

**IMPROVING THE CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS OF LEARNERS IN A  
GRADE SIX HISTORY CLASSROOM: AN ACTION RESEARCH  
APPROACH**

By

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## **DECLARATION**

I wish to state unambiguously that this mini-thesis is my original work unless stated clearly under subsequent headings of this paper. The production and publication of this paper will be done by the University of Stellenbosch and not through any other third party. I have also not submitted this work in its entirety or any part of it at any institution of higher learning for the purposes of any degree or professional qualification.

Signature:.....

Date .....

## Summary

This mini-thesis is an action research project I undertook at a primary school. The school is situated in a middle-class neighbourhood previously designated as a so-called coloured suburb during the period of apartheid in South Africa. The focus of the study is to develop the critical thinking skills of Grade 6 History learners. The idea to undertake research predominantly in critical thinking skills in History emerged from my many frustrations in the classroom both in terms of my teaching method and the apathy of learners taking the subject.

Reflecting on my teaching practice revealed that I was effective only in terms of imparting content to learners. The learners, on the other hand, were submissive and passive recipients of learning content presented to them. When I first started teaching, and even more recently, my main concern was to follow the curriculum and complete it within the time allocated for the subject. I was also concerned about how well learners could recall the History content in textbooks and considered high marks in tests and exams as indicators of my success as a teacher. The consequences of my transmission mode of teaching method made the teaching of History monotonous for learners and stifled autonomous and critical thinking.

My teaching practice left little room for learners' creativity and autonomous thinking about the content in textbooks. In an attempt, therefore, to address my teaching and learning concerns, I address the following questions, namely:

- How can History be used to develop the critical thinking skills of Grade 6 learners?
- How can I improve my classroom practice to make it more participatory?

In Chapter One I explore my personal and educational background. Included in this chapter is an account of my personal background, I describe the setting of the school where the study was conducted as well as a motivation and description of type of study that will be undertaken.

In Chapter Two I provide a literature review that is related to my research question. Included in the literature review is a discussion of the aims and objectives for the subject History for learners in the intermediary phase outlined in the latest Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), (Republic of South Africa 2011:11).

In Chapter Three I offer my reasons for choosing an action research project and discuss its methodology. In Chapters Four I give an account of the first action research cycle I undertook in my classroom. I also provide a reflection of my teaching practice and the activities completed by my learners. In chapter Five I give an account of my second action research cycle and reflect on what transpired in my classroom over that period.

In the last chapter I reflect on my two projects and relate the results of my study to my literature review. Last but not least, my conclusion will contain recommendations for further research in classroom practice.

## OPSOMMING

Hierdie mini-tesis is 'n aksienavorsingprojek wat ek by 'n laerskool gedoen het. Die laerskool is geleë in 'n middel-klas woonbuurt wat gedurende die apartheids jare as 'n kleurling gebied geklassifiseer was. Die fokus van hierdie studie is gemik op die ontwikkeling van kritiese dinkwese vir Graad ses Geskiedenis leerders. Die idee om navorsing in kritiese denkwese in Geskiedenis onderig te doen het ontstaan deur frustrasies in my klaskamer praktyd onderrig metode en leerders se min belangstelling teenoor die vak.

As ek nou reflekteer op my onderrig metode, was ek doeltreffend net in terme van die verspreiding van leer materiaal onder leerlinge. Die leerders was ook net passiewe ontvangers van die inhoud van leer materiaal. My eerste onderrig ervaring in onderwys en selfs deesdae, was ek baie bekommerd oor die kurrikulum vir Geskiedenis wat voltooi moet word binne 'n sekere tydperk. Ek was ook baie bekommerd oor leerlinge se punte in toetse of eksamens wat tekens was van my doeltreffendheid as 'n onderwyser. Die gevolge van die aflaaionderwys metode het veroorsaak dat die onderwys van Geskiedenis eentonig was vir leerders en het nie gelei tot kritiese dinkwese nie.

My onderwys praktyd het min ruimte gelaat vir leerders om kreatief en onafhanklik te redeneer oor die leer material in Geskiedenis handboeke. Hierdie situasie in die klas het my aangespoor om my onderwys praktyd aan te spreek, vernaamlik in:

- Hoe ek kritiese denkwese vaardighede in Geskiedenis vir my Graad 6 leerlinge kan verbeter?
- Hoe ek my praktyd in die klas kamer kan verbeter om meer deelneemind te wees?

In hoofstuk een verken ek my persoonlike en onderwys agtergrond. Ek gee 'n konteks, motiveering en tipe studie ek beoog. In hoofstuk twee voorsien ek letterkunde wat direk gekoppel kan word aan my navorsing vraag. Ingesluit in hoofstuk twee is daar 'n bespreking van die doelwitte vir Geskiedenis verskaf in die nuutste Nasionale Kurrikulum-en Assesseringverklaring (KABV) vir die intermediêre fase (Republic van Suid-Afrika 2011:11). Die KABV document uiteensetting ten doel om vir die onderig van Geskiedenis wat oorweeg kan word kritiese denke terme.

In hoofstuk drie verskaf ek redes hoekom ek aksie navorsing gekies het en bespreek die metodologie. In hoofstuk vier en vyf gee ek 'n uitleg van die twee aksie navorsing projekte en verband die resultate met my literatuur hersiening. Laaste, verskaf ek 'n afsluiting en aanbeveling vir verdere navorsing in klaskamerpraktyd.

## THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my sincere thanks and appreciation to the following people:

- My late father, Abdullah Majiet, who inculcated a love in me and my siblings to seek knowledge throughout our lives;
- My mother, Farieda Salie, who is a continuous source of inspiration to all her children;
- My friends, who continue to encourage me;
- The learners in my class, who enjoyed participating in this project;
- The teachers and principal of the school for allowing me to do research;
- The Stellenbosch University library staff for their friendly support and assistance;
- The lecturers in the Education Faculty for giving me the opportunity to study;
- My wife and children for being patient with me throughout this project;
- My supervisor, Dr Omar Esau, for his consistent inspiration, support and guidance.

I thank them all.

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this study to my parents

And to all my children, who I hope will be inspired to continue to seek knowledge for the benefit of humanity.



## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ANC – African National Congress
- CAPS – (National) Curriculum, Assessment Policy Statement
- DoE – Department of Education
- FET – Further Education and Training
- GET – General Education and Training
- KABV – (Nasionale) Kurrikulum- en Asseseringsbeleidsverklaring
- NP – National Party
- NQF – National Qualifications Framework
- OBE – Outcomes Based Education
- SADTU – South African Democratic Teachers Union
- WCED – Western Cape Education Department
- UWC – University of Western Cape

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

In this mini-thesis I give an account of the action research project that I undertook as a History teacher in a primary school classroom in South Africa. This project was an attempt to make my learners more critical and to stimulate their critical thinking skills.

In reflecting on my teaching practice, I was confronted by the silence and the stark passivity of my learners, whom I had expected to question and participate interactively in the History classroom. It appeared as if I was doing all the talking and stimulating discussions and debates, while learners were passively waiting for facts and answers.

My teaching method, which consisted mostly of lecturing, 'teacher talking and students listening', did not lead to any enduring understanding of, or critical reflection on, the History lessons. During my lessons the learners displayed a general apathy and boredom, and simply jotted down notes from the blackboard or textbook. When I probed them for answers about any History lesson, my learners mostly regurgitated prepared answers and showed very little insight into the content.

This mini-thesis is therefore an attempt by me, as a teacher-researcher, to investigate ways to improve the critical thinking of my learners as well as of myself as their teacher. As a teacher wanting to improve my classroom practice, I decided to use action research as my methodology of research. More than that, I wanted to make use of emancipatory action research. (In Chapter Three I give more details about the action research approach I chose.)

The reason I chose History through which to inculcate thinking in my learners is that, I believe, the knowledge of our past is imperative for us to better understand ourselves, and I was under the assumption that South Africa's violent apartheid past would stimulate a critical study of History, particularly amongst learners previously classified as 'so-called

coloured', 'black' and 'Indian'. Also, I presumed that the study of History in schools would play a greater role in correcting the wrongs of apartheid. It is at least encouraging to find that, notwithstanding the debates and controversies about what to include in the construction of a new curriculum after the end of apartheid in 1994, Chisholm (2005:2000), the inclusion of History in the school syllabus was incorporated with the following in mind:

it opposed rote learning and a content-driven curriculum, but it saw history as playing a critical role in challenging 'many of the racial ideas which were the ideological ramparts of apartheid.

It is further encouraging to find that, according to the *Report of the History Archaeology Panel* (DoE 2000 cited in Chisholm, 2005:200), the study of History aimed to:

develop 'a sense of identity and common memory',  
conceptual tools' to 'interpret and analyse...[and]  
engage in critical debate'.

It is against this brief background that I undertook my research into improving the critical thinking skills of learners and improving my teaching practice.

## **1.2 The purpose of the research**

The purpose of this study is to improve my teaching practice and empower the learners in my classroom to become critical of, and not merely recipients of, the knowledge conveyed to them. Hester (1994:6) argues that teachers are an active force in schools and that "school improvement can only be brought about through teachers who are able to think and learn". Recent studies show that the development of critical thinking skills greatly enhances learners' ability to improve not only in the study of History but in developing their skills in the future (Savich, 2009:10). Therefore my role as the teacher is paramount in inculcating critical thinking skills.

This action research project is a qualitative study that aims to enhance:

- My Grade 6 learners' critical understanding of History; and
- My critical insight into my classroom practice.

This mini-thesis captures my experiences and those of my learners that participated in the action research project, which was initiated primarily to answer two research questions:

- How can History be used to improve the critical thinking skills of Grade 6 learners?

- How can I improve my teaching practice in the classroom?

### **1.3 Background to the study**

As I am the main role-player in this action research mini-thesis, it becomes imperative that I share a little bit of my background. Like Riding, (2008) I argue that my own personal narrative is crucial and important in determining the sort of educator that I am, and that my life history informs how I approach my life as an educator. My personal narrative about my past is important to determine who I am and where I intend going as a teacher-researcher. My experience played a significant role in how my thinking was formed and shaped.

I was born in Lansdowne, a suburb in the Western Cape of South Africa. When I was 6 years old my family moved to Surrey Estate, a place where I spent most of my early and teenage years. Surrey Estate can be described as a middle-class suburb, which was in stark contrast to the maisonettes in many township areas across the Cape Flats.

My father was clearly an authoritarian figure and my mother always more understanding and compassionate. Over the years my father stressed the importance of education, but also emphasised that we need to think for ourselves. He was a strong proponent of critical thinking as he always intimated that the apartheid system wanted to keep the oppressed populations passive and docile. He strongly believed that schooling must prepare children for the world of work, but moreover it was meant to teach one to think critically, yet he cautioned us against just accepting what we learned at school without questioning. My father trained my brother, four sisters and me to do tailoring, which he said could help us stimulate creativity and give us an extra opportunity if we could not find work. Many of the ideas about being self-sufficient and thinking critically were inculcated in me from an early age.

Although we came from a struggling working-class background, my siblings and I successfully completed matric (Grade 12). My elder brother became a teacher, my eldest sister a nurse and later chief psychiatric nurse, and my other sisters found work in administration either in government or in the private sector.

I was in Grade 12 in 1985, at Athlone High School, when the protracted school boycotts in apartheid South Africa were launched. The boycotts resulted in many school learners, especially matriculants (Grade 12 learners), not to writing their final examinations. I managed to complete matric on my own in 1986 through distance education. In 1988 I enrolled at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) to study for a diploma in teaching. I majored in History, Psychology and Education. In 2002 I completed an Honours degree in Psychology, also at UWC.

My first teaching experience was from 1992 to 1994 at Fred Norman Senior Secondary School, in Johannesburg, during which time I taught English and History to Grade 8 (Standard 6) learners. The principal of the school was domineering and believed firmly in the discipline of learners and teachers and adherence to the school syllabus. The school, however, had an excellent reputation for achieving a 90 to 100% pass rate for matriculants for many years, which the principal attributed to the strict discipline at school.

My teaching method during those years was mostly 'teacher talks and learners listen'. I seldom attempted to deviate from that method of teaching and did my best to complete the syllabus. Although I was excited to be in a classroom, my teaching method engendered boredom and listlessness amongst learners. In reflecting on that time, I have to admit that my attempts as a teacher to create and stimulate interactive and lively lessons most likely contributed to the boredom and lack of interest amongst my learners, which in turn even affected me as a teacher.

My first teaching experience, nevertheless, opened my eyes to the rigid control exercised by the South African education department at that time and the stress on following a fixed curriculum. My teaching method was, therefore, mostly concerned with imparting the information in books and focused on how well learners could recall content. The exam questions were also set with the single idea that I had to test how well the learners could recollect what they had learned in the classroom.



What I observe today at school in terms of implementing the curriculum and management of schools is not much different in comparison to what I experienced when I started my teaching career twenty years ago.

#### **1.4 Context of the school where the study was undertaken**

The school within which the research took place is a primary school under the WCED in the southern suburbs of Cape Town (CT). The school is 75 years old this year, but the physical building is 150 years old and, according to the principal, was used initially as a municipal building.

At this school there are eleven classrooms of different sizes. The smaller classrooms can accommodate a maximum of twenty five learners and bigger ones thirty. In all the classes including mine, the number of learners exceeds thirty five, which creates overcrowding and limits the movement of teachers if she wants to walk around to check if learners are doing work in their exercise books. In all the classrooms there is one electric plug situated at the back. Whenever, any teaching aid is used teachers have to request the electric lead wire from the caretaker and return it after one or two periods. De Waal (2004:36) found that class sizes that vary between 35 and 48 learners leads to:

..class management problems as well as weaker learners not getting sufficient attention in terms of remedial work and academic backlogs and,

Lack of appropriate learning support materials further frustrates teachers as well as learners. This also hinders effective classroom practice insofar as it restricts the learner's visual perspectives as well as self-learning abilities.

This primary school has a school population of 300 learners, which is small in comparison to schools in the immediate vicinity which have enrolments of over 500. It has one computer room that is unused because the internet has been disconnected; it does not have a Science laboratory and there are no teaching aids in the classrooms except for the chalk board.

The majority of learners who attend the school come from the surrounding areas, while some live more than 30 kilometres away. The learners are mostly Afrikaans speaking,

although the school has no Afrikaans Home Language classes. Most of the learners are South Africans, so-called coloured people who speak Afrikaans, about a third are Xhosa speaking, and a small percentage of learners come from Zimbabwe, Malawi or Congo-Brazzaville, who speak their mother tongue and English.

The majority of learners come from the poorer communities in the surrounding areas. The school fees are low in comparison to neighbouring schools, but only a third of learners pay school fees. The school has a daily feeding scheme and after-care facilities. About a third of the learners come to school with mini-bus taxis or are dropped and collected by their parents.

The teachers have to teach all the subjects and there are no administrative periods for the teachers to catch their breath or to consolidate work done. School enrolment declined up to 2013, but enrolments have recently started to increase primarily because the school has become known for accommodating learners who could not be enrolled at nearby schools and for accepting foreign learners migrating from countries across Africa. From 2013 the school was gradually refurbished on the outside, which was made possible with the financial aid of the community and certain businesses. Since 2014 the school's image has been changing and enrolment is steadily rising.

According to some teachers at the school where I undertook this research, not much has changed since the end of apartheid. Teachers are expected to follow the curriculum strictly. There is always the worry amongst teachers that they need to complete the work for each subject outlined in the curriculum. The main medium of instruction is English, although many learners' home language is Afrikaans. The use of English as the main medium of instruction can create numerous problems in classrooms for both teachers and learners. Makoe and Mckinney (2014:658) argue that the "disjuncture between post-apartheid language in education policy and its implementation" must not be seen as gap, but as a "continuation of apartheid, of language ideologies and classroom practices".

At this school teachers generally teach using the transmission method, 'teachers talk and learners listen'. It was uncommon for all teachers to hear that teaching can be a collaborative approach and also that knowledge can be constructed with learners and is not

something that must simply be transmitted and assimilated. I had informal discussions with a few teachers to find out if they know anything about action research. The teachers had no idea what action research entailed, and after I explained that it is a practical way of improving one's practice and that one can develop one's own theories of knowledge, they seemed surprised.

### **1.5 Motivation for the research**

My motivation to undertake research in education stemmed primarily from my own experience in teaching History in both the primary and secondary schools. Learners showed little interest in the content in History textbooks; they could not relate to any of the content in any meaningful way and found the subject monotonous. During some lessons, however, I found that learners responded with more enthusiasm when I remodelled the History lessons. These lessons focused less on memorisation and recalling, and focused more on asking deep questions on interpreting the History text. Much less eagerness was evident when History lessons revolved around memorisation and choosing the 'right answers'. I realised that I was to blame for my learners' apathy and hence I started searching for a method that could assist me in changing my out-dated approach to teaching.

My initial research to find alternative ways to the transmission mode of teaching History and making the subject more relevant and interesting to my learners led me to search for solutions from many diverse sources. I was amazed to find so many articles in books, research articles, journals and theses on the topic of developing critical thinking skills. These sources inspired me tremendously in my research and provided a deeper insight into how influential schools can be in the lives of young people.

Savich (2009:1), in his study on the development of critical thinking, argues that apathy and boredom in History resulted from the way the subject is taught. Savich's study demonstrated many methods that could be used to alter my technical way of teaching. I had also over time focused too much on providing content and left little room for learners' active participation in lessons. In *What is History?* (NECC, 1987) a radically different approach is provided that teachers can use to make History much more meaningful and interesting for both teacher and learners. It is an approach that allows for a collaborative mode of teaching and learning. Both Savich's study and *What is History?* discuss methods to

make the study of History a method of developing critical thinking skills. In this action research study I made use of some of the methods employed by Savich to improve my teaching of History.

