History education in post-apartheid South Africa

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To what extent should a society remember or forget the past? Can history education have a role to play in peace and reconciliation? Can it become a vehicle for teaching the values and skills of democracy? These are all critical questions facing Colombia today – and were, and still are, questions facing South Africa. While all national contexts are different, there may be lessons which Colombia could learn from the South African experience.

I shall attempt to answer these questions by drawing on my own experiences in South Africa, not as a curriculum developer or an education official, but from my experience working with two groups of young South Africans aged between 17 and 20. The first group are all studying history at school and their teachers are part of professional development programme I am involved in; the second are first year education students at university, most of whom did not study history at school. The workshops were held in two very different contexts: the first in the city of Cape Town (urban); the second at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, a conservative rural setting.

There are three principles which I believe are important in thinking about history education in a post-conflict society and which underpin my work.
1. Firstly, remembering or forgetting the past is a complex political as well as educational decision. South Africa tried both. During the years of reconciliation after our first democratic elections in 1994, history was removed from the first post-apartheid curriculum. However, the belief of the Minister of Education that it is important to know about the past in order to deal with it for a better future, saw history put back in the curriculum during a second curriculum revision. It is my belief, too, that it is better to remember than to forget, for the past will not simply go away and if it is ignored, it will come back to haunt you. The next two principles are closely related to this.

2. Secondly, if history education is to contribute to national reconciliation then the old national narrative that was taught during the years of conflict, cannot be simply replaced with a new national narrative. The kind of history curriculum developed after the conflict should provide the space for the narratives of all groups within a country. It should also enable students to gain an understanding of the conflict from different perspectives and in terms of human behaviour and choices.

3. And thirdly and most critically, is it not just what is taught that matters, but also how it is taught. Attention needs to be given to appropriate teacher training in post-conflict societies. This seldom happens and did not happen in South Africa. Teachers in post-conflict societies are expected to teach new attitudes and values. However, their identities have been shaped by their particular experiences during the conflict and without the right support, they will struggle to be the transformative agents that the new society demands they become.
In this presentation, I will first briefly discuss the nature of apartheid and the legacy of the conflict. I will then address the questions posed through a discussion of the workshop experiences. The workshops were extensions of a programme that I co-founded with Facing History and Ourselves, USA and Shikaya, a non-profit organisation in Cape Town. The programme, called *Facing the Past – Transforming our Future*, provides strategies and support for history teachers to teach difficult histories, in particular the recent apartheid history.

**Apartheid South Africa – a racial conflict**

South Africa’s conflict was racial. Apartheid was a system of legalised segregation, which aimed to protect white power and the white ‘race’. A series of laws were passed between 1949 and 1954 which divided South Africans into difference racial groups, prohibited marriages between different ‘races’, and allocated segregated geographical spaces in which to live. Racial segregation enabled lines to be drawn between ‘us ‘and ‘them’. This led to stereotyping and discrimination and resulted in the formation of deep-rooted racialised identities.

Education was a tool for division, repression and indoctrination (Kallaway, 1984, p. 8). The curriculum deliberately inculcated notions of white superiority and black inferiority. Education for all children emphasized rote learning and discouraged questioning or critical engagement in the classroom. History was presented as a set of objective and neutral facts. The national narrative in all history textbooks, was the story of white Afrikaners who were in power during apartheid.

**Traumatic legacy**

The reality for the majority of South Africans was both subtle and overt daily humiliation and undermining of dignity. Humiliation, within the modern human rights discourse, is the ‘enforced lowering of any person or group by a process of subjugation that damages their dignity; ‘to be humiliated’ is to be placed in a situation...in a demeaning and damaging way’ (Lindner, 2006a, p. xiv). This has left deep psychological scars. However, something not often acknowledged is that perpetrators, too, are psychologically damaged. There is evidence that people who actually commit atrocities do not succeed in getting rid of their post-traumatic symptoms. Studies on perpetrators found that many people who engage in intense violence against others are deeply affected by their own actions (Staub et.al., 2005, p. 300). In South Africa former victims and perpetrators have to live and make sense of the past together. This has resulted in a complex and traumatic post-apartheid legacy. Sixteen years after apartheid ended, in the words of leading South African academic, Mamphele Ramphele:

…we still struggle to find closure on many issues related to the past. This is in part because the wounds are still raw. It is also because we have difficulty acknowledging the depths of our trauma. (Mamphele Ramphele, 2008)

This legacy is the context in which the teacher development programme *Facing the Past – Transforming our Future* was set up. It was to fill the gap of inappropriate teacher training for the new national curriculum that was introduced from 2002.

