritarian pedagogies reproduced domination by denying pupils opportunities for dialogue and reflection (Askari, 2025). In contrast, dialogic pedagogy emphasized mutual learning, critical inquiry and shared authority. Applying this lens to curriculum enactment drew attention to the ethical and political dimensions of pedagogical mediation and raised questions about whose knowledge was valued in classrooms.

5.4 History Education and Knowledge Control

History education occupied a distinctive position within the curriculum because it was deeply implicated in questions of identity, memory and power. Scholars argued that history was not merely a body of factual knowledge but a form of interpretive practice that involved constructing narratives about the past (Aguilar, 2025; Kayman, 2025). Effective history education therefore required opportunities for inquiry, debate and engagement with multiple perspectives.

Despite this theoretical understanding, research indicated that history teaching in many contexts remained dominated by transmissive pedagogies. Teachers often prioritized factual recall and textbook narratives particularly in systems where examinations emphasized memorisation (Collins & Wood, 2025 & Bonsu et. al., 2025). This approach limited pupils' engagement with historical thinking concepts such as evidence, causation and interpretation.

In postcolonial contexts, history education was further complicated by the legacy of colonial curricula that privileged Eurocentric narratives and authoritative knowledge structures. While many African countries, including Zambia, revised their history curricula to reflect national and regional histories, classroom practice often continued to reflect inherited pedagogical traditions (Jibililu, 2021; Rodriguez, 2025). As a result, pupils encountered history as a static and unquestionable account rather than as a dynamic field of inquiry.

Studies in African contexts consistently highlighted the dominance of teacher-centered pedagogy in history classrooms. Researches in Zambia suggested that large class sizes, limited resources and high-stakes examinations contributed to teachers' reliance on lecture-based methods and note dictation (Mulenga & Luangala, 2015; Silumba, 2021). These conditions reinforced epistemic control and limited opportunities for pupil voice and participation.

5.5 Pupil Voice as Curriculum Critique in History Education

The intersection of pupil voice, curriculum enactment and history education provided a fertile ground for understanding curriculum as a contested practice. Scholars argued that pupils' narratives could function as a form of curriculum critique by revealing how policies and pedagogies were experienced at the classroom level (Priestly et. al., 2021; Cook, 2020). In history education, pupils' voices were particularly valuable because they revealed how pupils engaged with narratives of the past and how they perceived the relevance and legitimacy of historical knowledge.

Research suggested that when pupils were excluded from interpretive engagement with history, they perceived the subject as irrelevant or disconnected from their lived realities. Conversely, participatory pedagogies that incorporated pupil voice enhanced historical understanding and fostered critical citizenship (Mbingutzi, 2024; Collins & Wood, 2025). However, the extent to which such pedagogies were realized depended on the degree of epistemic control exercised within classrooms.

In the Zambian context, limited research explicitly examined pupils' voices as a lens for critiquing curriculum enactment in history education. Existing studies tended to focus on teacher practices or curriculum policy, leaving pupils' experiences underexplored. This gap underscored the significance of the present study which positioned pupils' voices at the center of curriculum analysis and treated their narratives as a form of critical knowledge.

6. Synthesis and Research Gap

The reviewed literature demonstrated that while curriculum reforms increasingly promoted pupil-centered pedagogy and democratic participation, classroom practice often remained characterized by strong pedagogical mediation and epistemic control. Pupil voice scholarship highlighted the potential of pupils' perspectives to challenge these dynamics, yet such perspectives were frequently marginalized in curriculum research particularly in African contexts and subject-specific studies such as history education. Therefore, this study addressed this gap by integrating insights from pupil voice scholarship, curriculum enactment theory and critical pedagogy to examine how pupils experienced and critiqued the enacted history curriculum in Zambian secondary schools. By foregrounding pupils' voices, the study contributed to curriculum theory by highlighting the importance of pupil perspectives in understanding curriculum enactment and by exposing the power relations that shaped classroom knowledge practices.

7. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore pupils' attitudes toward History as a school subject in selected secondary schools in Lusaka, Zambia. Qualitative research is a systematic, interpretive approach that seeks to understand social phenomena through individuals' meanings, experiences, and perspectives within their natural contexts (Ali et al., 2025; Kazanskaia, 2025). It was considered appropriate because pupils' attitudes toward History were socially constructed and contextually embedded, and thus could not be adequately captured through numerical measures alone.

The study was guided by an interpretivist epistemological stance, recognizing knowledge as socially constructed and situated. The research was conducted in purposively selected secondary schools offering History at senior secondary level. Pupils studying History were selected through purposive sampling to capture diverse experiences and perspectives. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to account for the researcher's positionality and influence on data generation and interpretation.

7.1 Data Generation

Data were generated through focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. Focus group discussions enabled collective reflection on shared experiences of History teaching, while individual interviews provided deeper insights into pupils' personal perceptions. Classroom observations documented pedagogical practices, interaction patterns, and manifestations of knowledge control, with field notes capturing descriptive and analytical reflections.

7.2 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an interpretive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2024). Transcripts and obser-

vation notes were coded inductively, and themes were refined through constant comparison across data sources and informed by the conceptual framework.

7.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Informed consent and assent were secured, and participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through pseudonyms and secure data storage, and attention was paid to power dynamics within school settings (Johnson & Christensen, 2025).

8. Findings of the study

The findings of this study revealed that pupils' experiences of secondary school history classrooms in Zambia were shaped by pervasive pedagogical mediation and strong epistemic control, resulting in limited opportunities for pupil agency, dialogue and critical engagement. Pupils' narratives consistently pointed to a classroom environment where knowledge was tightly regulated by teachers, assessment imperatives and prescribed curricular texts, with little scope for pupils to contribute meaningfully to the construction of historical understanding. These findings illuminated how the enacted curriculum departed significantly from policy-level commitments to pupil-centered pedagogy and instead reproduced traditional, hierarchical modes of teaching and learning.

Pupils overwhelmingly described history lessons as teacher-dominated spaces in which instructional practices were characterized by exposition, dictation of notes and textbook-based explanations. Pupils reported that teachers typically entered the classroom with predetermined content and explanations which were delivered with minimal interaction beyond short, recall-oriented questions. Pupils' contributions were largely confined to responding to these questions, often with single-word or sentence-level answers that reproduced the teacher's explanation or textbook phrasing. Such pedagogical patterns positioned pupils as passive recipients of historical knowledge rather than as active participants in meaning-making. The history classroom thus emerged as a site where authority over knowledge resided almost exclusively with the teacher.

A recurrent theme in pupils' accounts concerned the limited space for dialogue and interpretive engagement. Pupils expressed that opportunities to discuss historical events, debated alternative interpretations, or related content to their lived experiences were rare. When pupils attempted to raise questions that went beyond the prescribed content or offered interpretations that differed from the teacher's explanation, these contributions were often redirected or curtailed. Some pupils reported that divergent views were subtly discouraged through corrective feedback that reinforced the "correct" answer expected for examination purposes. This pattern of interaction reinforced a narrow conception of historical knowledge as fixed and uncontestable, rather than interpretive and open to inquiry.

Assessment practices played a central role in reinforcing epistemic control within the history classroom. Pupils consistently identified examinations and tests as the primary drivers of teaching and learning. History lessons were organized around what was perceived to be examinable with teachers emphasizing specific facts, dates and explanations that are likely to appear in examinations. Pupils reported being advised to memorise teacher-provided notes and reproduce them verbatim in assessments. This assessment orientation narrowed the curriculum and constrained pedagogical possibilities as both teachers and pupils prioritized examination success over deeper historical understanding. As a result, pupils came to equate success in history with the ability to recall and reproduce authorized knowledge rather than to analyse, interpret or critique historical narratives.