I am further motivated by research that considers schools as institutions where learners' cognitive skills can be fostered through teaching-for-thinking in contrast to more passive approaches (Hester, 1994:6). In my classroom the learners' age, range from 10 to 12 years. Piaget (cited in Hester, 1994) found that learners in this age group are entering the concrete stage of cognitive development. This is a stage where logical thinking starts to develop as well as an ability to "apply certain definite rational processes to the solutions of problems and making decisions" (Hester, 1994: 109). It was also interesting to find that children are natural thinkers and that within an educational setting conscious instruction and commitment to the "teaching of thinking is crucial", as this can develop the skills of problem solving and critical thinking (Hester, 1994:79). In Chapter Two I will expand on these stages in greater detail and relate them to my research questions.

A further point that motivated me was that interpretations of history, particularly during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have been used to promote and advance the political ideologies of Eastern European and Western states at the expense of critical and distanced thinking for the subject (Wilschut, 2010:693). My study aims to equip learners with the skills to interpret history from their perspective and not always from the perspectives of historians. The idea to equip learners in my classroom emanated from the readings of a number of articles mentioned in this thesis and particularly from the activities in *What is History?* (1987:1).

### **1.6 Problem statement and limitation of study**

It appears that teaching and learning in schools continue to revolve merely around the transmission of knowledge, which is not the purpose of schools, according Hester (1994:6). Hester (ibid.) further argues that a 'learningful' school is a place where teachers and students must find meaning in their "intermingling" experiences, a task which is both creative and self-generative. A much later study by Msila (2011:1) argues that the current post-apartheid system of education in South Africa requires students to be critical so that they can become critical democratic citizens.

Learners in my classroom are unable to think critically about the History content and are more preoccupied with learning 'facts' and memorisation of content. The study of History is more than the collection of facts, as explained in *What is History?* (1987:1). The acquisition of critical thinking skills not only benefits young learners in schools and students at university, but will also help when they leave school and enter the world of work or perhaps in confronting problems in daily life (Flores, Matkin, Burbach, Quinn & Harding, 2012:212).

The acquisition of critical thinking skills must also take place from an early age so that children might become more fair-minded and innovative thinkers in their later life. Failure to inculcate critical thinking early on can lead children to passively accept authority figures and symbols, producing adults who are highly susceptible to manipulation (Hester, 1994:6).

The change in 'teaching-for-thinking' as opposed to 'teaching-for-marks' has implications for teachers as well. Teachers have to be willing to critique their own teaching practices, question their own beliefs about teaching, and ask "crucial questions about nature of knowledge, learning and the human mind" (Paul, Martin, Vetrano & Kreklau, 1989:41). Schools, I believe, are therefore important institutions where the teaching of critical thinking can be developed.

The specific research objectives for this mini-thesis are therefore:

- To develop the critical thinking skills of learners in History; and
- To improve my classroom teaching practice to make it more participatory.

### **1.6.1 Limitations of the study**

This mini-thesis is confined to the classroom and the school I am teaching. The techniques that were used to collect and analyse data were applied within a particular time period with limited resources. Despite these limitations, I agree with Elliot (1996:6) that when a study is conducted at one school or city, involves interviews or questionnaires are used to gather data, and can be completed within a limited time frame or with limited resources, then such a project has value.

### **1.6.2 Statement of Purpose**

The focus of the present study is to develop the critical thinking skills of Grade 6 History learners. The study was conducted at a primary school at which I am a teacher. An appropriate paradigm for this study is a qualitative one, because it is deductive in its approach to human understanding (Johnson & Christensen, 2004: 31-32). Chapter Three elaborates further on this approach as well as the methods of collecting and analysing data.

In many schools and universities the transmission mode of teaching is the dominant or preferred mode of teaching (Waghid, 2006:315). In my experience many principals and school district officials are overly concerned with the curriculum that must be followed and completed. They argue that a certain amount of work must be completed within a certain period. Many teachers, including myself, feel obliged to follow the curriculum, which leaves little room for creativity in classrooms. There is then also little time for 'deliberations' in classrooms, a term used in Waghid's (2006:315) research on the usefulness of deliberation in classrooms.

The instructions by many subject advisers and the concern among many teachers about completing the curriculum, in my opinion, causes teachers to adopt the transmission mode of teaching, because it helps to complete the prescribed school work. I believe that such stringent control over schools maintains the status quo regarding the way that schools functioned in the past and at present.

### **1.7 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework for this study**

The theories on, and approaches to, the concept of *critical thinking skills* provide the theoretical framework of this empirical study.

This project is guided by the theory and practice of action research. Marshall and Rossman (2011:7) explained that a "conceptual framework entails how a person's study, a specific setting or individuals identified as participants fits into a larger phenomenon". My thesis aims to answer a question that is part of a problem found not only in schools but universities as well (Flores, Matkin, Burbach, Quinn & Harding, 2012:212). Also, a study should link questions specific to one's study to larger theoretical constructs or to important policy imperatives. My research question can be linked to the aims of the teaching of History in the intermediary phase of school, Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement

Grades 4-6, Social Science, CAPS document (2011:11). This CAPS document outlines outcomes that can be considered critical thinking skills, particularly for History in the intermediary phase of schools.

The conceptual framework provides a “lens and perspective” with which to help a researcher understand and “explain the specific facet of reality that you are investigating” (Du Toit, cited in Maree & Westhuizen, 2009:17). A suitable paradigm for this thesis is therefore a qualitative one. Within a qualitative framework a number of aspects that deal with understanding people in their respective environments can be researched.

The factors that relate directly to the focus of this paper are the culture of the school, and the social and economic circumstances of the parents and learners in my classroom.

This study intends to use critical or emancipatory action research because of its multiple aims. The operational use of the concept ‘critical action research’ intended by some researchers implies emancipating people from certain habits, customs, illusions and coercion that may shape as well as constrain social and educational practice. In addition, critical action research aims at improving outcomes, improving the self-understanding of practitioners as well as arriving at a critique of their social or educational work and work settings (Reason & Bradbury, 2001:92).

### **1.8 Research Design and methodology**

The research design and method for this study is action research. I will elaborate on the reasons for choosing action research in Chapter Three of this thesis. McNiff and Whitehead (2005:3) explain that action research allows one to:

- do your own research and reflect on it;
- improve on one’s teaching practice through the cycles of reflection;
- work in collaboration with learners to construct knowledge; and
- develop one’s own or new theories of knowledge.

In terms of the three research paradigms, quantitative, qualitative and qualitative-quantitative, the perspective most suited to this type of study is the qualitative one. Denzin and Lincoln (2000:2) argue that not only is “qualitative research a field of inquiry in its own

right, crosses multiple disciplines, fields and subject matters”, but many approaches or methods such as case studies, politics and ethics, participatory inquiries and interviewing are just some of the methods that fall into this category. In the research methodology chapter I provide more clarification on why I chose a qualitative study and not a quantitative one.

This study can be described as empirical, because it attempts to answer a problem found amongst many learners who are incapable or perhaps unsure about how to think logically or reason about their school work and daily decisions outside school. This action research is an attempt to address the problems many learners face in the classroom and the role a teacher plays can be effective in bringing about a change in how learners reason and think. Mouton (2001:52) argues that only through action or active interventions are we able to address real-world problems, which is consistent with the ontological underpinnings of action research.

### **1.9 Selection of Participants**

The participants for this study are my class of 37 learners. Ethically, learners have the right not to participate in any research. My research, however, is not intrusive and individual learners will not be studied. The research will involve mostly group work and the learners’ responds to questions. The focus of the research is primarily on how I can improve my teaching practice and how I can empower my learners with critical thinking skills.

A few learners in my class will be asked to monitor my actions and record them in a note book. The monitoring will also be done by me and a teacher who will act as the triangulator in the research. McNiff and Whitehead (2005:62-63) suggest that the researcher is allowed to decide how much he or she wishes to make monitoring a collaborative project. The decision to involve at least three learners in my class to act as monitors and scribes is informed by the advice given by McNiff and Whitehead (2005).

### **1.10 Method of data collection and analysis**

Within a qualitative paradigm the researcher is the primary instrument to collect data and has a number of methods at his or her disposal to do so (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:32; McNiff & Whitehead, 2005:65-66). Focus groups, in-depth interviews, participant



observation, field notes and open-ended questions can be employed to make the study more trustworthy. This study will make use of written sources such as field notes, lesson plans, diary entries and questionnaires to collect data. Field notes will be taken by the triangulator, learners and me. A total of six lessons will be drawn up to ascertain how learners have acquired the skills of critical thinking. The gathering and interpretation of data for this thesis will therefore include observations of my practice, field notes, triangulation and questionnaires.

### **1.11 Ethical considerations**

Ethics are important in conducting research and the rules by which to conduct it protect both the researcher and participants, according to Johnson and Christensen (2004:93). These researchers describe three basic approaches people can take to resolve ethical issues; deontology, ethical scepticism and utilitarianism. This mini-thesis will employ the utilitarian approach, because it takes into consideration the benefits for the individual research participants and the larger benefit that may arise from the study. Johnson and Christensen (2004) further argue that if the benefits outweigh the cost, then the study must be considered ethically acceptable.

This study will also follow the ethical guidelines for research with humans such as: informed consent by participants, freedom to withdraw, protection from physical and mental discomfort, confidentiality or anonymity, and protection of the data. My thesis will involve minors and consent will be obtained from their parents or guardians (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:101-102).

### **1.12 Distribution of chapters**

The distribution of chapters is outlined below.

In this, my first chapter, I have tried to locate what I would regard as the problem in my teaching, namely a lack of criticality in the History classroom. I also described my own historical and schooling background, which I felt impacted on the way I teach and my worldview. This includes aspects such as my ideas that crystallised the purpose of the research. The other aspects of this first chapter include a background to the study, context of the school where the research was undertaken, theoretical and conceptual framework,

research design and methodology, selection of participants, method of data collection and analysis. Towards the end of the chapter I pointed out the importance of ethics and ethical considerations, especially when we work with minors in our schools. This chapter also briefly outlines what the reader could expect in the other chapters that follow.

Chapter Two is the literature review that is relevant to my study. The literature deals with conceptualisations of critical thinking, History teaching in schools, research studies in critical thinking, and research on cognition and thinking in children.

Chapter Three defines action research from the perspectives of a variety of researchers. It includes the reasons why I decided to utilise action research, and describes the data-collection and data-analysis procedures of this method. Included in this chapter are the ethical considerations a researcher must be conscious of when conducting research. In addition, the literature will also examine the research methodology of action research as well as the advantages and disadvantages of this approach.

Chapter Four is a description of the lessons I undertook in my first action research cycle. This includes the meetings I had with the management of the school, discussions with my learners and with a teacher who volunteered to act as an external observer of my proposed study. The chapter includes the method involved in planning, acting, collecting and reflecting on my project.

Chapter Five is a description of the lessons I undertook in my second action research cycle. The second cycle is a continuation of the first cycle. This chapter also involves the four cycles of planning, acting, collecting and reflecting on my project. In this second cycle the lessons learned in cycle one are taken cognisance of in order to improve on what I had done. The idea here was to look critically at preparations made for cycle one, consideration of the problems I encountered and making the necessary changes in my teaching practice. Chapter Five ends with a reflection of the lessons I completed in cycle two.

Chapter Six is the conclusion and contains a discussion of the salient points of my study. I also discuss the results I achieved in Chapters Four and Five by relating them to the literature and, lastly, recommendations are made for further research at school level.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Introduction

In Chapter One I described my personal and educational background, the theoretical and empirical studies related to my research question as well as reflecting on my teaching practice. I tried to locate what I would regard as the problem in my teaching, namely a lack of criticality in the History classroom. Chapter Two outlines the search process for reviewing the literature and then scrutinising the theoretical and empirical studies in the field.

The theories and approaches that will be examined are indicated by the key terms of my research question: critical thinking skills, History teaching at school level, and cognition and thinking in children. The theories and conceptualisations of critical thinking are discussed from the perspectives of recent and past scholars. The search to find answers for my research question led to me reviewing the literature on the purpose of schools and education over the past two or three decades. Although it is advisable to include literature preferably not older than 10 years to make research studies carry more weight (Glatthorn, 1998:31), my research covers literature that was produced a few decades ago because there is a need, I think, to understand how the transmission mode adopted today became the dominant mode of teaching (Waghid, 2006:315).

It is noteworthy that the bulk of the literature on critical thinking in History teaching includes studies that were undertaken by Western countries, with only a few from Asian countries and the least from South Africa. The South African studies provided greater specific insight into the context of my study. One such South African study was undertaken by van Niekerk, Ankiewicz and de Swardt (2010:191-215).

This chapter proceeds by first reviewing the historical background of the concept of critical thinking skills. It then examines theories of and approaches to the concept, defines critical and creative thinking, which includes research on cognition and learning amongst children. The chapter then examines postmodern and feminist theorists' critiques of critical thinking action and finally concludes with a conclusion.

## **2.2 Brief Historical Background on the idea of Critical Thinking**

In my preliminary research I discovered that critical thinking is not a recent mode of inquiry, but has been around for over 2500 years and practised by many famous philosophers and thinkers not only in our distant past but throughout the centuries to this day. Also, the roots of the development of critical thinking can be traced back to Plato's Academy, regarded as the model from which modern Western universities ultimately rose (Meyers, 1986:1).

The term 'critical thinking' as it is used today was not in vogue thousands of years ago or even just a few decades ago (Meyers, 1986:3). Meyers goes on to point out that in Western culture critical thinking was traditionally tied to the discipline of logic, which often provided the philosophical framework for a complete university or college curriculum. Also, Meyers notes that logic (e.g. Aristotle's works on logic) and the principles of rhetoric were the essential elements of the professional education of clergymen, teachers, doctors or lawyers until a few centuries ago.

In the past critical thinking was regarded as a subject that must be taught on its own and not in relation to another subject or developed through a study of subjects. Students had to master the concept and then apply its principles to different subjects (Meyers, 1986:4). Meyers (1986) states that the acquisition of critical thinking skills as a discipline on its own could not be used as a generic method for analysis in all disciplines. His argument is corroborated by more recent researchers on critical thinking who argue for the teaching of the concept through a subject and not in isolation (McPeck, 1990; Warren, Memory & Bolinger, 2004 cited in Savich, 2009).

Before I embarked on an exploration of critical thinking I was also under the impression that it is a concept that could be taught on its own and afterwards be applied to analyse any discipline or used as a problem-solving skill. My search through various studies on critical thinking demonstrated that the concept is developed better through subjects and not on its own in isolation.

## **2.3 Definitions and Approaches to understanding Critical Thinking Skills**

Critical thinking is not easy to define, nor is it even straightforward to conceptualise, because so many leading scholars provide their own definitions of the concept (Atabaki,

Kestiaray & Yarmohammadian, 2015:94). Critical thinking is also not one type of thinking amongst many, but is an “umbrella term that refers to the quality of thinking, whatever the context or activity” (Bailin and Siegel, quoted in Blake, Smeyers, Smith & Standish, 2003:188). The concept ‘critical thinking skills’ must thus be unpacked to clarify its meaning in more detail.

Many researchers first define ‘thinking’ either as a term on its own or its meaning in education, before discussing the term ‘critical thinking’. McPeck (1990:19-20) argues that thinking is always about something; it is not possible to think about nothing, not even the most mundane of activities; it is naturally tied to subject matter, irrespective of what the subject may be about. Atabaki et al. (2015:93) regard thinking as the most necessary aspect of human beings and argue that the goal of an education system is to teach people to think independently and effectively.

The term ‘critical’ is also expounded and different authors provide different explanations of the specific meaning of the term. Paul, Binker, Martin, Vetrano and Kreklau (1998:2) argue that the ‘critical’ dimension highlights or recognises the “intellectual autonomy of the critical thinker”. Paul et al. (1989), emphasise that a critical person is someone who will not accept conclusions uncritically and will evaluate reasons – distinguishing good ones from poor ones – and then makes decisions on what to believe. The ability to evaluate good from poor reasons is regarded as a skill that must be acquired.

The term ‘skill’ in critical thinking refers to weighing up something in terms of certain criteria, which entails evaluating the reasons for accepting beliefs and considering the evidence, even if that evidence goes against our assumptions or perspectives for believing something (Bailin & Siegel cited Blake, Smeyers, Smith & Standish 2003:183). The term skill is further described as the “skill of self-generative learning”, which implies that for learners to survive in a world of ever-changing social, political and economic complexities and “accelerating explosions of knowledge”, the development of active, autonomous, self-generative learners becomes ever more imperative (McCollum quoted in Hester, 1994:116).

The term critical thinking skill, one could argue, is better conceptualised as a list of interconnected terms or ideas that are multi-stranded and complex (Leicester, 2010:2). In Leicester's conceptualisation, terms such as problem solving, decision making and inquiry refer to instances in which critical thinking is taking place. Leicester distinguishes critical thinking from mental operations and argues that its use must be acquired through practice or learned. The ideas associated with critical thinking are rationality, reason, analysis, justification, logic, evidence, etc. (Leicester, 2010:23).

Leicester's definition also covers the way that teachers can change or transform from being 'normal' teachers to 'reflective practitioners' (Leicester, 2010:6), when they start to question or critically reflect on their teaching practice, both before, during and after teaching. The term 'reflective practitioner' is also used in action research.