The Facing the Past programme aims to do three things:

1. engage teachers with personal legacies of apartheid
2. enable teachers to teach a difficult past through understanding their own apartheid experience,
3. encourage students to become caring and committed citizens of the new South African democracy.

Enabling teachers to teach a difficult history and to create a safe space for students to engage with the apartheid past, contributes to reconciliation and peace. It provides a way of teaching about the past when that history still evokes passionate responses from students.

While the Facing the Past work is mainly with teachers, we have recently become involved with workshops for young people. More than any other aspect of our work, this has demonstrated the importance of knowing about the past, of not forgetting but coming to terms with the past in a way the enables them to move on.

I will illustrate this by discussing two recent workshops with students. Both groups are what literature refers to as the second generation – in this case, children of both victims and perpetrators. The first workshop which was held in Cape Town included Grade 11 students from various schools in the city. They are all history students, and they have all studied apartheid history and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). They are all being taught by teachers on the Facing the Past programme. The group was racially diverse and all, except those from a school in a poor area which has students who are all black, attend schools with racially diverse students and teachers.

The second workshop, held at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, included a racially diverse group of first year education students. We took 11 Facing the Past teachers with us to work with some 350 students. The Free State is predominantly Afrikaans-speaking and the majority of the white South Africans in the province come from conservative families. The Free State is largely a farming province/region, with authoritarian and paternalistic relations between the white farmers and their black labourers. Although all South African schools are by law desegregated, the white Afrikaner students mostly went to de facto segregated schools. The only interaction they had with black South Africans during their years at school, was the hierarchical relationship on the farms. As university students they are living in racially mixed residences. Many former white schools in the Free State province have phased out history to avoid teaching about apartheid. The difference between the ways in which the two groups of students engage or refuse to engage with the past could not have been more striking. I would argue that at the heart of the difference is the way in which knowledge about the apartheid past has been passed on to or withheld from them.

The students of the Facing the Past teachers at the Cape Town workshop, although a year younger than the Free State students, demonstrated greater maturity in the way in which they think about the past. The quotes that I use are transcripts of a group discussion during the workshop which was videotaped. I will highlight just a few relevant views that were expressed about the past, their parents and their own roles in creating a better future.
The knowledge that the past won’t just go away and that they as young South Africans had to deal with it in order to move forward was clearly articulated by one student:

I think that the reason people don’t want to speak about the injustices of the past is because they want to forget it. But they don’t realize that to forget it, you actually have to deal with it. You can’t just, it’s not gonna go away by itself. You have to sit and work through it.

He went on to express the inter-generational tension experienced in dealing with the past:

And, I think, that’s what our parents don’t realize. We have to deal with it on a daily basis, but they didn’t because of when they grew up. And that’s what makes it harder for us and for them because they come with their certain set of mindsets and they impose that on us and we come to school and it’s different. So, it is harder for them, but at the same time, we have to set the record straight. (Rondebosch Boy 2 – Coloured)

They understood that they have to deal with their parents’ prejudices and that the experiences of the two generations were and are different:

…it’s difficult for our parents, I think we’re all learning and I think it’s important to learn together. We have to understand that our parents are trying to grasp the concepts that we’re learning here, we’re learning at school, so it’s hard …to understand. (Herschel girl - black)

Another noted:

…my parents, because of apartheid, we don’t have, our parents don’t have any black friends. And so that rubs off on us. You know, issues of race, it doesn’t occur to them that we go to school and there’s other, like, people, different races are all mixed together. (Rondebosch Boy 1 - white)

Dating across the ‘colour line’ continues to be contentious among the parents:

And I can’t explain the shock to me when someone told me, this white girl told me, that her mom had actually said to her …’I don’t want you to date this coloured guy.’ And obviously she couldn’t date him, and I was just like so shocked because I thought that parents were over this… people are still holding onto all these preconceived ideas about different people and different races. (Wynberg Girls - black)

I remember a friend that dated a coloured girl. And our community is only a black community. So when he came with his girlfriend there in the community, people seen [sic] like a ghost or something. So, it’s going to take time to make people understand that we’re not different, we’re the same. (ID Mkize boy - black)

These students demonstrated an understanding not only of the complexity of apartheid, but also the complexity and trauma of the apartheid legacy. They understood their role to be one of building the future of the country.
The interaction with the students at the University of the Free State was very different. The white Afrikaans-speaking students are angry about the past and feel victimised. Because so few schools in the Free State offer history as a subject in Grades 10 – 12 – the students have half formed ideas of apartheid inherited from their parents. The comments quoted are from evaluations which we did at various points during the workshop.

