'Why was she born into this white skin?' Curriculum Making for Remembrance as Critical Learning in Postconflict Societies

Petro du Preez
petro.dupreez@nwu.ac.za

Abstract

South Africa is essentially a traumatised society in which remembrance of the past evokes many different emotions. This traumatised state is partly the result of the contradicting and confusing remembrances that individuals have of the past and how these translate into the present. This article proposes that remembrance should not be reduced to a strategic practice of viewing the past as a reconciliatory possibility for the future. Instead it proposes the past be seen as an opportunity for a critical form of learning. This requires attention to questions such as: How do we need to view curriculum to do justice to the notion of remembrance as critical learning? What method should we use to realise the ideals of critical learning of this kind? In considering these questions, the memory narratives of two students were explored and theorised in terms of intracategorical complexity. I argue that curriculum making for remembrance as critical learning could begin with eliciting individual memories through memory work and disrupting these remembrances through intersectionality and intracategorical complexity.

Keywords: curriculum making, postconflict society, remembrance, memory work, intersectionality

Introduction

South Africa is essentially a traumatised society in which remembrance of the past evokes many different emotions and reactions (Jansen 2009; 2011). This is not merely a product of the country's racially divided past, but a result of

the contradicting and confusing remembrances that South Africans have of the past and their influence on the way we construct our history in the present. While reflecting on these issues, I came across a book entitled *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma* (Simon, Rosenberg & Eppert 2000). This book made me realise that we have generally treated our history in a very strategic and clinical way. Our pedagogical justification for remembrance and history is that 'in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, we must learn the lessons of history' (Simon, Rosenberg & Eppert 2000:2). On the contrary, we need to engage in particular forms of historical consciousness in which we are not merely revisiting the past, but where we learn through and from the disruptions that emerge when coming to terms with the past (Simon, Rosenberg & Eppert 2000:2-3). In this sense, remembrance is not reduced to a strategic practice that perceives the past as a reconciliatory possibility for the future, but is a critical form of learning (Simon, Rosenberg & Eppert 2000:2-3).

Rethinking the role of history, remembrance and pedagogy in this way poses several challenging questions for curriculum workers in postconflict societies. In fact, it requires a paradigm shift in curriculum thinking as was proposed by Cornelia Roux shortly after South Africa became a democratic country (Roux 1998a; 1998b). What also seems to require more attention are the following questions: How should we approach curriculum to do justice to the notion of remembrance as critical learning? What method of realising the ideals of remembrance as critical learning should we choose? Regarding the first question, a conception of curriculum as *currere* is helpful because it,

[i] sees curriculum as a complicated conversation;

[ii] cultivates critical and communicative interaction;

[iii] acknowledges curriculum as a historical event; and

[iv] aims to act and realise civic ideals (Pinar 2010:177-178).

Thus, curriculum should be conceived of as a social construct (see for example Roux 2011). Partially addressing the second question, Pinar (2010:178) argues that '[t]he method of *currere* is an autobiographical means

of studying the lived experiences of individual participants in curricular conversation'. This autobiographical approach is also endorsed by Roux (2009). In the light of this aforementioned, I decided to use the broader methodology of eliciting the memories of students, so I could explore them using the theory of intracategorical intersectionality, and to theorise the findings in terms of curriculum making processes that are informed by the notion of remembrance as critical learning.

This study was situated in the methodological tradition of narrative inquiry (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou 2009). Memory work was used as a method of eliciting remembrances, whilst narratives-in-interaction (Phoenix 2009) was the approach used to make sense of the memories. In this approach, the focus is not on single narratives or 'small stories', but on how various narratives intersect and what they reveal about 'big stories' in society (Phoenix 2009:65).