Another definition of critical thinking is provided by Paul, Binker, Martin, Vetrano and Krekla (1989:2). These researchers offer a holistic definition and show how the concept can be used in education and teaching. Paul et al. (1989:2) argue that for thinking to be critical does not mean to be negative or to find fault, but to evaluate reasons and bring thought and action into line with one's own evaluations and with what we consider to be true. They argue that critical thinking does not stop there and identify a person with certain dispositions. Paul et al refers to people who can think critically as:

The ideal critical thinker could be roughly expressed in the phrase 'reasonable person'. ...the term 'critical' is intended to highlight the intellectual autonomy of the critical thinker. That is, as a critical thinker, I do not accept conclusions uncritically. I evaluate or critique reasons".

The explanation of a critical thinker is also compared to an uncritical thinker. Paul et al, describes the uncritical person as someone who does not reflect or evaluate reasons for a specific set of beliefs. It is further argued that uncritical people simply agree or disagree or even accept or reject conclusions without understanding them.

The important aspect of the holistic argument for critical thinking is that a person must, when evaluating reasons, be fair minded and open to other perspectives. The critical person must be able to evaluate even their own assumptions or perspectives when considering evidence by others who disagree with you. Also, a critical person must be able to reconcile

different points of view by considering the big picture and not consider points in isolation (Paul et al., 1989:4-5). When a person is prepared to think in this way, they are considered fair-minded and as having a strong sense of reasoning.

I have thus far attempted to outline the concept 'critical thinking' from the perspectives of numerous theorists without trying to compare their descriptions of the concept in the same paragraph. I chose to discuss theories of critical thinking in isolation from each other because there are so many descriptions of the concept that overlap and different authors emphasises different aspects of it. Belluigi (2009:699) clarifies my understanding by saying that:

Attempts to define the broad concepts of critical thinking and creative thinking have spawned diverse descriptions.

In an article by Harding et al, (2012:214) critical thinking is similarly described as complex and that there are many aspects of the concept that go beyond the discriminating of facts.

It is generally believed amongst teachers that critical thinking and creative thinking are two distinct concepts and used for divergent purposes in education.

#### **2.4 Critical and Creative Thinking**

The concepts creative and critical thinking are generally perceived as distinct, particularly in teaching and their definitions have been equally diverse (Belluigi, 2009:700). Belluigi demonstrates that there really are no differences between creative and critical thinking, except in the terminology used to define each term. Facioni cited in Belluigi, (2009:700) refers to critical thinking as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation and self-regulation. Biggs (quoted in Belluigi, year:page) defines creativity as abstract learning outcomes, which involve hypothesising, synthesising, reflection and generating novel ideas and problem solving.

On closer reflection, the terms used for both creative and critical thinking are interchangeable and both incorporate convergent and divergent thinking. In a related study the concepts of creativity and critical thinking are not considered divergent, although different terms are used to define each term. Fiedler and Weier (2013:58-59) define creative thinking as "brainstorming, creating new and worthwhile ideas, elaborating, refining,

analysing, and evaluating”, and thinking critically involves “reasoning, analysing viewing alternative perspectives and problem solving”.

Moeller et al. (2013:56-60) taught fourth and fifth grade learners to think creatively and critically through exposure to pictures. Meoller et al found that even the least responsive learners were able to think creatively and critically. The positive result of their study was achieved because learners were taken through a series of questions that guided them in their thinking. The significance of this study for my research question is that it shows that learners even in the fourth or fifth year of schooling can be guided to think creatively and critically.

There is really no difference between critical and creative thinking. The terms are interchangeable and used to evoke particular responses depending on a subject or phenomenon we are teaching in a classroom. Both terms involve thinking and the levels or quality of responses from learners depends on their cognitive development stages (Hester, 1994:109) Hester discussed Piaget’s levels of cognitive development in children from the elementary level of thinking to the concrete level, where students are ready to apply their thinking to actual concrete situations or problems. The next section will deal with History teaching and curriculum aims according to CAPS and the cognitive development of learners in the intermediary phase (Grades 4, 5 and 6) of school.

## **2.5 School Curriculum, History Teaching and Grade Six learners**

The CAPS document (Department of Basic Education, 2011) outlines specific educational aims for the teaching of History in the intermediary phase (Grade 4-6). A study that examined the South African curriculum states that the current system of education in South Africa requires learners to be critical thinkers (Msila, 2011:1-12). Learners who did participate in this action research project are in Grade 6, at an age characterised by concrete thinking. Many research studies in developing critical thinking skills in History have also been undertaken with learners at this stage of critical thought (Paul, Binker, Martin, Vetrano & Kreklau, 1989).

The CAPS curriculum for Social Science in the Intermediary Phase (Department of Basic Education, 2011:10-12) outlines specific aims for History , which are to promote “active and



critical learning” that involves “encouraging an active and critical approach to learning, rather than rote and uncritical learning of given truth” (2011:4). The learner envisaged should be able to “identify and solve problems, work effectively as individuals or in a group and collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information” (2012:5). These terms are usually associated with critical thinking or instances in which critical thinking can occur (Bailin and Siegel cited in Blake et al, 2003:188).

A claim is made that social science studies classrooms can and should be the place where students learn critical thinking skills (Viator, 2012:198-200). Viator argued that students are too often asked to focus on discrete facts on which they can be tested, and suggests that Grade 6 learners can be taught critical thinking skills by allowing them to discuss ideas and essential questions to provide a framework to study a particular aspect in History.

I mentioned in the introduction to Chapter One that learners found History lessons monotonous and simply regurgitated content that was memorised. Research studies showed that the apathy of learners towards History, misconceptions about the subject, and teachers’ tendency to use textbooks are some of the reasons that contribute to making the subject merely a passive study of the past (Viator,2012:198). In my classroom I mostly used the History textbook and lectured to learners about the content that had to be covered. Tests given to learners showed me how well they have memorised the content. Viator (2012) provides methods for teachers to counter the misconceptions that learners have about History by helping them to understand that History is complex and multifaceted, and that a number of sources need to be consulted in an attempt to understand what happened in the past.

When History is taught as the mere transmission of knowledge and accepted uncritically by learners, we cannot expect to transform society from being an unequal to equal one (Mkandawire & Walubita, 2015:151). Mkandawire & Walubita (2015: 151) further explain that because free primary education was implemented in Malawi and Zambia, the result was massive overcrowding and a drop in the quality of education. We also have free education implemented here and there are numerous studies to indicate that the quality of South African education has declined. In my classroom, for instance, a number of learners are weak in reading and writing and struggle to complete any activity given to them.

The decline in quality of education is not the only problem; studies indicate that learners have certain perceptions of History. These perceptions argued by Austin and Thompson (2014:29-33) can be that children (ages 6-12) understand History as events that happened in the past and written by historian at the time it happened. Furthermore, children had no idea that historians today can search for evidence about the past to write about events in History. The idea that children can perceive of history as events that happened in the past can be challenging for me and, I suppose any teacher that wants to teach critical thinking skills.

In *What is History?* (1987) a new approach to teach History is provided. The book provides an alternative mode of teaching History to the transmission mode. The book, even in its short introduction, shifts the narration of History from those in authority to ordinary men and women, who, it argues, must construct their own History. Furthermore, the emphasis is placed on the development of historical inquiry by students.

## **2.6 Criticism of Critical Thinking**

Many advocates of critical thinking have also contributed to the criticisms against it. Such criticism revolved around the use of the term itself, inclusion of it by curriculum administrators, and the theory and practice of critical thinking.

Perhaps the first notable criticism against critical thinking is that researchers have ascribed multiple meanings to the term. Curry (1999:2) argues that psychologist and philosophers emphasise the 'thinking' part of the term with little attention to the 'critical' part. Those in the field of critical literacy emphasise the 'critical' part and neglect the 'thinking' part (Curry 1999:2). Viator (2012:198) is one author that expands considerably on the advantages of adopting a critical literacy position in critical thinking.

A further point of criticism on critical thinking is that the term started to be utilised by education standard setters, textbook publishers and test markers, because concerns were raised about preparing students for the market place (Curry, 1999:7). Also, terms such as problem-solving strategies and metacognition were also confused with critical thinking skills. Problem-solving is utilised more in science, mathematics and engineering, and

metacognition refers to levels of thinking.

Other criticisms of the critical thinking emanate primarily from postmodern and feminist theories. The criticism in this sense is primarily of the theory and practice of critical thinking as well as the foundational underpinnings of the concept (Bailin & Siegel cited in Blake et al, 2003:190).

According to Bailin and Siegel, postmodern and feminist theories argue that critical thinking does the following:

favours the values and practices of the dominant groups in society and devalues those of groups traditionally lacking in power. ...it privileges rational, linear thought over intuition; it is aggressive and confrontational rather than collegial and collaborative, that it downplays emotions.

This type of criticism is regarded as an attack on the theory and practice of critical thinking (Bailin & Siegel, cited in Blake et al). The counter criticism to postmodern and Feminists arguments is that many critical thinkers do acknowledge a role for emotions and enjoins critical thinkers to be sensitive to the feelings of others and to understand other viewpoints. Proponents of critical thinking also argue that there is nothing in critical thinking theory to suggest that it must be practiced in a confrontational manner and can be practiced in a collegial and collaborative manner.

The argument that critical thinking favours the dominant groups in society and neglects those lacking in power is a challenge on the foundation of the concept. Proponents of critical thinking argue that the concept is based on principles and critical criteria. The principles are not simply the products of particular groups but are rooted in traditions of inquiry and linked to purposes. In terms of critical criteria, proponents argue that criteria are regularly modified because of criticism. In more simple terms, critical criteria of critical thinking are open to severe scrutiny and change.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

There is no single definition of critical thinking. Researchers on critical thinking provide their own definitions of the concept, but all agree on the normativity of the concept (Bailin & Siegel, cited in Blake et al., 2003:182). In more simple terms, critical thinking means to question, not to accept without evidence, and look at the reasons why statements are made.

Atabaki et al. (2015:94) conducted research to find out if critical thinking can be classified in a conceptual framework. Atabaki et al's understanding of critical thinking was informed by numerous and renowned theorists of the concept (Neistani, 2011; Ennis, 1985; McPeck, 1981; and Paul, 1993). Moreover, Atabaki et al has included the pioneering works of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Their research findings show critical thinking concept can be investigated in fields of psychology and philosophy.

While philosophers focus on the nature and quality of critical thinking, psychologist focus on cognitive process and components used to investigate practical problems. This differentiation highlights the distinction between attitude and skill. Skill therefore refers to analysis, reasoning, inference, and comparison, formulating a hypothesis, synthesis and creating new ideas, testing and reaching a comprehensive conclusion. Attitude, on the other hand, refers to searching for facts, curiosity, sceptical mentality, cognitive maturity, self-confidence, integration and open-mindedness.

My literature review also examined the term 'thinking' and the role schools play in the lives of young learners. Schools, it is argued, must provide the conditions or space for learners to develop their thinking capacities (Hester, 1994:6). Hester argues that since children are natural thinkers, it is imperative for teachers to develop the critical thinking skills from an early age. In relation to the arguments in favour of schools as institutions of thinking, Viator (2012: 200) argues that the space most conducive to the development of these thinking skills is the History classroom.

The terms critical and creative thinking were also examined, since there is much confusion about them amongst teachers (Belluigi, 2009:700). Research showed that these two terms are interchangeable and that the decision to use either critical or creative thinking depended on the phenomenon being investigated.

Overall, my intention in the literature review was to demonstrate that critical thinking is conceptualised differently by numerous authors, but that it pivots around the same themes or conceptions. Also, critical thinking is an umbrella term for thinking, whatever the context, and that the terms most commonly associated with it are the 'set of skills' outlined by

Atabati (2015:98). Some of these terms are also mentioned in the CAPS document for Social Science in the intermediary phase of schools.

The critical thinking skills I am interested in developing in my Grade Six History learners are those outlined by Atabati (2015). Learners must develop skills to analyse, reason, infer, compare, formulate hypotheses, create new ideas and comprehend; furthermore, they must develop the appropriate attitude to search for facts, be curious, doubtful, develop cognitive maturity, become self-confident, integrate concepts and be open-minded. The next chapter addresses my method to develop these skills and attitudes in my History classroom.

In my elaboration of critical and creative thinking I need to emphasize that there is a distinct difference between critical thinking and thinking. Thinking is thinking about something (McPeck, 1990:19-20) and does not necessarily imply thinking critically about whatever one is thinking. For instance, a person may be thinking about what course to take at a university and making a decision about what is best at the time of making that decision. The decision does not have to be based on any guidance and based purely on whims or wishes. Critical thinking is different in a number of ways. When a person is critically thinking about something, you have to ask yourself a number of questions; is there evidence to corroborate what I have read or heard, if evidence is presented, you have to ask from what source was the evidence obtained or how strong the reasons are given by someone for making a statement or believing something. The idea to learn critical thinking is also to solve problems in difficult situations and to have effective communication with others. Moreover, I believe, strongly that any education system, must produce people who are independent and able to think for themselves.

In the Chapter Three I discussed emancipatory action research as an alternative to the 'technicist' approach to research. I also explain why I chose this approach through which I conducted my research. My research incorporated two action research cycles, which I undertook at the school where I teach. These action research cycles, as I mentioned earlier, were attempts to stimulate critical thinking skills in my Grade 6 learners.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **ACTION RESEARCH**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In the previous two chapters I pointed out how my teaching practice contributed to 'docile' and an 'uncritical' culture of History teaching and learning in my classroom. As a teacher I was not inculcating critical thinking and a critical understanding of History amongst my Grade 6 learners. I began questioning the 'purely instrumental' way that I was teaching. In an attempt to understand what was happening in my classroom and in order to find ways to improve and possibly transform my teaching practice, I opted for an action research approach to change and improve my practice.

This chapter is a discussion of the methodology of action research. I provide a brief history of action research, define it, examine the modes in which it can be undertaken and provide my reasons for choosing emancipatory action research. I also discuss my data-collection and data-analysis procedures and finally I discuss the trustworthiness of my findings.

#### **3.2 Development of Action Research**

McIntosh (2010:32) argued that action research was originally conceived on the basis of the work of Kurt Lewin, beginning in the 1940s, and the scientific outlining of general systems theory, which refers to how the world is organised and functions through a system of laws. Similarly, Lewin intended to do research through a planned and systematic approach in which everyone is an equal participant in bringing about social change. McIntosh (2010) contended that action research understood in this way gives it the potential to be the most scientific form of qualitative research. It seems that this explanation laid a solid foundation for the way that action research evolved in later years.

The idea of Lewin's action research model was later taken up in the late 1960s by Lawrence Stenhouse to improve educational practice. This is also pointed out by Cowan (1990:4):

[T]he beginning of a serious attempt to use action research in education was given momentum in England when Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) encouraged teachers to view themselves as researchers.

In 1975 Stenhouse specifically referred to teaching as a process of enlightenment, making the point that to enhance one's practice one would need to reflect on one's own teaching.

According to Stenhouse (1975:39):

the improvement of teaching is a process of development. I mean by the first, that it is not to be achieved by a change of heart but by the thoughtful refinement of professional skill; and second, that the refinement of professional skill is generally achieved by the gradual elimination of failings through the systematic study of one's own teaching

Stenhouse's idea of research where teachers become researchers and contribute to the development of the curriculum was then taken up further and given a more critical perspective by writers such as Elliott (1985), Adelman (1985), Hopkins (1985), Walker (1985), Carr and Kemmis (1986), Grundy (1987), Winter (1989), McKernan (2000) and McNiff and Whitehead (2005, 2006).

By the 1970s action research became more clearly defined as 'research by practitioners' (Kemmis, quoted in Reason & Bradbury, 2001:91), referring particularly to the work practitioners do as opposed to something done *on* or *to* them. Kemmis's view was influenced by the work of Habermas (1982), who argued that in a process of enlightenment, there can only be participants. Habermas's radical view suggests that knowledge must be discovered by oneself, no one else can discover it for us, and otherwise we are not enlightened on our own terms.

Carr and Kemmis (1986) furthermore used action research to develop a critique of educational research and methodologies for the purposes of locating the theory within social and educational research, and explored some of the problems and possibilities that could emerge through a variety of studies in schools and other settings.

Stringer (1999: xviii) argues that there are many authors who provide disparate histories of action research that also reveal the different routes towards interpret this method. The common theories that emerged from all these diverse interpretations show that action research is empirical and reflective; it refers to people as participants and not subjects, and

results in practical outcomes related to the work or the lives of participants. In addition, action research has much in common with a range of other traditions such as practitioner research, action inquiry and action science, and its intellectual roots lie in the critical theories of Moreno, Freire and Habermas (Stringer, 1999:xix).

The brief explanation above shows that action research has a long history and that it has evolved to become a leading method in educational and social research. I agree with Davids (2014: 07) that action research seems to have re-entered mainstream educational research since its appearance in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This can be seen in the recent works of le Grange (2012), who argues that action research remains a relevant approach for addressing local and societal problems. Recently action research inspired studies by Esau (2012), du Toit (2012) and Wolvaard and du Toit (2012), as reflected by Davids (2014:07), demonstrates that action research is greatly utilised in various educational contexts.

### **3.3 Definitions of action research?**

Action research is defined by a number of authors and is known by many other names (Burns, 2000; McIntosh, 2010; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 2003). O'Brien (1998:2) notes that action research is also known as "critical research, participatory research, collaborative inquiry, emancipatory research, action learning, and contextual action, which really are all variations of the same theme".

This section of my thesis will provide a number of definitions of action research, but with an emphasis on its emancipatory mode. Emancipation in this context refers to freedom from a belief that there is only one reality or one way of understanding content in books or that knowledge must be constructed only by a teacher.