Their anger is expressed in denial that that past and racism has anything to do with them:

I don’t want to hang on to things which happened in the past the whole time… it is past – it is behind us… (White student – author’s translation)

I personally think that what happened in the past has nothing to do with us… I don’t even really know what happened in apartheid and I also don’t want to know. (Author’s translation – white student)

Refusing to offer history at school or to learn about the past is a form of denial. Anger and apparent indifference is often a response to shameful knowledge, a protective shield. A husband and wife psychologist team, the Mitscherlichs, in their study of post-Nazi Germany, called this ‘the inability to mourn…the result of an intensive defense against guilt, shame, and anxiety.” (Alexander and Margaret Mitscherlich (1975) The Inability to Mourn, p. 23)

The black students in the group demonstrated immense sympathy with the anxieties of their fellow white students. One wrote:

The white students carry so much guilt - I just wish I could tell them all that it was not their fault.

A consequence of the denial is that not knowing increases the anger and sense of guilt and shame. They are taking on the burden of their parents but don’t know enough about the past to deal with it. The relief for white students when they were able to express some of their feelings in the safe space provided by the Facing the Past teachers, is expressed in the next two comments:

It helped me today to talk about it because it hurts me… what the white people did to the blacks in those days. I feel disappointed in us as whites that we could have done such things. (Author’s translation)

Another white student wrote:

I came here thinking that as a white person my opinions would not be accepted. It was completely the opposite… (Author’s translation)

For many of those who chose to stay, the workshop began a process of rethinking the past. The following comment is representative of many:

In the beginning I was negative about the workshop, but in the end I was pleased that I attended the whole workshop… I now see things very differently and from various perspectives. I am very inspired. (author’s translation – white student)
The transformation process for these students, given the deeply conservative nature of many of their families, will perhaps be more difficult than it is for their urban counterparts in Cape Town.

Changes also took place among black students:

The course has been quite an eye opener. I at first thought this was just a waste of time to open issues or talk about what basically happened years ago. But at the end it has become so close to my heart to know… I am very passionate about change because I believe that our generation is the key to that. Because some are being channelled by friends and family, it will take time. But I believe that through hard work and determination it will happen. Change will come.

Many students, both black and white, wrote that it was the first time that they had shared ideas with peers of a different ‘race’.

It is one thing to put history back into the curriculum; it is another to make sure that it does not continue to divide. The role of the teacher is critical to the process of enabling young people to engage responsibly with the recent past. The key role played by the Facing the Past teachers in the Free State can be seen in some of the comments. One student wrote:

I was afraid and shy to talk early in the morning as I thought that whatever I was saying was wrong and other students are going to judge me. But basically this was really fantastic as I was able to talk freely in the end. The more I talk, speak, share, listen, I gained [sic] confidence. (black student)

…workshops like these help us to know how to deal with sensitive topics. It also shows that we can work together and that we aren’t as different from each other as we thought. It makes us open-minded. In this way we can work to universal values and goals and treat each other as equals. (white student – author translation)

You told us how to discuss difficult topics and humbled us by what we learned from each other. Learned to embrace differences and communicate! (white student – author translation)

The importance of understanding and communicating about the past was articulated by a number of students:

…it was very healing because we got a chance to take [sic] a few things off our chests…If other people came out of this workshop the same as they came in, one day [they] will regret it because they were given a chance to change their life. (black student)

New insights were gained about their role as responsible citizens in a fragile democracy:

It opened my eyes. I learned your past is always part of your future and it is what you make of it. (white student - author’s translation)

…our generation has the power to change all of this so that our children can live together in peace. (white student – author’s translation)
The conclusions drawn from these interactions can really only be tentative at this point – far more research needs to be conducted. However, indications emerging from the workshops are that knowledge about the traumatic past in the curriculum, mediated by teachers appropriately trained, enables students to process the ‘troubled’ knowledge in a way that helps them to move on from the past. Many of the white Afrikaner students feel trapped in the past, and unable to distance themselves from the trauma of their parents. Unconsciously they are taking on the burden of their parents. The Cape Town students, by contrast, were able to discuss the complexities of the past without the crippling sense of guilt or shame. They understand that they have to deal with their parents’ unfinished business and that they, too, are partly shaped by the past through their parents.