Eliciting Memories

Memory work was first developed in the mid-1980s by Frigga Haug and her German socialist-feminists colleagues. Its theoretical roots were initially social constructionism and feminist social theories, but more recently it has been influenced by poststructuralism (Onyx & Small 2001:773, 777). Memory work as a methodology[1] resulted from the concern of several feminist researchers that applying theory to experience prioritised theory over experience and active engagement in social the context (Stephenson 2005:34-35). They highlighted the danger of essentialism which ignores the diversity of experience (Jansson, Wendt & Åse 2008:229). Memory work makes it possible to close the gap between theory and experience by breaking down binaries such as subject/object and getting participants to be co-researchers and co-constructors of knowledge (Onyx & Small 2001:773, 777). Memory work can be understood as having an emancipatory and a transformatory intent (Onyx & Small 2001:773), which is in line with the narratives-in-interaction approach (Haug 2008:540). Moreover, as Onyx and Small

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[1] I use memory work as a method, to determine how memory can assist the process of narrative writing, especially when narratives are brought into interaction. This means memory is used as a method and not as a process of positioning memory as a theory and/or methodology.

(2001:774) point out, data generated through memory elicits moments in the construction of the self. Such data sheds light on the intersections of the personal, and the personal with the public and political, because of its emphasis on lived experiences (Stephenson 2005:35).

In 2011 I asked six postgraduate students to write a narrative telling me about their school experiences. The six narrators were all born between 1985 and 1989 and did grade 1 between 1993 and 1995. This was a significant time in South Africa's history because in 1994 apartheid – the racialised, patriarchal ideology based on Christianity and Nationalism and that supported a minority of the population, mostly Afrikaans speaking citizens – was formally abolished and replaced by a secular, democratic South Africa based on equity for all irrespective of race or gender. However, although this particular group of narrators were not directly part of the apartheid struggle, their stories indicate that they are knowledge carriers of the past to a varying extent.

I was particularly interested in the methodology of eliciting memories and in the influence of voices of remembrance on curriculum making in postconflict societies. Directives given to the students were based on the first phase of memory work where the main concern is individual reflection and the actual writing of a memory: the narrators were thus not aware of the overall research problem (Onyx & Small 2001:776-777). Participants were asked to use pseudonyms, to write in the third person, to focus on describing memories, not on interpreting them, and to include even what might seem trivial (Onyx & Small 2001:776).

For the purpose of this article, I only used two narratives to enable an in-depth perspective. In what follows, I will briefly introduce each of the two narrators using their pseudonyms, Dimpho and Lebo[2].

***Dimpho** (born 1986, Grade 1 1993) is a white girl who grew up in rural areas in SA. She describes her core family as very religious (Christians) and not racist at all. However, she does allude to her extended family and the racism she experienced through her interactions with them. She describes the school in Northern Cape Province of South Africa she went to in Grade 3 (1995). Her combined grade 3 and 4 class consisted of 8 white children and*

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[2] The pseudonyms that the narrators selected were Dimpho which means 'gifts' in Tswana and Lebo which means 'light' in Zulu.

about 22 coloured[3] children. There was another combined grade 3 and 4 class that mainly consisted of black Portuguese speaking children[4]. They had been placed in a separate class so that they could learn how to speak Afrikaans. In the larger white community her parents were censured because they sent their children to the 'black school', had friends from different racial groupings, and because they did not attend the Christian National ('volkseie' / national identity) school. In addition, they belonged to the Apostolic Faith Mission Church which was seen as a sect in the community because it was not part of the three mainstream sister Christian churches[5]. Her narrative abounds with many images and metaphors of apartheid education and ways of knowing – its racism, its patriarchy, and rigid religious beliefs. She recalls how in 2001 (grade 9) the school she was in had to amalgamate with the school in the township area that consisted mostly of Tswana speaking children. During this amalgamation, the community was characterised by violence between the different social groupings. It was considered very dangerous to go to school and very soon Dimpho was the only white child left in a school of 750 learners. After further political rivalry her parents had to take her out of the school and put her in the Christian National School in fear of her safety.