Over the last two decades a number of definitions of action research have emerged. Morton-Cooper (quoted in McIntosh, 2001:32-33) regards action research not as a method of research but as an approach to studying human beings in an environment where everyone's ideas are shared. This method of research is seen as involving a critically reflective attitude.



Burns (2000:443) regards action research as ‘fact finding, practical problem-solving in a social situation with a view to improve the quality of action’ (2000:443). Burns argues that action research is opposed to the method of obtaining knowledge in a purely scientific way where findings are generalised. The author identifies four basic characteristics of action research: it is situational, collaborative, participatory and self-evaluative.

McNiff and Whitehead (2005:1) define action research as a ‘common-sense approach to personal and professional development that enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their work and to create their own theories of practice’.

The definitions provided by most proponents of action research, irrespective of their variety, show that it is not a haphazard form of enquiry but a systematic method that must be followed in order to investigate what one is doing (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005:1). My understanding of action research is that it is a practical method that any teacher who intends doing research on his or her teaching practice can follow. The cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting is a necessary part of this process so that it can benefit both teacher and learners. Action research can, however, turn into merely a technical exercise, and being involved in the action research process does necessarily mean that you are a critical researcher (Esau, 1994). Its potential for transformation depends on the way in which it is done, who is involved in the process, the type of questions which are asked and how this research is then able to change the micro and macro conditions in which practice occurs.

### **3.4 The Modes of Action Research**

There are basically three modes of action research, each with its own underpinning assumptions. The choice to adopt a particular mode also depends on the orientation of the researcher. My reason for choosing a particular mode is outlined under sub-heading 3.5 of this chapter.

Grundy (1987:10) identifies the modes of action research as the technical, practical and emancipatory. Holter and Schwartz-Barcott (1993:301) describe the modes as a technical collaborative approach, a mutually collaborative approach and an enhancement approach. McKernan (1991:16027) lists three types of action research; the scientific-technical view of

problem solving, practical-deliberative action research, and critical-emancipatory research. McCutcheon and Jurg (1990:145-147) discuss three perspectives of action research: a positive, interpretivist and critical science perspective.

Although the modes of action research are described using different terms, they differ in their underlying assumptions and not in its methodologies (Grundy 1982:363). This study will employ emancipatory action research because it aims to empower all participants to achieve more rational, just, democratic and fulfilling forms of education (Carr & Kemmis (1986:203). This type will suit my research question because I wish to instil skills that will empower them to think differently about their school work. The term 'empower' is defined as giving someone power to do something (Macmillan Student's Dictionary, 1996).

### **3.5 How does action research operate?**

Action research makes use of what can be called four phased cycles or spirals. The four phased stages consist of the following interrelated stages; planning, action, observation and reflection (Costello, 2003:3).

In the planning stage, one must have a general idea of what one wants to improve or change. Kemmis and Mc Taggart (1984:18) give the following advice to the potential researcher:

You do not have to begin with a 'problem'. All you need is a general idea that something might be improved. Your general idea might stem from ...the recognition that existing practice falls short of aspirations.

Thus the planning stage involves the teacher- researcher to form a general idea of what she wants to change. Also, this stage involves observing what is happening in one's classroom from a number of perspectives, which includes both the micro and macro contexts. One cannot therefore plan a project that is isolated from the socio-political set-up of a local context or even a country. In addition, one can ask an 'outsider' to assist in the planning and reflection of this research process. The 'outsider', can be a colleague who takes on the role as the triangulator, whose feedback helps the teacher-researcher to develop a clearer focus on the issue under investigation. It is important to understand that the triangulator is

regarded as participant in the research, seen in this way by both the researcher and

students.

During the planning stage the teacher-researcher must do a number of things in preparation to initiate her research. Negotiations must take place with students, principals and other staff at school, if the research will be conducted at a school, and with the triangulator. Moreover, a careful planning of the data collection methods and period over which the research will be conducted must be finalised. The preparation is important because a teacher-researcher has to be cognisant of the constraints (unexpected early closures and often unexpected interruptions of classes) in the school.

The acting stage is the second stage of planning. This stage is marked by a systematic execution of what was planned. The teacher-researcher should observe her actions while it is implemented. One must be prepared for unexpected events because plans do not always go according to plan (McNiff and Whitehead, 2005).

Observation is the third stage of the first research cycle. In this stage the teacher-researcher gathers data about her action. These actions are detailed recordings as personal field notes. It is also important to note that in this phase both the triangulator and learners must record their observations. A teacher-researcher can also make use of audio and video recordings which can capture people words, actions and expressions or body language of participants.

In the fourth stage one reflects about what one has done. In this stage data collected by the teacher-researcher is compared to the data collected by the triangulator and learners or focus groups in order to arrive at some understanding of what have transpired. In comparing data, aspects that a teacher-researcher was not aware of can be revealed. Discussions must also be held with the triangulator, learners and other stakeholders in order to enrich the level of analysis and ensure their involvement in the process as agents that contributed to the changes envisaged. The teacher-researcher will use this analysis of what transpired in the first cycle to plan the way forward for the next cycle.

### **3.6 Why I chose action research?**

The idea to do something about my teaching practice arose because my teaching method did not bring about any enduring change in the way my learners understood my History

lessons. My literature search led me to action research as a workable method to radically alter my teaching practice. A close study of action research showed that the method has numerous advantages for people intending to improve their practice in any profession and particularly in the teaching profession (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005:1).

Action research has become popular around the world in professional learning contexts, especially the teaching profession (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005:1). It is also argued that action research, particularly in education, can lead to professional development, improving curricula or problem solving in various work contexts (Atweh, Kemmis & Patricia, 1998:22). More importantly, McNiff and Whitehead (2005) argue that action research allows teachers to follow a system to investigate their work in order to bring about what they want it to be. The system or method of action research is simple enough to follow, yet it can bring about a change in the work of practitioners.

Action research is more than just a systematic research method. It has characteristics that are similar to all kinds of research (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 2003:9). However, action research places the researcher at the centre of the process of enquiry. This is significant because I am able to perceive myself as the researcher investigating my own learning and the learning of my students. The important aspect of being at the centre of research is that you have to see yourself in relation to others.

In my study I am the practitioner-led researcher and my students are participants in the research process. In order for a practitioner to see his practice in relation to others implies that one has to understand oneself on a deeper level but in relation to others (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 2003:13). In this understanding of action research two things are achieved. On a personal level it can improve one's own learning as well as fulfilling a social aim, which is the improvement of one's situation, specifically in the classroom.

It is often argued that action research is what teachers do anyway. Teachers act and reflect on their actions and amend their practices in the light of what they have learned (McNiff et al., 2003:13). Here I wish to agree with these authors and argue that action research is not merely about problem solving or finding ways to make learners understand the content of a

particular subject being taught – it is more than that. In my study, for example, action research not only allows me to see myself not as the only person with knowledge, but also that students can be co-learners whose input must be valued. When a teacher is prepared to work in partnership with learners, it creates a pedagogic situation in the classroom where knowledge is constructed by both parties.

In the context of my study the idea is not to instil an understanding of History as a study where dates are emphasised, or the focus is on an individual of a particular country, or the events in a particular war, but entails learning the skills to critically analyse historical texts and textbooks. If action research is adopted, I believe a change in the way not only History but other subjects can be taught is possible.

There is a marked difference between the transmission mode of teaching and action research in terms of what can be achieved in a classroom. McNiff et al. (2003:12-16) identify ten points that distinguish it from other kinds of research or teaching practice:

- It is practitioner based;
- It focuses on learning;
- It embodies good professional practice, and goes beyond it;
- It can lead to personal and social improvement;
- It is responsive to social situations;
- It demands higher-order questioning;
- It is intentionally political;
- The focus is on change, and the self is the locus of change;
- Practitioners accept responsibility for their own actions; and
- It emphasises the values base of practice.

With reference to the reasons for adopting this approach that I provided above, this research project will follow an emancipatory action research mode. Emancipation in this context implies that learning will be participatory, democratic in terms of developing practical ways of knowing, and bring together action and reflection, theory and practice in participation with others. Also, emancipation aims to find practical solutions to issues that are a concern for people and are more generally helpful towards the upliftment of people (Reason and Bradbury, 2001:1).

Emancipatory action research is, according to Grundy (1987:148), the mode which tries to be consistent with the principles of improvement, involvement and emancipation. Emancipatory action research as expounded by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000:231) has an explicit agenda which is as political as it is educational. Reason and Bradbury (2001:1) have the following to say about emancipatory action research:

Emancipatory action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in pursuit of worthwhile human purposes grounded in a participatory worldview ... It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally, the flourishing of persons and their communities.

Emancipatory action research is also described by Carr and Kemmis (1986:203) as an empowering process for participants in that it engages them in the struggle for more rational, just, democratic and fulfilling forms of education. Thus, high on the agenda of emancipatory action research is the issue of empowerment (taking control of one's life in an autonomous, responsible way). This type of action research approach seemed to suit me as I wished to empower the students whom I worked with, as well as myself. I also agree with Esau (2012) that emancipatory action research, though not a magical cure for all that ails education, can become a powerful tool supporting the transformation in our society in a very uncertain 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **3.7 Data-collection Procedures**

The data that were collected come from two sources, a teacher and an external observer. The idea was also to include two learners who could monitor my actions and those of my learners (participants). The two learners I asked to act as monitors were eager and excited to be part of research. They told me that they have never been part of any research or even ever asked by a teacher to act as monitors. McNiff and Whitehead (2005) explained that a teacher researcher can choose learners she feels has a good idea of what is intended and is able to perform the role as monitor in a classroom. Also, McNiff and Whitehead (2005:63) argued that a researcher has to be selective in gathering data because too much data can

“swamp rather than support”. In action research the focus is really on the researcher practitioner is and not so much on the participants.

The written methods used to collect data were diaries, field notes, focus groups, triangulation and questionnaires.

The data collection procedures were carried out according to the guidelines offered by McNiff and Whitehead (2005:61-68). The aspects of my practice that were observed were:

- How I introduced the lesson?
- The types of questions I asked?
- How I responded to answers given by learners?
- The language I used in my lessons?

As the teacher-researcher, I monitored and recorded different aspects of my practice in a diary. The observations were directed specifically at my students in the classroom. However, I also recorded many other observations that were not necessarily related to my research but seemed appropriate at the time. Again, the focus of my observations was on how the learners understood and comprehended what I intended for History lessons. I observed and recorded the following:

- How did students respond to my instructions?
- How did they respond to the questions on the worksheets?
- Do they show that they understand what they are expected to do?
- Do they show confidence in giving answers?

I was able to record actions in the classroom after I explained to them what the lesson was about. The observations by the external observer are recorded. (See Appendices E and F)

The teacher I spoke to was quite interested to be part of the research and had never heard of action research. He was therefore enthusiastic and more than willing to be part of the process.

The data-collection techniques also involved five questionnaires (See Appendices G, H, I, J and K) on extracts from *Day-By- Day, Social Sciences, Grade 6 (CAPS) learners Book* (Clacherty et al, 2011:118-119) and *What is History?* (NECC, 1987:31-32). The answers on these questionnaires provided by learners are discussed Chapters Four and Five.

The data-collection procedures thus involved field notes, personal diaries, questionnaires and extracts from the History CAPS textbook for Grade 6.

The role of the external observer was to observe my actions and those of my learners participating in the research. During my meeting with the external observer I explained what the project was about and asked him to record whatever he thought was important in the research process. Although I explained what to observe specifically, the external observer was also free to record the actions or responses he felt were important during the lessons.

The idea in the data-collection procedure was to make it a collaborative project as far as possible. McNiff and Whitehead (2005:62) emphasise the point that if another person is asked to monitor and record, then data sets can be compared and contrasted, which adds to the validity of the research.

### **3.8 Data-Analysis Procedures**

In the light of my research question it was decided that I would analyse and interpret the data myself. McNiff and Whitehead (2005:67) leave the option open to researchers to decide if they want to gather and interpret data on their own, or in collaboration with students, or with external observers. The primary reason for deciding to interpret the data myself was that I was clear on what I wanted to achieve in my practice and with my learners. The data that were analysed emanated from my diary entries, field notes and questionnaires (lessons plans).

The primary focus of the data analysis was to ascertain whether learners were able to apply critical thinking skills in History.



The data analysis was done according to the guidelines provided by Bogdan and Biklen (1992: 153-154). Biklen shows that there are two modes in which data can be collected in qualitative studies. The one is 'analysis in the field' and the other 'analysis after data collection'. Analysis in the field allows a researcher to do some preliminary analysis while working in the field, while analysis after data collection allows the analysis after all data have been collected.

This study employs both approaches to data analysis mentioned above. Again, following the guidelines of Bogdan and Biklen (1992), my first action research cycle, 'analysis in the field' was undertaken during the first action research cycle, when I jotted down aspects of my teaching practice and those of my learners.

Those aspects that I discovered helped me to plan the second cycle of action research. The second set of data collected was then analysed after the process were completed.

The rationale behind my data selection analysis was primarily to ascertain if my teaching practice has improved in relation to working collaboratively with learners and also if there were signs that my learners were beginning to understand what critical thinking skills entailed.

The quality of data collected and analysed had shortcomings because of a number of factors. It was my first action research attempt and it is the first time learners in my class were participating in research. In some of the lessons the time was too short to complete everything I wanted to do. Although the project was done over three weeks, the time allocated was little because the project was time consuming and hard for learners to understand. The entire class consisting of 35 learners participated, but not all learners were eager or able to complete the action research lessons. On a more positive note, the external observer found the project refreshing and thinks that it is a much better means to impart knowledge.

### **3.9 Trustworthiness of findings**

My research was undertaken in a natural setting where I was personally involved in the process. The learners in my classroom who participated in the project wrote their understanding of the action research lessons on answer sheets, which are the sources of the

data indicating their understanding of what I tried to achieve. The external observer's field notes are also an indication of how the project unfolded and what we can learn from the project. The result of the project is limited to the Grade 6 classroom of the primary school.

In the following chapter I give an account of the first action research cycle that I undertook in my classroom. This project as I have indicated in Chapter 1 (see p2) was an attempt on my part to develop the critical thinking skills within my learners. I wanted to empower the learners in my classroom to become critical of the knowledge I imparted and not passive recipients of it.

## CHAPTER 4

### MY FIRST ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE: AN ATTEMPT TO IMPART CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

#### 4.1. The start of an educational journey

In the first chapter I provided a background to this mini-thesis and indicated how my classroom practice did not inculcate autonomous and critical thinking in my learners. In the second chapter I discussed and unpacked the concepts of critical thinking skills and critical and creative thinking, and gave an explanation of my understanding of it. In Chapter Three I defined action research and gave my reasons for choosing this approach. This chapter is aimed at detailing my first action research cycle in which an attempt was made to inculcate critical thinking skills in my learners. This cycle in which I attempted to generate a change in my teaching practice took place during the first three weeks of August 2015.

Before I started my project I felt excited and motivated but also somewhat nervous because this was the first time that I was going to undertake research in my classroom. I was confident that the class I intended to do the research with would be willing to participate, but I was not sure about the outcome once the project was completed. I informed the learners about the ethics of research and feared that some learners might, during the course of the research, refuse to participate before the process was completed. What I did not fully comprehend at the time was that my teaching practice would forever change in terms of how I view teaching, learning and education.

#### 4.2 Embracing the challenge

I am a teacher at the primary school where the research was undertaken and also the class teacher of the Grade 6 class that participated in the study. At this school teachers do class teaching and not subject teaching, which means teachers do not move from one class to another. The teachers, therefore, teach all the subjects for the grade they are responsible for.

**In the Grade 6 class I teach there are 29 girls and 8 boys. All the learners are able to read and speak English, although their proficiency in terms of spoken and written work of the**

subject varies. Out of the total number of learners, 9 are from Zimbabwe, 2 from Malawi, 4 from Congo Brazzaville and the rest are from South Africa. These learners in my class are reflective of a multicultural African society in terms of culture, language and religion. The rich cultural differences between my learners, I felt at that time, would be well suited for my research study. I thought that since learners come from different countries in Africa their different backgrounds would make my research more interesting and perhaps provide answers more rich in meaning for my research. After I collected the data of my participants (learners) I found that it was not the case.

#### 4.3 Deciding on my topic

It was not easy to initiate a project where the challenge was to change the way I was teaching History and at the same time inculcate critical thinking in my Grade 6 learners. It was the first time that I embarked on an action research project to improve my teaching practice to make it more participatory and be a benefit for my learners and myself.

My method of teaching, which could be described as autocratic, implied that I was the only knowledgeable person in the classroom. The learners, on the other hand, simply listened and accepted whatever I said without question. It also appeared that learners were too afraid to ask questions, and if they did, showed little confidence in doing so. The learners' passive and submissive attitude, I think, reinforced the belief that I was the only knowledgeable person in the classroom. In my History lessons I concentrated on and emphasised memorisation of subject matter and gave very little attention to critically engaging with it. In retrospect, I have to admit that I contributed a great deal to a system of schooling where learners were socialised to remain passive and uncritical recipients of knowledge. This point of departure is described by Smith (1994:169):

By being taught irrelevant, impractical and unnecessary subject-matter, students are socialised into being passive and less challenging and critical of the authoritarian education dispensation.

The authoritarian method I used to impart knowledge was not the only mechanism that socialised learners into submission, but my rigid adherence to a curriculum and pacing myself to complete it within the time allocated, I believe, further entrenched a particular

system of education in South African schools. This system can be described as the product approach to curriculum development (Hoadley and Jansen, 2009:66-67). The product approach outlines four steps for teachers to follow. Step one is the purpose which refers to the aims and objectives, step two the content, step three organisation and step four assessment and evaluation.