Despite these constraints, pupils articulated a clear awareness of their marginal position in classroom knowledge processes. Many pupils expressed frustration at being treated as passive listeners and articulated a desire for more participatory forms of learning. Pupils described history as a subject that could be engaging and meaningful if they were allowed to discuss historical issues, relate them to contemporary social realities and express their own views. Some pupils explicitly identified discussion, debate and group work as pedagogical strategies that would enhance their understanding and motivation. These expressions suggested that pupils were not resistant to learning history but rather to the restrictive pedagogical conditions under which it was taught.

Pupils' narratives also revealed a tension between official curriculum rhetoric and classroom reality. Several pupils were aware that policy documents and teachers occasionally spoke about pupil-centered approaches, yet they experienced little evidence of such approaches in practice. This disjuncture contributed to pupils' skepticism about the authenticity of curriculum reform and reinforced their perception that classroom authority remained firmly teacher-controlled. In this sense, pupils' voices functioned as an implicit critique of curriculum enactment exposing the gap between policy intentions and lived classroom experience.

9. Discussion of the study

The findings of this study provided a compelling illustration of how curriculum enactment in secondary school history classrooms in Zambia was shaped by pedagogical mediation and epistemic control. When interpreted through the lenses of critical pedagogy, curriculum enactment theory and Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse, these findings revealed that the history classroom functioned as a tightly regulated pedagogical space in which authority over knowledge was centralized and pupil agency was constrained. From a curriculum enactment perspective, the findings underscored the importance of examining curriculum at the level of classroom practice rather than policy texts alone. While the Zambian history curriculum formally endorsed pupil-centered pedagogy, inquiry-based learning, and critical thinking (CDC, 2013), the enacted curriculum experienced by pupils was characterized by transmission-oriented teaching and examination-driven instruction. This confirmed Kayman (2025) and Rodriguez's (2025) arguments that curriculum enactment was shaped by teachers' interpretations, institutional pressures and systemic constraints, often resulting in outcomes that diverged from policy intentions. In this study, assessment imperatives and entrenched pedagogical traditions emerged as powerful mediating factors that shaped how the curriculum was realized in practice.

The dominance of teacher-centered pedagogy observed in the findings reflected what Bernstein (2000) described as strong classification and framing of pedagogic discourse (Piazuelo & Rivero, 2025). Knowledge in the history classroom was strongly classified, with clear boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge and strongly framed with teachers exercising tight control over the selection, sequencing, pacing and evaluation of content. This strong framing limited pupils' opportunities to influence the direction of lessons or to engage in open-ended inquiry. As a result, pupils were positioned as acquirers of pre-defined knowledge rather than as co-constructors of historical meaning.

Critical pedagogy offered further insight into the power relations embedded in these pedagogical practices. Cited by Carpenter et. al., (2025), Freire's (1970) critique of the "banking model" of education was particularly salient in interpreting pupils' experiences. In the banking model, knowledge was deposited by the teacher into passive pupils thus reinforcing hierarchical relationships and inhibiting critical consciousness. The pupils' accounts in this study closely mirror this model, as they describe history

lessons dominated by note dictation, memorisation, and reproduction of authorized explanations. Such practices limited dialogue and positioned pupils as objects rather than subjects of the learning process.

The findings also illuminated the central role of epistemic control in shaping pupils' learning experiences. Epistemic control was exercised not only through teacher authority but also through assessment practices that defined what counted as valid knowledge and how understanding was demonstrated. Smith & Ahmed (2025) argued that contemporary education systems increasingly prioritized qualification at the expense of subjectification and democratic participation. In this study, the emphasis on examination success reinforced a narrow conception of historical knowledge and marginalized opportunities for critical engagement and identity formation. Pupils learnt that success in history depended on reproducing authorized narratives rather than developing independent interpretations or critical perspectives.

Importantly, the pupils' narratives did not reflect a rejection of authority per se but rather a desire for recognition as epistemic agents. Pupils expressed willingness to engage with historical content and a desire for pedagogical practices that acknowledged their capacity to think, question, and interpret. This challenges deficit assumptions about pupils' readiness for pupil-centered pedagogy and supported Mbingutzi's (2024) argument that pupils possessed valuable insights into teaching and learning processes. Pupils' expressed desire for dialogue, discussion and relevance suggested that the limitations observed in classroom practice were not inherent to pupils but were produced by structural and pedagogical constraints.