Lebo *(born 1989, Grade 1 1995) is a black Zulu speaking girl who grew up in an urban setting: Pretoria, Mamelodi West, SA. She was raised by her single mother in a township area. Her mother enrolled her at a mainly-white Afrikaans nursery school (only 3 black children) about 10 kms away from home. She was later enrolled at a predominantly white Afrikaans primary school (about 80% white, 20% other ethnical groups) and went to an English speaking high school (very diverse in terms of ethnical representation). She*

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[3] Coloured was a classification used during apartheid to refer to people of mixed Indian, native Khoisan and Bantu descent who typically had a fairer skin complexion than native black cultures.

[4] These children, together with their parents, were removed from their home in Pomfret in the North West Province of South Africa to Olifantshoek (Northern Cape Province). These soldiers were originally from Angola, but fought on the side of the South African government in the Border War (1966-1989).

[5] Dutch Reformed Church, Uniting Reformed Church, Reformed Church.

recalls how she initially travelled to and from school using the local school transport, but from grade 2 onwards she had to make use of the public train system in South Africa (which is notoriously dangerous due to violent attacks that often occur on trains). She explains in detail how her mother accompanied her on the train to show her how it worked on the first day. Thereafter she had to use it on her own despite her fear and apprehension of this public transport system. She remembers how all the other children were dropped off at school by their parents in cars and acknowledges that using the train was the only financially viable option her mother had, given that she valued a proper education outside of the township. Lebo's narrative reflects the process of socialising in an environment where she was different in terms of her ethnicity and her language. It speaks of adapting to situations and forming an identity amidst difference in terms of race and class.

A loose interpretation and application of the second phase of the memory method followed which entails the collective search for common understanding through:

[i] each member expresses their opinions and ideas about all the memory narratives;

[ii] similarities and differences are revealed;

[iii] clichés, generalisations, contradictions, cultural imperatives and metaphors are identified;

[iv] group discussions about possible theories that could be applied to the narratives are discussed;

[v] what is excluded from memory narratives are unpacked; and

[vi] if need be narratives could be rewritten (Onyx & Small 2001: 777).

The two narrators, who are friends, studied one another's narratives, responded to and questioned aspects thereof. I analysed and worked through their conversations, asking questions, and engaging in the recursive process

of exploring their remembrances as soon as phase two commenced. Onyx and Small (2001:777) describes the process of further theorising of memory narratives as the third phase. Here the narrators worked through my interpretations of their narratives to confirm correctness and thus enhance the validity of the discussions and the subsequent theorising.

Memories in Interaction: Readings from the Intersection

Intersectionality emerged as a paradigm of feminist research because gender was often seen as the only category of analysis that universally represent all women irrespective of differences between women such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class (McCann & Kim 2010:147). This movement has resulted in some theorists questioning the use of categories as static entities of analysis (McCall 2005:1771). Although critical of boundary making processes and acknowledging that categories have no foundation in reality because language creates and often distorts reality, I used boundaries as anchor points when analysing the memories of narrators (McCall 2005:1771). Since I wanted to explore the phenomenon of static categories in the memory narratives, I engaged in a process of reading the narratives together with the theory of intersectionality. Jackson and Mazzei (2012) refer to this process as 'thinking with theory in qualitative research'. Instead of theory leading the analysis of data, or the data generating theory *per se*, this method facilitates a recursive process in which narratives are freely brought into interaction with one another as well as with theories that could help us think through the findings.

When the two memory narratives are brought into interaction, two levels of intersections emerge. *Firstly*, the narratives themselves intersect when categories such as race, language, class and ideology spontaneously emerge. In these moments divergent intersections such as the following are palpable: colour-blind versus colour sensitised; language as means of socialisation versus language as means of justifying segregation; reviving ideology versus reconstructing a new ideology for unity in diversity. But we were able to see convergent intersecting feelings, experiences and longings that emerged in the reflective moments that these narrators experienced. Secondly, each narrative portrays intracategorical intersections. Intracategorical complexity which refers to the study of people who cross traditionally

constructed categories illustrates the complexity of social groupings and points to the danger of treating any category as unitary and/or homogenous (McCall 2005:1774).