My method of teaching followed these four steps rigidly. The criticism against the product approach emerged from the process approach to curriculum development. The process approach criticised the product approach as too neat, idealistic and technical in that it restricted and limited teachers leaving no place for human interpretation. It also argued that education should not be about fulfilling an objective and that good education is simply more open-ended and experimental (Hoadley and Jansen, 2011:68-69).

A curriculum that would be an alternative to a product approach is the critical approach. The critical approach to teaching would involve asking questions about why a particular content was chosen and other content excluded. It will examine the reasons for facts and opinions in subject material. It would also involve the thoughts and ideas of participants in the teaching process.

Given the approaches to understanding the school curriculum, my task now was to transform my teaching practice from a product or 'objectivist' to critical approach to teaching. My task would also be to re-educate myself about the process and critical approach to curriculum because I have spent many years following a product approach which did not bring about a learner that can reason or critically question learning material, particularly in history lesson.

My next plan was to work out a teaching strategy in which my teaching practice would change radically so that learners would no longer feel that they must simply listen and learn. When I was at school I too was a docile and submissive learner who saw the teachers as the only knowledgeable ones in the classroom. The perpetuation of a schooling system that made learners docile and teachers authoritarian is explained by Walker (1988:15) who argues that:

[T]eacher behaviour is learned during one's own school days and ... this school experience is more significant than pre-service training in shaping how one teaches.

The observation by me that my learners were docile and submissive is not a new phenomenon in South African schools. In a study by Esau (1994:1) the author also realised that his students were passive and did not participate in class discussions, and to remedy the situation he attempted to democratise his classroom practice. The study by Esau was undertaken over 21 years ago, and if we compare learners' behaviour at that time to learners in my class, we find that they too are passive, docile and submissive.

With that in mind, I asked myself: has teaching become more democratic after the period of National Party (NP) rule or remained the same, today, under the leadership of the African National Congress (ANC).

With the awkward awareness that I was contributing to the silencing of critical and creative thinking in learners and perpetuating a particular view of teachers, I had to think carefully about how to initiate my project. As a start, I decided to talk to my learners to ascertain how they experienced my teaching lessons, particularly in History. The discussions were held about one week prior to the start of my first action research cycle. I asked learners to tell me what they thought was good and bad about the way I gave lessons in class. My learners' responses were quite varied, but they served two purposes. First, it gave my learners the opportunity to talk freely and gain confidence about speaking to me. Second, it helped me to become accustomed to the idea that learners must be allowed to speak and think for themselves, or express what they feel.

I have to admit that it was not easy to hear about my weaknesses and shortcomings as a teacher. It took some time for me to realise and accept that if I want to emancipate my teaching practice, I would have to be willing to accept criticism.

The class discussions were fruitful and my learners provided the following responses:

They felt that I was too serious.

They said that I favoured the clever children and neglected the other learners.

Sir shouts sometimes and comes to school in a bad mood.

Sir only marks the books of the clever learners

Teacher must hit the rude children.

We don't get nice projects.

Teacher lets us write a lot.

We do too much Maths and English.

We don't get enough free periods.

The exercise proved worthwhile in that it gave me valuable feedback and insight into how learners felt. I was more interested in the suggestions and had to agree that I spend far too much time on Mathematics and English. My teaching method left little room for learners to assimilate the content learned and no time for questioning.

Thus in my attempt to inculcate critical thinking in my learners, I decided to address the following questions:

How can I teach in a way that allows time for learners to ask questions and provide feedback?

How do I cover the curriculum without suppressing critical and autonomous thinking?

How will I know that I have succeeded in achieving my goals?

These are the goals that I set for myself in the classroom before I initiated the project. I will also know that I have succeeded in achieving these goals if my learners freely participate in debates, show that they can apply the skills of critical thinking and, when I am able to transform myself from being an authoritarian figure to a teacher researcher.

#### **4.4 Constraints**

When I started my project, I became acutely aware that a number of obstacles stood in my way. The first problem was that only three periods per week were allocated for History. Second, it was not possible to use any other period because I am compelled to complete the work allocated in the curriculum for each subject within a specific time. It was not possible to ask my learners to remain after school, because most of them either walked home or made use of taxis that picked them up immediately after school. Many learners in my class had a sister or brother in the lower grades that waited for them because they were too

young to walk home on their own. Many learners expressed the concern that it is unsafe to walk home alone after school.

What was also a concern was that the principal took the view that learning usually takes place in a quiet environment. The principal's management style was intimidating. He would simply walk into any teacher's classroom and observe what is happening in one's classroom. I was not too worried about the principal walking into the classroom, but he would frequently complain in our daily morning briefings that teachers' classes are noisy and teachers must not sit too long behind their desks. The principal would also caution us that the subject advisers visit the school regularly and too much noise may disrupt teaching and learning and reflect on his management style.

I have over the course of my teaching practice at different schools observed that many principals and Head of Departments (HODs) have the same management style.

In spite of the constraints, I planned to proceed with my research in my classroom.

#### **4.5 Negotiations**

It was ethically correct to inform all parties at the school and my learners parents about what I intended to do.

In order to initiate my action research project many preparations had to be made. I discussed what my research entails with the principal and deputy of the school. The principal was at first hesitant because he was worried that my research would impact on my teaching time to complete the Grade 6 curriculum. After I explained that the research would be done during the periods I teach History and that it could be done over a period of two or three weeks, the principal agreed to allow me to undertake the research. I also indicated to the principal the times and dates when the project is planned.

In a staff meeting the principal informed the staff about my intentions to undertake research at school. In the meeting I briefly explained what action research is, the role learners in my class will play in the research, and that I would share my findings with the staff. In addition, I explained that action research is aimed at improving one's teaching



practice. I also clarified that in order to embark on any research at schools permission had to be obtained from the Western Cape Education Department, from parents and the governing body of the school. Before the staff meeting concluded I asked if any teacher would be willing to participate in the research and play the role as a research participant. One senior teacher agreed to act as participant observer and was quite excited to be part of the project. After a brief discussion the staff gave their consent for me to embark on my research.

In a separate meeting, about a week before the research was initiated, I explained in more detail to the participant observer what action research is, the role he will play in the process in terms of observing and recording data, the role of the learners as well as my role in the research.

The principal was also informed about the rules that would be followed in selecting research participants as well as confidentiality and anonymity. Since my research involved children, written permission was sought from their parents or caregivers. It was also made clear that, although all my learners would participate in the research, they would be placed in groups of about four or five, and their actions monitored and recorded.

#### **4.6 My Data collection**

Data collection is an important aspect of any research and forms the basis for analysing data that have been collected. This mini-thesis will utilise field notes, focus groups, triangulation and questionnaires.

##### **4.6.1 Field Notes**

Field notes allow the researcher to convert experiences and observations into descriptions, according to Emmerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995). Emmerson et al. point out that researchers using field notes can give a voice to people to be heard in the text they produce. When taking field notes, it is important to date them. Notes should be carefully captured during interviews and discussions, or as soon as possible afterwards.

##### **4.6.2 Focus Groups**

There are different definitions of focus groups in the literature. Powell et al. (1996:15)

identify focus groups as collective activities making a contribution to social research.

Elliot and Associates (1995:5) define a focus group as a small group of 6 to 10 people led through an open discussion by a skilled moderator. The group needs to be large enough to generate rich discussions, but not so large that some participants are left out. Focus groups, according to Morgan (1998), are under-used in social research, although they have a long history in market research.

#### **4.6.3 Triangulation**

Triangulation is an essential part of this project. Triangulation, according to Esau (2013), may occur in different ways as data can be collected in many ways by observing a project from different perspectives: using various settings, using different enquiries, using multiple research methods. However, the data collected in a triangulation process must be directly fed back to the participants, who offer critical comments on the data (McKernan, 2000).

Triangulation is a powerful technique that facilitates validation of data through cross-verification from two or more sources. It is a technique of establishing the credibility of qualitative analyses. As a teacher you can compare and contrast accounts of teaching acts in the classroom from one's own, the learners' and an observer's point of view. McNiff (1988:15) explains triangulation as:

...the process of obtaining information on a subject from three different points of view, viz. the teacher, pupils and participant observer or other third part.

#### **4.6.4 Questionnaires**

Questionnaires were used to see if learners were able to answer questions that tested their understanding of critical thinking skills. My idea to use extracts from History textbooks and related questions to improve critical thinking skills was informed by Savich (2009) and Moeller, Cutler, Fiedler and Weier (2013).

#### **4.7 Planning my first action research cycle**

After I had meetings with the governing body of the school and parents of learners who agreed to participate in my research, it was time to launch my plan. The first step I took was

to inform my learners that I was very excited to finally start with my research and reminded them of their rights as participants. I also reminded them that I had a short time during which to conduct the research and that I hoped they would find it stimulating and rewarding.

After I consulted with my learners, we agreed to have the following series of lessons specifically with regard to teaching of History:

- a) Discussion of a worksheet in groups of two. The worksheet was entitled 'What is History?', and served as an introduction to understand the notion of history.
- b) A group activity where learners are asked to discuss two accounts of the history of Zimbabwe. The lesson was based on the question: 'Who built Great Zimbabwe?'
- c) Open book assessment. In this activity learners were given an extract which they had to analyse individually. The aim in this activity was to see if learners could apply the few critical thinking terms that they had learned in the previous two activities.

I had certain expectations in selecting this series of lessons. The first lesson was aimed at showing learners that History is not merely about the learning of 'facts' or about other people and to give them an opportunity to express their views. I wanted learners to understand that History can also be about their lives. The group work involved comparing two extracts which they had to discuss amongst themselves. The teacher who volunteered to act as external observer was present for this activity. His role was to observe my actions as well as the actions of the learners. The assessment was to ascertain whether learners were able to apply the skills they had learned in the previous activities.

There were specific reasons for proceeding the way I did in preparing learners to acquire the critical thinking skills that I hoped they would master. Beyer (2008:197) provided valuable insights into how to teach thinking skills for Social Science and History. He argues that it is not an easy task to teach students to think critically. The learning of critical thinking involves more than simply processing subject material and requires the application of several complex mental operations or thinking. In order then, for teachers to assist learners in acquiring skills, is to show by means of example of how to apply a skill. The learners can follow the example shown by their teacher and practice the skill learned. The idea here is that learners must

understand that thinking is a skill that must be learned and applied. Thus when learners are able to apply a specific skill through their own example, it is a measure to show that they have learned how to do it

#### **4.8 Implementing my plan**

What follows is an account of my sessions with the learners. With the use of my data-collection techniques I hoped to accumulate enough data to receive sufficient feedback to assist me in my endeavour to transform my classroom practice and improve the critical thinking skills of my learners.

After careful planning and consideration of my limited time available, it was decided to conduct the research on the following days:

<b>Lessons</b>	<b>Dates</b>
Lesson 1	4 August
Lesson 2	6 August
Lesson 3	11 August
Lesson 4	13 August
Lesson 5	18 August
Lesson 6	20 August

##### **4.8.1 Lesson One**

The first lesson was 'What is History'. The intention of the lesson was to dispel the idea that History is merely the study of long-past events and long-dead people. I introduced the topic by explaining that the aim of the lesson was for learners to give their understanding of History. I also explained that learners in many schools understand that history is found mainly in textbooks and the common view is that it is the study of past events and people who died long ago.

My first instructions were that learners must read the questions and not refer to the textbook for answers. They were furthermore told that they could discuss questions with the learner that sat next to them. I also explained to them that there are no right and wrong answers.

Each learner had to complete a worksheet (see appendix H). They were given no other reading material besides the questions and had to draw from their own experiences. The activity contained the following questions and instructions:

What is your understanding of History?

Why do you think the study of History is important?

What did you enjoy about the study of History? You can give any example/s?

Do you know what critical thinking is? If you do not know, just say No. If you do, give a short explanation.

Write a short account of the History of your country.

The learners appeared to enjoy the lesson because it was not necessary for them to refer to the textbook when searching for answers. I walked around the classroom and noticed that most learners were actively engaged with the questions. There were learners who did not show any real interest in the worksheet and only pretended to be working on it.

I asked a few learners how they felt about the questions. One learner answered that they enjoyed the worksheet, while some other learners felt that the questions were too easy. There were also learners who asked me to explain some of the questions. The question that seemed to be quite challenging to the learners the most was the last one: 'Write a short history of your country'. I explained that they could write about anything and that they only have to write four or five sentences. In retrospect, I realised that the question was too broad and not focused enough. The idea, however, was to show that History does not have to be about long-past events and long-dead people, but that it can be about the events in their lives or events that happened in their countries that are important to them.

Many learners' responses for question one (What is your understanding of History?) was similar or it revolved around the same idea of what the study of History is about. A few other learners, however, have provided different responses. The following sentences below are a sample of the responses of learners that provided similar answers. Their responses are typed verbatim:

"It teaches us about what happened in the past"

"It teaches you about what happened in the past before we were born"

“My understanding of history is that it tells us what happened years ago, our history of lives”

“My understanding is to learn about the things that happened in the past”

There was clearly a common understanding amongst most of my grade six learners that History is about a study of the past. When I asked learners if they think History is about people who lived long ago and who have died, many responded in the affirmative by saying that it was the way they were taught and how they understood history. It was also interesting to hear from learners that they felt history is mostly about the study of other people and other cultures and not about them or their cultures. From the start of the study it became apparent that learners in my grade six class were taught History as a subject that contained information that must be remembered and recalled during tests or exams. It seems that learners had no idea that History can be critically studied or that questions do not necessarily have to be about understanding content.

The responses of many learners for question two (Why do you think the study of History is important?) showed a similar pattern of how they understood the study of History. The following are the answers of some learners that answered question two. The learners' answers are written verbatim:

“The study of history is important because it tells us our life of years ago and where it started”

“A thing that happened in the past”

“Yes its important because I need to know what happened long ago”

“ It is important because it help us about the things that happened in the past”

Again, when were read the participants answers for question two it became clear that a common pattern emerged of how leaners understood History. At this stage of my research it also became clear that most learners in my Grade six class did not think that the study of History can involve critically thinking about content in textbooks.

The learners responses for question three (What did you enjoy about the study of History?) were varied but it still revolved around the same theme. The word ‘past’ were not used by learners in their answers to question three but reference were made to some past event of

a particular country or famous individuals, such as leaders of countries. What is also significant about many learners responses for question three were that they wrote about History content they remembered from earlier grades and some learners even wrote about content found in books other than the prescribed History textbook.

Almost all the learners did not write any answers for question four (Do you know what critical thinking is?). The intention of this question was to discover if learners understood what the term critical thinking entails or means in the general sense of the word. Most learners simply did not write any answers and those who answered question four simply wrote, “no I don’t know”. Again, it was noticeable that a similar pattern started to emerge amongst how learners responded to certain questions. In the class discussions I had with learners, some learners associated the term ‘critical’ to being ‘critically injured’ or to ‘patients that are critically ill in a hospital’. It was only after I explained and gave examples of what the term critical thinking means were learners able to respond differently to the concept. Many learners also told me that they have never been told to think critically about their school work.

In the fifth question of lesson one (Have you ever been asked to think about your school work in a critical way?) many learners wrote that they have never been asked to think about their school work in a critical way. Some learners wrote that other people have told them to be critical but did not provide any more detail about exactly what critical thinking entails.

All the learners who attempted to answer question six (Write a short account of the history of your country?) wrote something that was meaningful to them but their answers were again merely content they could remember from History lessons in earlier grades. I decided to include a question on the ‘History of one’s country’ because a third of the learners in my classroom migrated from African countries that neighbour South Africa. I was initially under the impression that I would receive a different response from learners that came from neighbouring countries. However, the only difference in the responses of learners’ was that South African learners wrote about historical events that occurred here, whereas learners from neighbouring countries wrote about their histories.

The responses of the participants (learners) in my classroom that attempted the six question

of lesson one, showed from the start that they were not able to think independently and merely recalled content learned. There was definitely a pattern that emerged in the answers provided by all participants. It did not matter if learners came from neighbouring African countries nor were South African citizens. There was nothing in their answers to suggest that schooling stimulated learners to develop independent thinking about the content of History lessons. My findings at this early stage of my research revealed what was stated by a Hester (1994) in his book about school improvement in which education or schooling is expected to teach or develop critical thinking skills across the curriculum.

The answers learners provided for lesson one in cycle showed clearly that learners understood the study of History to imply the study of 'facts' found in textbooks, which is mainly about the past and of heads of states. The South African learners, for example, wrote about events that happened during apartheid and President Mandela (South Africa's first democratically elected president). The learners from Zimbabwe wrote about their president and the learners that came from Malawi and Congo-Brazzavile wrote about their political leaders. It did not matter if learners came from different countries they all responded to questions in similar ways.

One aspect that emerged positively from the first lesson is that learners showed the potential to think for themselves, which is apparent in question six (lesson one, cycle one). In this lesson, although learners wrote about things that were important to them, they were able to write about their own experiences of their particular histories. The responses by learners are important and corroborates what Hester (1994:109) explained about the ability of learners to think for themselves if they are given the opportunity to do so.

It seems that it was the first time that learners were given questions to answer in which they had to use their own understanding. They could also not use their history textbooks to find answers. It appeared that many learners engaged with the questions and did not seem too concerned if their answers were correct or incorrect. Although not all learners participated in the first action research activity, the stage was set for the rest of my research.