The study's findings also resonated with broader scholarship on history education in postcolonial contexts. Collins & Wood (2025) noted that history curricula in many African contexts remained shaped by colonial legacies and examination-oriented systems that privileged authoritative knowledge. While the Zambian history curriculum has undergone reform, the persistence of teacher-centered pedagogy suggested that deeper structural issues continued to shape classroom practice. These included large class sizes, limited instructional resources and high-stakes examinations, all of which contributed to teachers' reliance on transmissive teaching methods.

Pupils' voices, as captured in this study, thus functioned as a form of curriculum critique that exposed the limitations of reform efforts that focused primarily on curriculum documents rather than pedagogical practice. By articulating their experiences of marginalisation and constrained participation, pupils highlighted the need for curriculum reform to address classroom-level power relations and epistemic authority. This aligned with Tomala & Rucker's (2025) argument that curriculum was never neutral but was always implicated in relations of power and control.

The discussion also raised important questions about teacher agency and professional identity. While the findings highlighted the dominance of teacher authority, they should not be interpreted as attributing blame solely to individual teachers. Rather, teachers themselves operated within institutional and systemic constraints that shaped their pedagogical choices. The emphasis on examination performance, accountability pressures and limited professional development opportunities all contributed to the reproduction of teacher-centered practices. From an ecological perspective on teacher agency, Bonsu et al., (2025) asserted that teachers' capacity to enact learner-centered pedagogy was shaped by structural, cultural and material conditions that often limited innovation.

Nevertheless, the study suggested that amplifying pupils' voices had the potential to disrupt these entrenched practices by making visible the lived consequences of pedagogical mediation and epistemic control. When pupils articulated their desire for participatory learning and meaningful engagement, they challenged dominant assumptions about effective teaching and highlighted alternative possibilities for

history education. In this sense, pupil voice was not merely descriptive but transformative, thus offering a basis for reimagining curriculum enactment in more democratic and inclusive ways.

The findings further contributed to curriculum theory by reinforcing the importance of lived experience as a site of curriculum analysis. Interpretivist curriculum theory emphasised that curriculum meaning emerged through the interpretations of participants (Rowe, 2024). By foregrounding pupils' perspectives, this study expanded the analytic focus beyond teachers and policymakers and recognised pupils as legitimate interpreters of curriculum. This shift had important implications for how curriculum effectiveness was evaluated and how reform initiatives were designed.

In summary, the discussion demonstrated that the history curriculum as enacted in Zambian secondary schools was characterized by strong pedagogical mediation and epistemic control that limited pupil participation and critical engagement. Pupils' voices revealed both the constraints of current practice and the possibilities for transformation. By treating pupils' narratives as curriculum critique, the study highlighted the need for curriculum reform efforts that attended to classroom-level power relations, assessment practices, and pedagogical cultures. Without such attention, pupil-centered reforms remained rhetorical rather than transformative.

10. Implications for Curriculum Theory and Practice

The study contributed to curriculum theory by foregrounding pupils' voices as a critical analytic lens for examining curriculum enactment. It underscored the need for curriculum theory to attend explicitly to power and epistemic authority in classroom practice.

For practice, the findings suggested the need for professional development that supported teachers in adopting dialogic and inquiry-based pedagogies. History education should create structured opportunities for pupil participation, interpretation, and connection to lived realities.

At the policy level, assessment practices must be aligned with curriculum goals that value critical thinking and participation. Without reforming examination systems, efforts to democratize classroom practice are likely to remain rhetorical.

11. Conclusion

This study demonstrated that pupils' voices provided a powerful lens for critiquing curriculum enactment in secondary school history classrooms in Zambia. By foregrounding pupils' experiences, the research revealed how pedagogical mediation and epistemic control shaped classroom practice and limited pupil agency. The study argued that meaningful curriculum reform required attention to classroom-level power relations and recognition of pupils as epistemic agents. Embracing pupil voice held transformative potential for history education and curriculum practice in Zambia and beyond.

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