Dimpho, writing in the third person, states: 'Dimpho's heart is torn into pieces. She does not know who she is. Shouldn't she perhaps have been coloured or perhaps black? Why was she born into this white skin?' Her grandfather, whom she adored and looked up to, is described in her narrative as being a racist man. She recalls how she wanted to tell him about a male teacher who really inspired her, but was afraid to speak about the teacher because he was a coloured man. She describes how this teacher became a very good friend of her parents. What is evident is that she experienced a tension between her core family and what they believed about people of different ethnic origins ('my parents were not proud Afrikaners with all the traditions, etc.'), and that what her extended family thought. She writes: 'Her grandfather kept her white'. Her grandfather's conviction was not unique in her context. In fact, most of the small, ethnically diverse community in which they lived shared these racist beliefs despite the fact that racial segregation was no longer enforced. Her experiences at school further reinforced this tension. The traces of racial segregation and Christian Nationalist Education permeate her lived experiences at school. The tension between 'small narratives' and 'big narratives' and how this made her question her ethnicity is quite vivid in her memory narrative.

In Dimpho's memory she is narrated as 'the vehicle of otherness' that makes it 'troublesome' for herself and others to justify and 'construct normalization' (Knudsen 2007:62). In contrast, Lebo's memory is vaguer when it comes to issues of segregation, racial discrimination, gender stereotyping and political rivalry; it illustrates a rhetoric of sameness and normalisation. The different social contexts in which these memory narratives should be read probably explains this difference of emphasis in the narratives. In Lebo's case, the community was more diverse, liberated and less explicit in their quest of reviving past ideologies. Important to remember is that oppression does not only occur on one level, for example race, but that all forms of subordination and oppression are interconnected (Matsuda 2010:295). It is therefore important to look at these intersections that could perpetuate inequality and ask critical questions about it (McCann & Kim 2010:157).

Language and Race

The intersection of language and race are evident in both narrators' memories. This is not a data-theme derived from some theory. It is a historical relic because language was one of the instruments that apartheid-engineers used to oppress certain groups. Dlamini (2010:137) writes: '[Afrikaans was] … the guttural language of orders and insults; of Bantu education, the language that had had children up in arms in 1976 as they took to the street to protest against being forced to learn everything from Mathematics to Science in Afrikaans'. Dimpho's first memory of social tension in education is that all the black Portuguese children were placed in a separate class to 'learn how to speak Afrikaans'. This is both a symbol of the segregated past of the country and a disconcerting reminder that the tradition of purposive marginalisation is still being maintained in democratic South Africa. One may ask what type of remembrance is cultivated in this kind of education and whether this form of remembrance is not partly to blame for the traumatised state of the country. Lebo, despite being brought up in a predominantly white school context, did not experience the same confusion as Dimpho regarding the colour of her skin. This could be because people in her local school community did not overtly distinguish between people on the basis of biological indicators. She uses the third person to explain how she learned how to speak Afrikaans: '… she learnt the language at an earlier age in nursery school, so she adjusted well in speaking the language and as time passed, she got used to the language, and it became easy for her to speak, understand and read …'. She explains how she often used Afrikaans when she wanted to express herself eloquently at home, and how the Zulu and English speaking members of her extended family found this peculiar and often challenged her mother because of this. This made her mother decide to send her to an English High School, so that she could learn English.

