

## Research Brief

# History Education Reform, Transitional Justice and the Transformation of Identities

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The essential goal of education is to transform children into citizens who can function beyond the circle of the family. Within education, history may be the discipline that is most inherently conservative, as it has traditionally been the venue in which group cohesion and patriotism have been inculcated. In deeply divided societies, particularly after identity-based conflicts, in which the polarization of identities has acquired a “zero-sum” nature due to violence, fear and mistrust, history is a particularly problematic subject. Yet, changes in the ways that groups are portrayed in textbooks and classrooms can promote truth-telling and acknowledgment, and can be a distinct dimension of moral repair in the wake of mass atrocity.

Through representation, inclusion and new ways of approaching stories about the past, history can also contribute to the transformation of identities—of how students see themselves and the groups with which they most closely identify. It can also reshape how students perceive groups that have come to be seen as the “other”—that is, outside their own circle of moral responsibility, less deserving of human rights, threatening, disloyal and generally negative or inferior.

## Why Teach History?

In countries where the wounds of identity-based conflict are fresh, there are questions about whether, how and at what age children should learn about parts of the nation’s past—usually the recent past—that are difficult and expose deeply opposing views. This debate took place in South Africa after apartheid. Initially, some reformers argued that history was not useful in helping the majority of South African children—deeply disadvantaged black South African children—finish their compulsory education and prepare to get jobs.

Pro-history reformers prevailed, however, arguing that that history education would strengthen democracy and a culture of human rights through three means: teaching human evolution with scientific accuracy; presenting the history of all the people who reside in South Africa; and transmitting the history of past human rights abuses in

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**Research Project**

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**Identities in Transition**

In post conflict societies, histories of exclusion, racism and nationalist violence often create divisions so deep that finding a way to agree on the atrocities of the past seems near-impossible. This project seeks, first, to ensure that transitional justice measures are sensitive to the ways in which targeting people on the basis of their ethnic or religious identity may cause distinctive harms and, second, to clarify the difficult political challenges that arise in societies where communities are not ready to cooperate, or even agree on a definition of who the victims are. If transitional justice can find ways to act as a means of political learning across communities, foster trust and recognition, and if it can serve to breakdown harmful myths and stereotypes, then this will be at least a small step toward meeting the challenges for transitional justice in divided societies. The project is managed by Paige Arthur, Deputy Director for Institutional Development at ICTJ.

order to prevent their instrumentalization and, ultimately, their repetition. Additionally, understanding history itself as a subject—how historical evidence is uncovered and its implications debated—was seen not as a luxury but rather as a valuable component in the formation of active citizens.

### Focus on Curriculum vs. Focus on Pedagogy

Much attention is given to reforming curriculum, such as textbooks, by those hoping to contribute to conflict resolution and achieve justice for victims of past atrocities. In two-state cases, for example, a recent effort has been to create a mutually intelligible “bridging discourse” that minimizes disagreements, rather than a substantially new narrative that a majority of citizens can agree on. This goal, difficult at best in interstate contexts, faces overwhelming challenges in the aftermath of intrastate conflicts, where communities that had become enemies must coexist in one polity.

Further, when done in isolation, curriculum reform faces serious obstacles. Both students and teachers may resist the new narratives, even dismissing them as “enemy” propaganda. Not all teachers may be committed to the new curriculum, and those who are may have their authority challenged by students unwilling to go along with narratives that clash with what they learn at home and in their communities. Schools may have become, or may remain, largely segregated. Finally, teachers trained in more traditional methods of teaching history—with an emphasis on memorizing facts and a focus on elite and military history, simple and heroic narratives, and treating students as passive receivers of information instead of active learners—may not know how to make use of new materials that assume not only different content but a different approach to history as a subject.

Increasingly, experts in history education reform are focusing on pedagogy reform, specifically on teachers being of equal, or perhaps greater, importance than teaching materials. For example, Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO), a teacher training organization, has developed a professional development methodology that uses events in other countries as a way of addressing one’s own past, particularly when parts of one’s own past are still too divisive or emotional to approach in the classroom.