#### **4.8.2 Lesson Two**



This lesson was about the 'History of Great Zimbabwe'. In this lesson I wanted learners to understand and identify that there can be different viewpoints on the same topic and that different viewpoints can send different messages to those who read it. I selected extracts from the book *What is History?* (NECC, 1987:31-32). The extracts and questions on this topic are found in appendix I. For this lesson I invited my colleague who volunteered to be a co-observer in my project. His role was to observe the actions of learners in my classroom and my actions. During the lesson he had to record what he observed and provide feedback afterwards.

In this lesson I asked the learners to arrange themselves in groups of four or five. Thereafter they had to read the extract and discuss among themselves before writing down any answers. They also had to decide on who will be the learner in the group that will write down answers and the learner that will read out the answers. Furthermore, I pointed out that the period is only forty minutes long and that they have to spend ten minutes discussing the questions, ten minutes to write down answers and the remaining twenty minutes was allocated to listening to answers from the individual learners in the groups.

The activity for this lesson contained the following questions: (appendix I)

1. What is great Zimbabwe?
2. Choose the sentence from extract A which expresses the writer's opinion on who built Great Zimbabwe.
3. Choose the sentence from extract B which expresses the writer's opinion on who built Great Zimbabwe.
4. Can you think of a reason to explain the viewpoints of the two writers?

The group work was successful in many ways. Firstly, the learners did not argue about who should be the one writing down responses and one who will relate answers to the class after the lesson. In most groups the learner who was the speaker was also the one who wrote down answers. Even though the questions were short and required short answers, some learners in their respective groups argued about what to write down. For me that was a positive outcome because learners felt confident to express what they think are the correct answers. It did not matter because learners were debating possible answers to questions.

Although many groups worked diligently on trying to work out the answers, individual learners in certain groups were playful and not willing to participate in the activity. There was also a lot of noise and I tried to minimise it by asking learners to lower their voices. When that approach to minimise the noise did not work I resorted to standing next to the group that talked the loudest. I was concerned that too much noise would disturb the class next to me. During this lesson and many other lessons I constantly worried that too much noise would provoke the principal to stop me from continuing the research.

During the activity I noticed that my triangulator was not pleased about the level of noise in the classroom. I spoke to him afterwards and explained that research is not the same as when one is teaching and learners are merely passive recipients of content passed over to them.

However, the group work seemed to work well and most learners participated in the research lesson. The learners in each group jotted down responses and read it out to the class. It appeared, judging from the way learners responded to the questions, that most of the questions were answered or attempts were made to answer all the questions. The answers provided by the learners differed but it was again clear that learners struggled to interpret information.

Many learners found the second and third questions challenging because they did not understand or could not differentiate between 'fact' and 'opinion.' In order to facilitate my research in the class, I had to explain to the class through various examples the different meanings of the two words. It was only after I gave sufficient examples on the board when learners were able to continue answering the questions. After I gave examples learners showed more confidence to answer question two and three.

The following are the responses given by learners that answered the second and third question, which asked them to identify 'an opinion' expressed by the writers of the extract. The following are the words of learners. It is typed verbatim (see appendix I, for extract A & B):

*“Therefore it is clear that the ruins of Great Zimbabwe which were seen by foreigners in the sixteenth century could not have been built by the Bantu then”*. This sentence is an example of ‘opinion’ identified by learners. At this stage of my research, it appeared that learners were beginning to learn how to think critically about History content given to them. Some authors regard the ability to think independently and autonomously as an indication of a critical person (Paul, Binker, Martin, Vetrano and Krekla, 1989:2). My learners were beginning to show these dispositions to think critically when given the opportunity to do so. They may have written the words directly from the extract but their ability to identify or distinguish between fact and opinion was significant in their development to become autonomous thinkers.

For the third question, most learners wrote the following sentence from extract B, *“From the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, one group of powerful Shona rulers lived at Great Zimbabwe and the huge buildings were built during this time”*. The learners were also able to identify that what was written by the authors of the extracts is not necessarily the truth. In discussions after the class about the two extracts, many learners said that they are starting to understand that History content is not necessarily facts but someone’s ‘opinion’ or interpretations of events.

My interpretation of the answers provided by the learners is that they were able to identify which sentences expressed opinions and which expressed facts about ‘Who built Great Zimbabwe’. It was an indication that learners, although not all, could see that two different viewpoints were expressed. In a similar study by Savich (2009), learners critical thinking was enhanced when multiple text were given instead of single text such as prescribed school textbooks.

Most learners, however, were not able to explain the last question of this activity. Some learners did attempt to answer question four of this activity and said that they think the Shona’s have built it. Their responses were, at least for me, a strong indication that learners could discern possible facts in extracts. It is argued by Paul et al (1989) that by remodelling lesson plans and by teaching for thinking, it is possible to enhance autonomous and critical thinking of learners.

After the activity, the triangulator made the following comments:

The class was extremely noisy in the group discussions.

The learners argued about who must sit together.

Not all the learners in their respective groups participated in the discussion.

I concentrated more on learners who were willing to work.

The next activity was an open book assessment, completed five days after activity two. The topic of the lesson was on European explorers in Asia in the time of Mapungubwe, taken from Day-by-Day, Social Science Grade six textbook, CAPS (Clacherty et al, 2011:106-107). The aim of this activity was to ascertain if learners were able to apply the inquiry skills introduced to them in the first two activities.

For this activity, the learners were instructed to sit where they usually do in the class and not to talk to their fellow learners. I told them that it was not an assessment for marks and that I needed to see if they could apply the critical enquiry skills learned about in the previous activities. The activity was done in the following manner. I briefly explained what the activity was about and clarified what is expected in each questions. In the previous two activities much time was lost when I did not explain the questions. In this activity I wanted to avoid too many disruptions and to spend more time discussing answers to questions or feedback from them about how they experienced the activity.

I employed the following method for this activity. Five minutes was allocated to explain each question. The learners were given fifteen minutes to write down their answers and the twenty minutes that remained was for them to exchange and compare answers. It was also a time when they could ask me questions about the activity which they were still unsure about, and I could give learners feedback on their answers. I did not invite the co-observer to observe this lesson and asked two learners, who previously agreed to participate in the research, to observe my actions in the classroom and give me feedback afterwards.

The learners had to answer the following questions:

1. From whose viewpoint is the extract written?
2. Choose two sentences that express the writer's opinion?
3. Can you think of a reason to explain the viewpoint of the writer?

The test was done under the following conditions. They were allocated 15 minutes to complete the test. Then the learners had to compare their answers those who sat next to them.

This lesson did not proceed as planned. Some learners did not write any answers and some spoke to their friends. I had to remind the class several times that they needed to be quiet. When the time elapsed for the test I asked them to put down their pens and to exchange answer sheets. The learners could then compare their answers to check for similarity or differences.

The answers learners provided showed that they were able to identify several opinions expressed by the writers. Some learners were also able to show that the writers seem to write more about Marco Polo and very little about what happened during that time in China. The learners could, however, not successfully answer question three of this activity.

I concluded the lesson by praising them for attempting to answer the questions and reaffirmed that the research was about learning to critically question history content and that there does not have to be correct or incorrect answers.

After the activity, I asked the two learners to give me feedback about how they experienced the lesson and the actions of the learners. They felt that learners talked too much during the test and that some copied from their friends. They also felt that I should not walk around too much in the classroom so that I can better observe what is happening. When I asked them their opinion about the lessons and activities, they replied that it was better than to worry about learning 'facts' that must be recalled during tests.

#### **4.9 Reflection on my first action research cycle**

Reflection is an important stage in the action research cycle (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005:72-73). It allows the teacher-researcher to reflect on what he has done. The observations made by the teacher-researcher can be compared to those of the triangulator in order to arrive at some understanding of the process that has taken place. It is also a stage where the input of learners can be taken into account so that changes can be made to improve on one's teaching practice.

A researcher can monitor actions by asking four or more questions designed to reflect on one's practice (Mcniff & Whitehead, 2005:82-73): What have I done? What have I learned? What is the significance of this learning? How will my new learning generate new actions? I followed these guiding questions to assist me in reflecting on cycle one.

What have I done? In lesson one I had the idea that children would respond more easily if I explained briefly what the aim of the lesson is and left it up to them to give me answers. When that approach was not working sufficiently, I explained in more detail what is expected and gave a number of examples to questions. The silence from most of the learners and the answers given by some learners indicated to me that I was still trapped in the traditional method of teaching. The learners who answered questions simply repeated the answers and explanations I provided.

What have I learned? The first thing I learned was that learners must become accustomed to a new way of teaching. Learners were still trapped in the belief that the teacher knows and they do not know. I also learned that it is more helpful if I used examples that they could relate to instead of examples they could not relate to. I should also have used simpler words to explain what the lesson entailed. A positive aspect of the activities was that learners started to understand what I was attempting to do. This was shown by some of the feedback I received from learners.

What is significant of this study? My first attempt in action research revealed aspects of my teaching practice that was unknown to me. I realised how habituated I had become to the transmission mode of teaching and it was not so easy to work collaboratively with learners. What is significant about the first lessons is that I learned to take into consideration that learners come from multicultural backgrounds and that the explanations they offered of *critical thinking terms* could differ, but fitted into the context of their lives. I learned that their contexts are radically different to mine and that I have to value my learners' input and consider their points of view. The lessons gave me more insight into my practice and insights into learners' understanding of certain words.

How will my new learning generate new actions? There are a number of things I have to do differently. I have to give a lot more thought and planning to my lessons so that more learners can participate in the activities. The first cycle revealed to me that I focussed too much on learners that usually pay attention in class. I had to find ways to get the attention of learners who refuse to participate in activities.

I need to take into consideration learners' responses and not be in a hurry or be too concerned about time restraints. I must not worry if things do not always go according to plan. Proponents of action research argue that action research may not produce results that are as neat and final as may be possible in some other techniques (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:595).

During the beginning stages of the group work activities it seemed as if pupils were still very confused. I suppose it was due to a lack of guidance on my part. I can perhaps, in the next cycle, give more guidance instead of leaving so much in the hands of learners.

My reflection of the lessons completed in cycle one show that I may have been over-optimistic about what could be achieved. Although I knew what I wanted to do in lesson one, the terms that I used to explain certain concepts were not helpful. The triangulator also pointed out that I had to provide more examples of the terms I used and suggested I explain things in more simple terms. He also suggested I spend more time listening to learners and could use their examples to further explain concepts.

After the completion of my first cycle I was more motivated and had a deeper insight into what action research meant and its practical application in a classroom.

The critical thinking skills I wanted learners to acquire in the first cycle was; identifying opinion in History textbooks, I wanted them to understand that information written about historical events is the viewpoint of the writer and that there may be other viewpoints that were not included in a particular extract. I also wanted learners to understand that other viewpoints may be more accurate. Moreover, that learners can write their own stories, which is their History written from their points of view.

The acquisition of critical thinking skills, taken from the explanations provided by Paul et al (1989) show that when learners are able to question and think critically about what they read in History textbooks, it is an indication of autonomous and critical thinking.

I have also realised that it is not necessary to use the words commonly associated with the term critical thinking if a teacher wants to teach learners critical thinking skills. A skill in this sense can therefore imply asking critical questions and the ability to distinguish opinions from facts and searching for evidence.

I have to admit that my first action research cycle revealed my weaknesses as a teacher, but also that I can now attempt to change my teaching practice to be more participatory and democratic.

#### **4.10 Towards a second research cycle**

Looking ahead, I foresaw the need to continue with a second action research cycle in my effort to inculcate the critical thinking skills in my classroom. In my next research cycle I wanted to create another opportunity for the learners to think for themselves. This remained a challenging contest, but with more insight, I thought the second action research cycle, which I describe in the next chapter, would perhaps open my mind to a new and possibly more stimulating and innovative ideas in my bid to make my teaching practice more “liberatory” and “democratic”.



## CHAPTER 5

### MY SECOND ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE

#### 5.1 Background and preparation

This chapter gives an account of the second action research cycle which I undertook in my classroom. This second cycle is a continuation of the first action research project in which I attempted to work collaboratively with my learners in inculcating critical thinking skills in History and improving my teaching practice. I realised that change was not possible overnight.

#### 5.2 Reflections on my first action research cycle

The experience I gained in the first cycle allowed me to make the necessary changes in my teaching practice. I had to revisit my actions in the classrooms and consider the comments made by my triangulator.

In the first cycle I gave learners too much freedom to organise themselves into groups. In hindsight, when I allowed learners to organise themselves into groups, many of them paired with friends which did not bring about a critical discussion among them. I was under the impression that allowing learners the freedom to organise themselves into groups would increase participation in activities. I also gave too little guidance which allowed many learners to ask too many questions. The result was that the activities could not be completed in the way I intended. I realised that part of the guidance I could offer was to make sure that learners understand all the words on any worksheet or extract I gave them to answer.

My actions in the class also showed that I still spend too much time with learners who usually work hard and tend to neglect those who are struggling with the work. The preference to assist learners who usually work hard showed that my teaching practice was not yet democratic. It appeared that I was still perpetuating a system of schooling that maintained dominance and inequality. My actions in the classroom can be seen as fulfilling a 'functionalist' idea of schools (Giroux quoted on Skelton, 1997:178). A 'functionalist' perspective questions how schools played their part in maintaining social order and stability.

With the above precaution and the lessons I had learnt during my first action research cycle, I was determined to be more mindful and critical of my actions in the classroom, especially if I wanted to be successful in undertaking emancipatory action research.

### **5.3 My second action research cycle**

My second action research project was scheduled for the 13, 18 and 20 August. I spent the week after the first cycle reflecting on cycle one, especially reflecting on how I could improve my practice and activities regarding the stimulation of critical thinking.

### **5.4 Collection of Data**

The research methods used for data collection were field notes, questionnaires, focus group interviews and a co-participant who served as a triangulator.

#### **5.4.1 Field Notes**

Field notes were invaluable in my data-collection techniques. They definitely helped me in the recording of important observations and I could revisit my notes at any time. It is a convenient method of capturing ongoing activities in my classroom.

#### **5.4.2 Questionnaires**

In this second cycle I made use of questionnaires to collect data about how learners learned critical thinking skills. In the first cycle the questions on the lessons served as an important means to ascertain how well learners could apply the skills they have learned.

#### **5.4.3 Focus group interviews**

This method assisted me especially if I wanted to know how learners felt about the research activities and how they experienced any changes in my teaching practice. I used the same focus groups in the second cycle; because of the excellent feedback I received from them in cycle one. From the responses it was evident that the learners were confident and started to think. My experience shows that a focus group interview is a useful tool for doing qualitative research.

#### **5.4.4 Triangulation**

The triangulator who assisted me in my project provided valuable feedback that I could use to improve my classroom practice. As I already pointed out, my colleague who agreed to act as triangulator in cycle one said that he is willing to be part of the second research cycle, playing the role of participant-observer.

Triangulation is technique that allows for validation of data through cross-checking from two or more sources. Through triangulation, teachers can compare and contrast data obtained from the learner's, the participant-observer and their own accounts of what transpired in the classroom. In this regard, Altricker, Feldman and Somekh (2008) shows that triangulation provides a more balanced picture of what transpires in a research situation.

#### **5.5 Planning of my second research cycle**

The following is a report of the lessons I undertook on 13, 18 and 20 August 2015.

My first project exposed some weaknesses of my teaching practice aimed at improving the critical thinking skills of my History learners. These weaknesses revolved mainly around my use of language and the way I responded to learners' questions about the lessons. These weaknesses must not be seen as a failure, but aspects of an action research cycle. McNiff and Whitehead (2005:53) points out that good practice implies "constantly monitoring, evaluating and changing as appropriate".

In this second cycle I attempted to work on the changes I made in my own notes and those recommended by the co-observer. The changes revolved mainly around my use of language, which now is more attuned to the way that learners understand certain terms. I am also listening more carefully to what learners are asking, so that I can better respond to what they are asking. An attempt was also be made to involve more learners by placing them next to learners they would not usually sit with. When I placed learners away from their friends, some complained about it but they eventually abided by my decision.

The second cycle of lessons was planned for 13, 18 and 20 August 2015. This was shortly after the completion of the first cycle, but it suited me well because it appeared that the learners started to understand what I was planning to do. The triangulator also agreed that

the dates of the lessons suited him, because he wanted the learners to prepare for the control test in September. The day before the first lesson I reminded the learners about what the research is about and what each lesson entailed. I also reminded them that the research is about acquiring critical thinking skills but, moreover, it was about improving my teaching practice.

## **5.6 Putting my plan into action**

The following is an account of my sessions with learners in my classroom. With the use of my data-collection techniques, I hope to receive feedback that can assist me in my effort to transform my classroom practice.

### **5.6.1 Lesson 1**

The lesson took place on Wednesday, 13 August 2015. The lesson was 'Dias and his crew encounter the KhoiKhoi in Mossel Bay 1488'. The learner's task was to analyse the account of 'Dias and the Khoikhoi' in the prescribed Social Science textbook (CAPS) by Clacherty, Cohen, Dada, Joannides and Ludlow (2011:118-121)

Before I commenced the lesson I placed the learners in groups. In my class of thirty seven learners, there were eight groups consisting of four learners and one had five learners. When the learners were seated, I explained what the lesson is about and what is expected of them.

In previous lessons I wasted a lot of time by assuming that learners understood my instructions. I then spent about five minutes explaining the term 'analysis' and gave a few examples of what is expected.

The learners' first task was to look specifically at the pictures in the textbook of 'Dias and his crew encounter the Khoikhoi', then discuss which words or ideas that occur to them when studying the pictures and finally to write these down. One person in each group had to write down the words and another learner had to read out the answers.