Religion and Ideology

The intersection of religion and ideology was not coincidental either because religion was used to justify apartheid ideology. Dimpho recalls phrases that teachers used when they taught: 'I give children a hiding because I love them', 'True love does not only cherish, but discipline', and 'Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers of this dark world'. The

latter phrase was interpreted by the teacher as follows: 'As we can see, our struggle here is against the black government'. The first two phrases are not merely antitheses, but illustrative of the Christian Nationalist Education (CNE) system and was maintained in Dimpho's community long after the abolition of apartheid. Apartheid values are largely based on the norms of Victorian society that justified corporal punishment as a means of enforcing discipline, requiring teacher commitment to guiding children away from original sin or Godly alienation (Parker-Jenkins 1997:4). Lebo's narrative too has echoes of CNE, particularly in the way she describes the Christian school camps they went on and how they 'moulded' her or 'built her character'. Her selection of words reflects moral habituation (Curren 2008) the approach to moral education that underpinned CNE, which was based on the belief that inculcating a set of values in learners would change their behaviour (Joseph & Efron 2005:525) . Again we need to keep in mind that this practice is/was maintained in a secular, democratic context.

Friendship and Race

Friendship across racial boundaries was not very common in apartheid. Dimpho remembers how she never really had good friends at school. During break times she used to sit with the small group of white children and they would ensure that no child from another ethnic group joined them. She explains her membership of this group: 'The only reason why she was part of this group was because she was white'. There is no easy way to explain this. It could be that she did not want to be frowned upon in the way her parents were because of their cross-cultural friendships. Or, it could have been a response to peer pressure to conform to group norms. Lebo never recalls an incident where she or anyone in her school was discriminated against on the grounds of race. She always had friends from diverse ethnical orientations and they 'did everything together'. In the end of her written narrative she writes the following:

> She was more socialized into the Afrikaans culture, more than into her own culture because of the friends she made through primary school and kept till now as life-long friends … there is something about Afrikaans people that draws her to them and she adores them, the

company, the culture and the type of people they are. Now she doesn't wonder why they used to call her a snob throughout her school career, because it looked like she only had white friends.

When I asked her to explain the last sentence in more detail, she mentioned that the friends and family she had in the township area often commented on her interracial friendships and in this sense she was perceived by them as thinking she was better than them.

'Small Stories' Intersecting with 'Big Stories': Reflecting on Narratives-in-Interaction

Firstly, Lebo and Dimpho's memory narratives convey many more examples of intersections that relate to ethnicity, class and gender, but for the purpose of this study the examples explored provides enough context to draw several theoretical conclusions. Secondly, although these intersections illustrate multiple layers of complexity and opens up a variety of pathways of understanding, it is important to notice how these narrators' 'small stories' relate to 'big stories'. In so doing, these 'small stories' carry knowledge about the past that could further traumatise the society, or work toward detraumatising it.

Dimpho's narrative illustrates that socialisation mostly occurred in line with the community beliefs and the country's history of conforming to power relations of different kinds. The community narrative that was captured in a simplistic history of white dominance did not justify her social reality. It might be that this narrow perspective and the complexity that she experienced led to her early confusion and the question: am I black or white? The fact that she asked this question illustrates that she reflected on the situation and the static categories that history revealed to her. Her narrative is illustrative of a 'small story' that reflects the bias of a community, its 'bigger story', and how this is in conflict with the ideals of democratic SA. In a reflective note on her narrative she states that for her history is no longer divided along black/white, good/bad, victim/perpetrator lines; but is described as a complex intersection of 'things that happen that determines who one becomes and how you learn to live a compassionate life'. I would like to believe that this realisation is partially the result of engaging in the

process of memory work. Lebo's 'small stories' too are influenced by a 'bigger story' (albeit very differently): the story of young South African children who had to learn how to live and adapt in a plural society where people are different, not only in ethnic terms, but as a result of their religious orientation, class, etc.