FHAO searches for ways to help teachers and students connect historical events related to violence and human rights violations to moral and civic challenges in their own lives. Concepts such as judgment, reconciliation and resistance to injustice are important pillars of FHAO’s curriculum. In South Africa, FHAO helped start a professional development project for teachers to create discussions on the Holocaust, U.S. race issues and other case studies, since teachers and their students find safety in this distance from their own past. FHAO has also used this methodology in its transitional justice module.

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## Linking History Education to Transitional Justice

Although a number of truth commissions have made recommendations for educational reform, the extent to which they have been implemented is unclear. In Sierra Leone and Peru, for example, truth commissions produced materials for classroom use, including guidelines for teachers, but the materials have not been made an official part of the school program in either country. As a result, it appears unlikely they are having the impact the planners of these two truth commissions had hoped.

While South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) itself did not produce a didactic version of its report, or even an abridged version intended for and easily available to a general audience, South Africa has nonetheless made considerable commitments in education policy and curriculum to teaching about apartheid and the issues taken up by the TRC—guilt, healing and reconciliation. The TRC and the challenges of facing the past and how it relates to the nation's future is a theme presented briefly in the national Curriculum Document, and in more detail in the national Assessment Document.

Beginning in 2008, the TRC—specifically, the debates around it and how it contributed to national healing—was the topic of one of four essay questions on the national matriculation history exam. However, the history exam is not compulsory nor is the TRC question a required one since students write only two essays. South African educators are concerned that the number of students selecting history is declining, that students, mainly white but some black as well, have begun to find the TRC and apartheid boring; there is also felt to be a danger that representations of history now may alienate white students by appearing to implicate them in guilt for the past.

Even when the setting is not the difficult post-transitional period, education faces many challenges: it tends to be conservative when it comes to social change; it is tasked with filling many needs for many different groups; and it is chronically under-resourced. However, education itself can be considered a “justice” institution, as it is where students first come into contact with official structures of their society, its basic narratives and its values. Rwanda's pre-genocide school system had been a microcosm of the ethnic injustices, blind obedience to authority and everyday violence and exclusion that led to the genocide. Children are strongly aware of injustices in their school. Thus, transitional justice actors cannot afford to ignore education.

## Conclusion

Sophisticated studies of historical learning in Northern Ireland and Spain, among other places, show that history can be made interesting to students and can offer them new insights into the difficult pasts and contemporary dilemmas of their societies, challenging more simplistic and partisan stories they hear at home. But some preparatory work with teachers should be done first.

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### About the Authors

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In tension-filled, post-conflict societies, it makes sense for transitional justice initiatives to focus on working with teachers. In order to ensure proper instruction on these complex issues, educational experts should ensure teachers learn pedagogical techniques that are inclusive, respect the intelligence of children and nurture inquiry rather than a demand for simple answers. Transitional justice experts should engage teachers, in professional development venues designed for them, with difficult issues from the past themselves before they try to tackle them in the classroom.

Clearly, in the interests of transitional justice, truth commissions as well as historical commissions and courts could go further than they have to date in having on-staff educators who work as liaisons to the educational community, providing outreach and workshops for teachers and creating didactic materials for teachers to use in classrooms. But without ensuring that teachers feel familiar and comfortable with teaching the materials, and without broader educational reform efforts, in which justice, equity and respect are modeled in the school system itself, these efforts, outreach and materials may be wasted. Including pedagogical reform as a part of comprehensive history education reform is likelier to make a contribution to transforming negative group stereotypes and defusing divisive narratives about the past than curriculum reform alone.

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The International Center for Transitional Justice assists countries pursuing accountability for past mass atrocity or human rights abuse. ICTJ works in societies emerging from repressive rule or armed conflict, as well as in established democracies where historical injustices or systemic abuse remain unresolved. To learn more, visit [www.ictj.org](http://www.ictj.org).