The learners had to make a list of all the words or ideas they collected by studying the pictures in the on Day-by-Day, Social Science Grade 6 textbook, CAPS ( Clackert et al, 2011:118, 120-121).

When the learners commenced with the activity, I walked around the class to assist learners in the activity. During the exercise I played the role of time keeper and informed them not to worry too much about whether their answers are correct or incorrect.

The lesson proceeded as planned with very few disruptions. There were nevertheless still learners, who did not participate in the activity, which I felt was detrimental to the acquisition of critical thinking.

During the activity I walked around the classroom and asked learners if there was anything they were unsure of. After the activity was completed I asked a few learners what they wrote down. One learner responded by saying, "The Khoikhoi have no clothes and are scared of Dias". Another learner responded by saying, "Dias came with a big boat". A third learner responded by saying, "The Khoikhoi are poor, they scared, and their goat is scared".

When I enquired from the same learners about what they thought the pictures are trying to convey to them. One learner said that the KhoiKhoi cannot fight Dias who is coming to take over the land that belongs to the KhoiKhoi.

In my assessment of the ideas that emanated from individual learners, they have managed to respond to the pictures and gave their understanding of what happened during the period Dias confronted the KhoiKhoi in Mossel Bay. It is also evident that learners can apply logic to historical events by studying pictures and discussing ideas with fellow learners.

The triangulator made the following comments after the activity was completed:

The learners seemed to enjoy the activity and they argued less. They responded much more than in the previous lessons and did not find it too difficult to respond to the pictures. He also commented that the period passed by quickly and wished that more time could be spent on similar activities. He felt that a follow-up activity must be done so that responses of groups can be compared.

I agreed with the comments made by the triangulator and told him that I would do a follow-up lesson if time allows me to.

## **5.6.2 Lesson 2**

This lesson was a narrative account of my experience of voting in South Africa's first

democratic elections in 1994.

My decision to give a narrative was because the previous activities involved reading and interpreting text from textbooks and other sources. I wanted to expose learners to understand that teachers can also be sources of information for them to interpret History.

This lesson was held on 20 August 2015. The method I employed was to first narrate my experiences voting for the first time and then allow learners to ask me probing questions.

The aspects I included in my story were the excitement that South Africa was finally free from apartheid, the euphoria around the country, and the thousands of people who came out of their homes to stand in long lines, waiting patiently to cast their vote. I included in my story how I excited it was for me, during the time I was a teacher in Johannesburg, to see so many people of all races walking to the different polling stations. I ended my narration by telling them how apartheid was the cause that I could not fulfil my dream of becoming a pilot.

The learners were not placed in groups. They were asked to remain in their desks and could write down any ideas or thoughts that came to mind. The learners then had to ask me any questions and write down the answers I gave them.

The narrative lesson was done in three parts. The first ten minutes was devoted to my telling my story. The class then had ten minutes to write down any questions they wanted to ask me. The remaining fifteen to twenty minutes were for me to answer their probing questions.

I was pleased that the learners enjoyed the lesson. It is not uncommon for children to enjoy listening to stories. The challenge, however, was to narrate my experiences in such a way as to capture their imagination and not be monotonous to listen to.

After I narrated my story, it was time for learners to ask me questions. The following are a number of questions learners asked:

What was it like during apartheid?

What is apartheid?

Why was sir in Johannesburg?

Why was sir so excited to vote?

Does sir still want to be a pilot?

Did sir meet President Mandela?

Is sir an ANC (African National Congress)?

I responded to the best of my ability to the questions posed by my learners. I was elated that learners felt more confident to ask question about the past, particularly about apartheid and showed more interest about studying South Africa's History. For me, the enthusiasm learners showed in asking questions, showed that it is possible for them to understand that history is not just the study of long-dead people and long-ago events.

Before I concluded the lesson I reminded them that the purpose of the lesson was for them to understand that history is not always in textbooks. Elderly people and all their teachers are also sources of information. My lesson was also a way of showing learners the difference between first-hand and second-hand accounts in History.

### **5.7 Reflection on my second action research cycle**

I have to accept that self-reflection is an integral part of an emancipatory action research project. In self-reflection about one's project one has to be honest and be prepared to accept that the goals one sets out to achieve cannot always be realised.

I may have not been completely successful in my endeavour to inculcate critical thinking skills in my learners, but at least I made an attempt. I believe that I have succeeded in showing them that History is not always found in textbooks and that people are valuable sources of information. Thus in the future I intend to emphasize a lot in my lessons on the importance of oral accounts in history.

The feedback I received from my triangulator made me conscious of many weaknesses in my teaching practice on the second cycle as well. His feedback helped me to better manage the classroom and I received more collaboration from my learners. The groups in my class I had informal and formal discussions with concerning my teaching practice gave me more insight about my teaching practice. The responses by learners on activities gave me a good

indication of their understanding of the skills I wanted them to learn.

I have after school arranged a meeting with learners who agreed to answer a number of questions regarding their experiences about the research process. I arranged beforehand with the focus group on an appropriate time to meet after school. The group that consisted of six learners agreed to meet me on 25 August 2015, at 2 o'clock the afternoon in my classroom. The meeting was arranged for a Tuesday because learners usually go home forty-five minutes earlier on Tuesdays because of staff meetings. I also arranged beforehand with the principal that I planned a meeting with learners to discuss my research project. The principal accepted my reason for not being able to attend the staff meeting and reiterated that he cannot allow me to miss any staff meetings in the future. I also reminded the learners that they have to inform their parents of the meeting that was scheduled.

The meeting with the focus group was fruitful. The questions I posed them revolved mainly about my teaching practice, and to a lesser extent, the acquisition of critical thinking skills. The reason for focussing less on how learners acquired critical thinking skills is that I feel that more time was needed to entrench the skills they have learned, and that learners have responded well in the activities.

In the meeting I asked the following questions:

1. What was different in the way I presented History lessons before I started with the research project and the way I presented it now?
2. Where my instructions clear and easy to understand?
3. Did my explanations and examples I gave help them to do the activities on their own?
4. What can I do differently in the future when presenting History lessons?
5. Is there anything they want me to change that can make History more interesting and relevant?

The following are the responses I received from the focus groups:

- 1) The group felt I was too hasty and rushed them to complete the work I gave them.



- 2) I appeared very serious and just read from the textbook and then they (learners) had complete the activities in the textbook.
- 3) When I gave History lessons I did not allow them enough time to discuss the work with their friends and just wanted them to get done and move on to the next subject.
- 4) Some learners felt that I gave them too much work and their books were almost full.
- 5) Some of the more positive feedback I received from the group was that they enjoyed the history activities because they did not have to worry too much about writing long notes from the textbook. They also wanted to do more projects outside the classroom.

The feedback given by the focus groups was directed more about my teaching practice, which I must admit was 'product' driven, meaning that I expected a particular outcome at the end of an activity. In the process I forgot that to be democratic implies I had to accept that learners' answers must also be valued. It was not necessarily important to find the correct answer but evaluating answers. I also left little room for creative and critical thinking. I can almost say that I smothered the learners' natural thinking abilities. I was acting against the studies made by Piaget (quoted in Hester, 1994:109) (see page 21), that children in the ages ten to twelve have moved from the elementary to the concrete level of thinking.

The feedback I received from my triangulator was more on my management of a learning situation. The triangulator was concerned about the level of noise and if I achieved my aims for a particular lesson. The achievement of a particular aim was not my concern in any of the activities; I wanted to create a situation in the classroom where learners felt they were part of a learning process and that the teacher was not the only knowledgeable person in the classroom. In relation to the concern of the noise and learners non-conformity to instructions by the teacher, Giroux (quoted in Skelton (1997:178) explains:

Schools played their part in maintaining social order and stability. This 'functionalist' perspective viewed schools as vehicles through which students learn the social norms, values and skills they require to function and contribute to the existing society.

In my assessment of the learners and participant-observer's feedback, opened my eyes to

my teaching practice that still needed to become more 'liberatory' and 'democratic'.

The lessons and activities in cycle one were aimed at introducing History from the learners' perspective and to introduce critical thinking skills. The lessons and activities in my second action research cycle were aimed at showing learners that history is not always found in books and that they can contribute much to what is constructed in a classroom. Davids (2014:8) sums up what I attempted to achieve:

[E]ducators need to move away from a teacher-centred mode of teaching to a learner-centred classroom approach. This kind of change promotes a democratic teaching ethos in which the teacher adopts a transformative pedagogical disposition.

In the following chapter, the final one, I summarise, reflect on and explain how my two action research cycles contributed to critical thinking in my History classroom. I discuss whether my action research project was emancipatory and fulfilling and I conclude by recommending emancipatory action research to the teaching fraternity.

## **CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **6.1 Reflection on Critical Thinking skills in the classroom**

In this final chapter I summarise, reflect on and attempt to explain whether my action research project comprising of two cycles succeeded in producing a more fulfilling and emancipatory teaching experience. The project aimed to establish autonomous and critical thinking skills within learners in my Grade 6 History classroom. This project was also an attempt to make me more aware of my role as a teacher wanting to improve my classroom practice as a teacher-researcher. Although my action research was not without challenges, I wish to emphasise that action research remains a viable option for teachers who need to pursue the quest to democratise their teaching practices.

### **6.2 Teachers as transformative intellectuals and teacher researchers.**

The action research that I conducted in my classroom emphasises to me that teachers should become teacher-researchers as well as what Giroux (1988:125) referred to as “transformative intellectuals”. Giroux argues that this has several benefits:

First, it provides a theoretical basis for examining the work of teachers as a form of intellectual labor, as opposed to defining it in purely instrumental or technical terms. Second, it clarifies the kinds of ideology and practical conditions to function as intellectuals. Third, it helps to make clear the role teachers play in producing and legitimating various political, economic and social interests through the pedagogies they endorse and utilise.

Teachers as transformative intellectuals should question the ‘product’ approach to teaching. They should start questioning what they teach, how they teach, who controls existing knowledge at schools and whose purpose it serves. Teachers must caution against falling into the trap of carrying out hegemonic practices by slavishly promoting the dominant ideology which undermines the independent development of learners. By continuously questioning hegemonic practices I am aware that critical thinking for social justice becomes part of one’s everyday makeup as a human being. One realises in striving for social justice and other fairness issues it becomes political. Teaching and learning is thus a political act.

Thus, teachers as 'transformative intellectuals' must see their teaching practice as a political act. Giroux (1988:127) is explicit on this point and argues that:

Central to the category of transformative intellectual is the necessity of making the pedagogical more political and the political more pedagogical. Making the pedagogical more political means inserting schooling directly into the political sphere by arguing that schooling represents both a struggle to define meaning and a struggle over power relations...Making the political more pedagogical means utilizing forms of pedagogy that embody political interest that are emancipatory in nature; that is, using forms of pedagogy that treat students as critical agents...and make the case for struggling for a qualitatively better world for all people.

I believe we can become transformative intellectuals if we are prepared to challenge and constantly question what we do on a daily basis in our classrooms and at school. If teachers are prepared to challenge authoritarian management of schools by more soft democratic approaches, it is already a start to the breaking down of the uncritical hierarchical school structure. Many teachers in my experience are afraid to challenge authority, or implement changes in the way they teach. Teachers can play a role in changing undemocratic educational practices by being active in teacher forums or teaching unions, such as, South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), National Professional Teachers Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA) and other democratic organisations. By being active in teacher unions or other forums the teacher as a critical thinker and as transformative intellectual can make that link between classroom practice and the broader educational and socio-political realities of schooling.

Many teachers today also face a number of constraints at school. Elliot (1989:67) in his attempt to assist teacher-researchers against the constraints they face suggests the following:

A small band of isolated teacher researchers can tap into a reflective counter culture in the form of action-research network which transcends school boundaries and is linked to a teacher education institution. Membership of such a network can provide the kind of cultural resources which strengthen the capacity of aspiring teacher researchers to resist the time pressures operating on them from inside their schools.

Despite the constraints teacher-researchers face it is possible for them to empower their learners and inculcate critical thinking skills. Teachers have to be confident and believe that their actions will and can make a difference.

I would like to believe that the action research project that I undertook in my classroom made me more self-reflective and more critical. There are several lessons I learned from my two action research cycles. Teachers must realise that they must not merely assume that things are 'normal' but must consult their colleagues and learners in a reflective manner. Teachers can learn from the feedback given by colleagues and learners concerning their teaching practices.

During my action research project, some learners have benefitted from the process as evidenced from certain of the positive comments I received in class and in interviews with learners. Even if I have not succeeded fully in developing the critical thinking skills of my learners, I have come to realise that change is a process and cannot happen overnight.

### **6.3 Reflections on my practice**

In my action research project, which consisted of two cycles, I aimed to instil critical thinking skills in my learners. The project entailed the teaching of History to my Grade 6 class who consisted of 37 learners, 8 boys and 29 girls. Each cycle stretched over a period of two weeks. My first action research cycle included the completion of three activities. The activities were made up of the following types of lessons:

- a) Discussion of a worksheet in groups of two. The worksheet was entitled 'What is History?', and served as an introduction to understand the notion of history.
- b) A group activity where learners were asked to discuss two accounts of the History of Zimbabwe. The lesson was based on the question: Who built Great Zimbabwe?
- c) Open book assessment. In this activity learners were given an extract which they had to analyse individually. The aim in this activity was to see if learners could apply the few critical thinking terms that they had learned in the previous two activities.

In selecting these series of lessons, I had expected learners to develop a critical understanding and disposition into the study of History. I expected that these three activities were sufficient to achieve my goal of inspiring learners to think and not just accept what they learn in History textbooks. After I completed cycle one, I realised that my task was not an easy one. The experience nevertheless made me more sensitive to the needs of my learners and much more critical of and reflective of my teaching practice.

During the first activity (Re-introducing History), I was still too 'technicist' in my approach

when I simply handed the questionnaire to my learners. Although the learners discussed it diligently, I was under the impression that it will open their minds to think for themselves. I left learners to their own devices. Freire (quoted in Shor, 1987:46) warns us against that type of practice and says:

...I cannot leave the students to themselves because I am trying to be a liberating educator. Laissez-faire! I cannot fall into laissez-faire. On the other hand I cannot be authoritarian...I have to be democratic and responsible...As director of the process, the liberating teacher is not doing something to the students but with the students.

My second activity was also a problem because I assumed that learners have acquired the critical thinking skills I wished them to have inculcated. Although I invited the triangulator to observe and record my actions, I was still too worried about my image as a teacher. This project has certainly shaped my being as well. In hindsight, I should have asked my triangulator to be more critical of how I worked with my learners. A more critical observation of my teaching practice would have been more helpful. In my attempt to change my learners I realised that I needed to change myself. In the next cycle I asked the triangulator to focus and give more in depth comments regarding my critical working relationship with my learners.

In the third activity which was an open book assessment, I observed that some of the learners did not take the test too serious. While some learners were actively engaged with the activity, other learners giggled and were quite distracted. They never saw open book testing as 'real exams'. At the end of the activity, I contemplated whether I was perhaps not being too 'technicist' or too hasty in the manner that I wanted to make my learners critical thinkers. I had to remind myself that developing critical thinking and other democratic skills takes time and this project was merely the start of a long journey for the learners as well as for me.

My second action research cycle also included three activities.

a)The first lesson took place on Wednesday, 13 August 2015. The lesson was about 'Dias and his crew encounter the KhoiKhoi in Mossel Bay, 1488'. The learner's task was to study the pictures and identify words or sentences that described or portrayed 'Dias and the Khoikhoi'.

- b) The second lesson was a narrative account of my experience of voting in South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994. My decision to give a narrative was because the previous activities involved reading and interpreting text from textbooks and other sources. I wanted to expose learners to understand that teachers can also be sources of information for them to interpret History.
- c) The third activity was an open discussion in the class. The aim here was for learners to ask me (the class teacher) questions about my experiences during the period of apartheid.

In choosing these series of lessons I hoped to engage my learners more actively in my classroom activity. These activities must be seen as a continuation of my first action research cycle. During these activities I was still experiencing the problems I encountered in my first cycle. The difference is that in these activities I was more conscious of my actions and responded much better to my learners. However, the learners seemed to respond much better to the activities in the second cycle because they did not have to rely on textbooks and responded much more spontaneously.

I must admit that the action research project was a challenging experience that exposed my weaknesses in my teaching practice. As a teacher I had to accept criticism from my learners. The fact that they were willing to ask probing questions about the textbook and about my experiences during the period of apartheid and post-apartheid is evidence that that they started to think more autonomously and critically.

When reflecting on the methods I employed to improve critical thinking skills in my classroom, I can confidently say that many learners welcomed the change from passive memorisation of content to analysis and comprehension. This became more evident in the second open book test that I had with my Grade 6 learners. The learners may not have fully grasped the critical thinking skills introduced through various activities, but participated increasingly and were much more actively engaged in the lessons.

Many learners have shown that they are willing to ask questions and provide feedback when required to do so. The answers that emerged from group work activities showed that

learners were prepared to think for themselves. I must admit that the answers were not always what I expected to hear, but the mere fact that something new evolved showed creative and critical thinking. Moller et al. (2013:58) sum up thinking creatively as follows: “brainstorming, creating new and worthwhile ideas, elaborating, refining, analysing, and evaluating”.

When I completed my action research project that comprised of two cycles and a series of lessons, I asked my class how they experienced the activities that I was trying to teach them. The following answers by some learners in a feedback session perhaps best indicate whether I achieved some success in my endeavour.