Closely analysing Lebo's narrative might provoke two different responses based on the theoretical lenses employed. Radical critical theorists might argue that Lebo's story and its inability to unleash deep, systematic discrimination is illustrative of how she was systematically and unconsciously assimilated into another culture. Poststructuralists would probably argue that the intersections of experience and her seeming 'colour-blindness' is in itself significant and carries a message of how she constructed her social reality. In this regard I concur with Jansen (2009:256) who criticises critical theorists for their inclination to create simplistic categorical dualities to assist them to make sense of the world, and then to select a dualist position from which to argue. Typically such '... historical narratives retain "good black victims" versus "bad white perpetrators"' (Jansen 2011:8). He argues that this is not helpful in a postconflict context that aims to reconstruct and reconcile, and which requires spaces for dealing with complex, contradicting and intersecting moral issues, when he states: '... in any oppressive situation the moral world is a lot more complex than critical theory suggests' (Jansen 2009:259).

Disrupting Intersections: Curriculum Making for Remembrance as Critical Learning in Postconflict Societies

To theorise these narratives in the context of curriculum making for remembrance as critical learning, we need to acknowledge that as a result of the knowledge economy our curriculum has been locked into the rhetoric of managerialism and commercialisation. It has become a dumping ground for profound societal issues in the hope that the curriculum will miraculously address them. These circumstances have led to a situation where influencing the official school curriculum has become a very difficult task. However, I would argue that we cannot allow this to hinder us from engaging in critical pedagogy. It is possible for the enacted curriculum to become a vehicle for critical learning to be used to realise the ideals of remembrance.

First, remembrance, pedagogy and history are not static categories, but a dialectical triad that offers opportunities for the curriculum maker to enact *currere* and in so doing set the scene to engage people in particular forms of historical consciousness. This process could begin with eliciting remembrances of individuals through memory narratives in an attempt to engage people in particular forms of historical consciousness which is not bound to the individual, but implies a praxeological consciousness when these narratives are brought into interaction (Simon, Rosenberg & Eppert 2000:2). For example: a teacher could arrange the official curriculum content so that it opens opportunities for dialogue about remembrances, since such memories carry powerful stories that could assist us in understanding history from multiple perspectives. Identifying similarities and differences between memory narratives; revealing clichés, generalisations, contradictions, cultural imperatives and metaphors in remembrances; and unpacking memories and what is included and/or excluded from it becomes possible through dialogue.

Second, remembrances could be disrupted using intersectionality and intracategorical complexity as departure points to open pathways for the 'difficult return'. This difficult return – which includes learning how to live with loss and a disquieting remembrance, learning that bears no definite comfort, and learning how to deal with an un-worked-through past (Simon, Rosenberg & Eppert 2000:4) – could be endorsed when we begin to disrupt and destabilise the static categories created by history and perpetuated in the present. Thus, at the heart of remembrance as critical learning, there are disruptive moments that could open alternative pathways of knowing.

Third, this process does not only begin to demarcate remembrance as critical learning, but includes a third process in which reconfiguration of relationships, identities and communities as well as the process of ethical learning occurs (Simon, Rosenberg & Eppert 2000:6,8). This I would argue is paramount for a postconflict society. Through remembrance, Dimpho and Lebo were able to rethink their own relationships, how they constructed their identities and the implication for their communities. In this sense they used memory work as a space of ethical engagement about their own lived experiences.

The explorations in this article provide evidence that memory work has the power to elicit remembrances about the past that could, translated through *currere* and disruption, become critical learning experience. It seems

that remembrance has the potential to respond to the traumatized state of people in South Africa in a positive and reconciliatory way: it offers '… a means for an ethical learning that impels us into a confrontation and 'reckoning' not only with stories of the past but with 'ourselves' as we 'are' (historically, existentially, ethically) in the present. Remembrance thus is a reckoning that beckons us to the possibilities of the future, showing the possibilities of our own learning' (Simon, Rosenberg & Eppert 2000:8).

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Petro du Preez
Edu-HRight Unit
North West University
Potchefstroom
South Africa
petro.dupreez@nwu.ac.za