- Sir wants us to think for ourselves.
- We must not accept everything we read in textbooks.
- We can write our own history.
- We need to be critical thinkers yet be discipline.
- Critical thinking is not merely about arguing.
- Critical thinking needs democratic space.

In reflecting on the series of lessons, I have to accept that learners were still grappling to comprehend how to think critically about History. However, the responses from the learners and those of the triangulator indicated to me that change in one’s classroom were not impossible. The main problem now was that, after the series of lessons, would I be able to steer away completely from a ‘technicist’ mode of teaching. The constant worry of completing the syllabus within a set time and the authoritarian attitude of the principal remains a challenging factor to me and does not allow much democratic space for critical thinking.

Reflecting on my action research project helped me to change in a number of ways. I have to admit that I am not the only knowledgeable person in the classroom; it is possible for learners to bring into any discussion their views and understanding. It is possible to construct knowledge in collaboration with learners. However, in the power dynamic that exist in a classroom situation, the teacher remains the person with the biggest influence.



Action research and even more so emancipatory action research have helped me to reflect on my role as a teacher and has even sharpened my critical skills as a teacher-researcher. It has also emancipated my way of thinking in many ways. I began to steer away of becoming a mere teacher technician. As mentioned throughout this mini-thesis, my teaching practice was entrenched in the technical or objectivist mode of teaching (Hoadley & Jansen, 2009:83), and did not always serve the educational needs of my learners. In the past I was over-concerned about disseminating learning material and thought little about what I was actually doing in my classroom. I frequently gave tests to see how well learners have memorised and could recall their school work. I used the high marks of certain learners as an indication that I am a good and successful teacher.

In reflecting further on my teaching practice and the barriers towards a critical environment, I realised that I had to perform a multiplicity of roles in my classroom as an employee of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED). Even though, I am not qualified to teach all the subjects, I am virtually coerced to do so and this was more apparent at the school where I teach. This environment definitely agitates against the concept of critical thinking and the stimulation thereof. In South African public schools, the number of learners determines the number of teachers a school is allocated. In a disadvantaged school the challenge becomes more apparent as teachers teach subjects that they are not specialised in. With overloaded classrooms and huge workloads the implications for critical and innovative thinking becomes more challenging. The school where this research was conducted and where I teach is considered 'poor' because of limited resources. Spaul (quoted in Davids, 2014:4) said the following about learner performance in schools that are not well resourced:

Most schools in poor areas in South Africa are dysfunctional and unable to equip students with the necessary numeracy and literacy skills they should be acquiring at school.

My reflection as a teacher aiming to instil critical thinking skills made me realise that it remains a challenge for me to move from being a conveyor of knowledge to be an agent of change, considering the low levels of numeracy and literacy amongst the learners I teach. Action research, however, provides me with a tool to enhance my teaching and to take up challenges like these.

#### **6.4 The future of action research**

I believe that action research remains a powerful tool to change the 'mindset' of both teachers and learners and can play a significant role in the transformation of education in this country. Here I am drawing on my own experiences after completing an action research project in my classroom.

This action research project was significant, because it empowered me as a teacher and awakened many of my learners to new ways of understanding history content and even the education in general that they receive at school. I wish to restate and confirm what was said by Esau (2010), namely that action research may not be able to solve all the problems in education, but it provides a valuable tool in supporting the transformation of South African education and society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### **6.5 Implications of this Action Research project**

This study was an attempt to teach my Grade 6 learners to think critically about the content in history textbooks. The findings of this study are in line with findings of similar studies, in which primary and secondary school learners were able to acquire the skills of critical thinking (**Hester, 1994; Moeller, Cutler & Fiedler, 2013; Savich, 2009**). **However, what I think made this study unique, is the influence my research had on other teachers and learners that participated in the project in terms of how they may now view education.**

I cannot claim that my action research project was a 'world changer' in its entirety. It nevertheless offered my learners a rare opportunity to experience research first-hand. It is not always possible that learners will get the opportunity to be involved in research in the classroom. When I was conducting research, the atmosphere changed in the classroom. Learners could detect that my teaching methods were different and also open for criticism. I was not rushing to complete the work and move on quickly to the next subject to complete a syllabus. At the end of every activity, there was some reflection by some learners who talked about what they learned. I recently instituted a regular reflective session in the last period of the day to reflect on work done for the day. A reflective pedagogy with the idea of stimulating critical skills amongst Grade 6 learners made my action research project an emancipatory one and more fulfilling.

#### **6.6 Conclusion**

This emancipatory action research process has been a liberating experience. It has indeed been an 'eye-opener' to my learners as well as to me on a personal level. In my experience conducting action research in my classroom, I am convinced that teachers are placed in a unique position to develop the critical and creative abilities of all learners. This action research project highlights the idea that action research and more so emancipatory action research is a viable option that teachers and other practitioners can use to improve their practices.

The research I undertook focused on the improvement of critical thinking skills for my Grade 6 History learners. However, implementing action research opened up a deeper understanding in me, both as a person with particular beliefs about the world and my actions in the classroom. While I was conducting research, I was reminded of Habermas's words: "in a process of enlightenment, there are only participants" (Reason & Bradbury, 2001:8). In the past I walked into the History classroom and considered myself the only constructor of knowledge, while the learners were merely passive recipients. This action research project will definitely have a lasting impact on both the learners and me as teacher-researcher.

Emancipatory action research allowed me to accept that learners' views are as important as my views. The learners and I were constructing knowledge, perhaps for the first time. We must believe that learners do not come to our classes already frozen in history, incapable of escape from the worldly forces which work to limit them. Only when we develop our capacity as teacher-researchers to understand the way **dominant** ideology works to constrain our learners, to keep the poor in their place, to limit women's options, to perpetuate racial oppression, and to foster passive uncritical thinking will history be overcome. Only when we as teachers are able to rescue knowledge from the so-called experts will we control our own professionalism and liberate our learners from the burden of history.

I cannot claim that my research with learners in the short time we had available brought about a more rational, just, democratic and fulfilling form of education. What I can claim is that the research allowed education to move in that direction.

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### ADDENDUM A

2 Mathias Close  
Westgate  
Mitchells Plain  
7789  
20 July 2015

Dear Parents/Guardians

**Re: Permission to involve your son/daughter in an action research project at school.**

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that I intend to do research in my History classroom. The research is primarily about my teaching practice that I want to improve.

I intend to conduct action research in the classroom, which basically means to improve one's practice.

The research will take the form of lessons and the role your child will play is to answer questions based on these lessons. The questions concern understanding of History content and are not designed to elicit any personal information about them or any family member.

In no circumstances will your child's name be used or be forced to participate. Your child will not be required to write their names on the answer sheets. In this way will your child's identity be protected.

The research lessons are planned from 4 August to 20 August 2015 and will take place during normal school hours and will not interfere with contact time for other subjects.

This research has been approved by the principal and governing body of the school.

Please indicate if you approve or do not approve of your child's participation in this research by simply making a cross in one of the blocks.

My son/daughter may participate in the research.	
My son/daughter may not participate in the research.	

Thank you for supporting me in this research.

Yours Sincerely

.....

Mr A K Majiet

NB: If you have any questions regarding my research, or need more information please feel free to call me on 076 227 2526 or email me on [akarriemmajiet@gmail.com](mailto:akarriemmajiet@gmail.com)

## ADDENDUM B

2 Mathias Close  
Westgate  
Mitchells Plain  
7798  
4 March 2015

The Principal/ School governing body  
Western Cape Department of Education  
Thornton Road Primary School  
204 Thornton Road  
Crawford

Dear Sir/Madam

### **Re: Request to conduct research in the school**

I am currently working on my Master's Degree at The University of Stellenbosch. My study is about improving the critical thinking skills of my Grade 6 History learners. The aim of the research is to improve my teaching practice in History.

The type of research is known as action research, which means to improve one's work or any practice a person is involved in. Action research is undertaken by identifying a problem, planning on what to do about it, taking action, observing what one has done and then reflecting on the process. A second process is then undertaken in which the same steps are followed. The result of one's action may then bring about an improvement in one's practice.

Since the research entails the development of critical thinking skills for History, it will be conducted during the time allocated in the school time table for this subject. The research will therefore not impact on teaching time for other subjects.

The focus of the research is on my teaching practice and not on learners who will participate in the project. Their participation involves responding to a series of lessons on critical thinking skills in History.

It is hoped that the learners will learn valuable skills in understanding History content, which will benefit them throughout their schooling and in higher education. The end product will reflect and confirm the experience of my learners in the classroom.

My supervisor for this research is Dr Omar Esau of the University of Stellenbosch.

I, hereby, request permission to carry out the action research with my Grade 6 learners of the school.

A copy of my research proposal is attached in this letter.

Your approval of my request will be highly appreciated.

Yours Sincerely

A.K Majiet

NB: For more information please feel free to contact Abdul Karriem Majiet on 076 227 2526 or email me at: [akarriemmajiet@gmail.com](mailto:akarriemmajiet@gmail.com)

## ADDENDUM C

2 Mathias Close  
Westgate  
Mitchells Plain  
7798  
4 March 2015

Dr A.T Wyngaard  
Director: Research  
Western Cape Department of Education  
Private Bag X9114  
Cape Town  
8000

Dear Sir/Madam

### **Re: Request to conduct research at Thornton Road Primary School**

Dear Sir

I am currently working on my Master's Degree at The University of Stellenbosch. My research topic is, 'Improving the critical thinking skills of my Grade Six History learners'. The aim of the research is to improve my teaching practice in History for primary school learners in the intermediary phase.

The type of study intended will be a qualitative one. The method I will employ is action research, which means to improve one's work or any practice a person is involved in. Action research is undertaken by identifying a problem, planning on what to do about it, taking action, observing what one has done and then reflecting on the process. A second process is then undertaken in which the same steps are followed. The result of one's action may then bring about an improvement in one's practice.

The research will take the form of a series of six lessons and the role your child will play is to answer questions based on these lessons. The questions involve a critical understanding of History that learners must attempt to answer.

Since the research entails the development of critical thinking skills for History, it will be conducted during the time allocated in the school time table for this subject. The research will therefore not impact on teaching time for other subjects.

The focus of the research is on my teaching practice and not on learners who will participate in the project.

It is hoped that the learners will learn valuable skills in understanding History content, which will benefit them throughout their schooling and in higher education. The end product will reflect and confirm the experience of my learners in the classroom.

My supervisor for this research is Dr Omar Esau of the University of Stellenbosch.

I, hereby, request permission to carry out the action research with my Grade 6 learners of the school.

A copy of my research proposal is attached in this letter.

Your approval of my request will be highly appreciated.

Yours Faithfully

A.K Majiet

NB: For more information please feel free to contact Abdul Karriem Majiet on 076 227 2526 or email me at: [akarriemmajiet@gmail.com](mailto:akarriemmajiet@gmail.com)

## ADDENDUM D

[Audrey.wyngaard@westerncape.gov.za](mailto:Audrey.wyngaard@westerncape.gov.za)

tel: +27 021 467 9272

Fax: 0865902282

Private Bag x9114, Cape Town, 8000

wced.wcape.gov.za

**REFERENCE:** 20151111-5149

**ENQUIRIES:** Dr A T Wyngaard

Mr Abdul Majiet  
2 Mathias Close  
Westgate  
Mitchell's Plain  
7789

**Dear Mr Abdul Majiet**

### **RESEARCH PROPOSAL: IMPROVING THE CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS OF LEARNERS IN A GRADE 6 HISTORY CLASS**

Your application to conduct the above-mentioned research in schools in the Western Cape has been approved subject to the following conditions:

1. Principals, educators and learners are under no obligation to assist you in your investigation.
2. Principals, educators, learners and schools should not be identifiable in any way from the results of the investigation.
3. You make all the arrangements concerning your investigation.
4. Educators' programmes are not to be interrupted.
5. The Study is to be conducted from **18 January 2016 till 30 September 2016**
6. No research can be conducted during the fourth term as schools are preparing and finalizing syllabi for examinations (October to December).
7. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey, please contact Dr A.T Wyngaard at the contact numbers above quoting the reference number?
8. A photocopy of this letter is submitted to the principal where the intended research is to be conducted.
9. Your research will be limited to the list of schools as forwarded to the Western Cape Education Department.
10. A brief summary of the content, findings and recommendations is provided to the Director: Research Services.
11. The Department receives a copy of the completed report/dissertation/thesis addressed to:

**The Director: Research Services  
Western Cape Education Department  
Private Bag X9114  
CAPE TOWN**

**8000**

We wish you success in your research.

Kind regards.

Signed: Dr Audrey T Wyngaard

**Directorate: Research**

**DATE: 12 November 2015**



## **Addendum E**

### Observation report 1 (Triangulator)

Date: 4 August 2015

The triangulator's first observation was that the learners were quiet in the first session. He felt that not many learners understood what the research is about. He also thought that some learners were really not interested in the lessons.

He observed that I over explained what was required of learners which took away too much time of the period. He understood that I worked within a strict time limit and recommended that I simplify what I intend to do. Also, he felt that I must allow learners to make mistakes and not to correct them in front of the class.

### Observation Report 2 (Triangulator)

Date: 6 August 2015

The triangulator thought that more learners responded to my lessons because I simplified the questions. He felt that some learners were still too quiet boredom and did not participate enough. He observed that when questions were asked that they could relate to, it showed an improvement in developing the critical thinking skills for History.

He recommended that I must incorporate more group work in the lessons.

## **ADDENDUM F**

Observation Report (Triangulator)

Date: 13 August 2015

The triangulator was pleased that the lessons were going well. He attributed that to my ability to simplify my language and using the examples provided by learners to explain difficult concepts.

His concern was that there were still too many learners that were indifferent to what was happening in the class. He felt some groups played a minimal role in the class discussions and it was always the same learners that responded to questions.

The triangulator recommended that I must spend more time with learners or groups that struggle with the work instead of standing in front of the class and writing down some responses on the chalk board.

Overall, the triangulator felt that I managed responses much better and that more learners were now participating in class discussions or individually in their groups.

## ADDENDUM H

### Lesson 2

Answer the following questions to the best of your ability:

1. What is your understanding of History?

.....  
.....

2. Why do you think the study of History is important?

.....  
.....

3. What did you enjoy about the study of History? You can give any example/s?

.....  
.....  
.....

4. Do you know what critical thinking is? If you do not know, just say No. If you do, give a short explanation.

.....  
.....

5. Write a short account of the History of your country.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

## ADDENDUM I

### Lesson 2

#### Conflicting evidence on Great Zimbabwe

##### Who built Great Zimbabwe?

The ruins of Great Zimbabwe are awesome and stirring because they are so massive and well preserved. By the time whites came upon them nobody lived there anymore. White explorers found traces of gold and beautiful carved statues of birds (and other animals). They were inspired by the way the building had been constructed without any kind of cement and the carefully laid patterns in the walls. They wondered who had built these mysterious structures.

Read extracts A and B on the next page, then answer the following questions:

Extract A:

Without the capital (money) and without the co-operation needed to create capital, no great urban and technological civilization can be achieved. Therefore it is clear that the ruins of great Zimbabwe which were seen by foreigners in the sixteenth century could not have been built by the Bantu then, or at an earlier period. They had not yet developed to the stage where they could design and build such immense works. The incredible work involved could not have been done by a Bantu society, then or now, unless under the whip of the slave – owner.

Extract B:

Great Zimbabwe is the name given to the place where some Shona rulers lived. The word “Zimbabwe” is a Shona word which means “the dwelling of a chief”. There are so many Zimbabwe’s in the countries that are called Mozambique and Zimbabwe. This is because Shona ruling groups settled in many parts of these countries. But the most famous Zimbabwe is the large stone buildings known as Great Zimbabwe. From the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, one group of powerful Shona rulers lived at great Zimbabwe and the huge buildings were built during this time.

Great Zimbabwe was built on and around a high rock called M wana Hill. It is in the middle of a valley. The outside walls are 10 metres high and 5 metres thick. They are made of granite rock. This kind of rock breaks easily into squares. The squares of rock were put next to each other without anything to hold them together. The buildings of great Zimbabwe were the biggest buildings in Africa, to the south of the Sahara desert.

[Adapted from What is History? Page 31-32]

Compare and Contrast the two texts.

1. What is Great Zimbabwe ?

.....  
.....

2. Choose the sentence from extract A which expresses the writer's opinion on who built Great Zimbabwe.

.....  
.....

3. Choose the sentence from extract B which expresses the writer's opinion on who built Great Zimbabwe.

.....  
.....

4. Can you think of a reason to explain the viewpoints of the two writers?

.....  
.....  
.....

## Addendum J

### Lesson 1 (Cycle 2)

1. How are the Europeans portrayed in the extract?

.....  
.....  
.....

2. How are the Khoikhoi portrayed?

.....  
.....  
.....

3. What is the impression you the writer is trying to give us.

.....  
.....  
.....

4. Compare the information given about the Europeans to the information given about the Khoikhoi.

.....  
.....  
.....

5. From whose perspective as you think this History was written from?

.....  
.....  
.....

## Addendum K

### Lesson 2 (Cycle 2)

1. Interpret the following extracts. Compare the two accounts.  
.....  
.....  
.....
2. What are the differences between the extracts?  
.....  
.....  
.....
3. In which extracts are evidence (proof)?  
.....  
.....  
.....
4. From whose perspective is each extract written? Which account contains more detailed information?  
.....  
.....  
.....
5. Synthesize the material. How can we put the material together in order to make sense of it. Is it logical/does it make sense?  
.....  
.....  
.....
6. Can we simply relive everything we read in History textbooks?  
Give reasons for your answer.  
.....  
.....  
.....