

## FACING HISTORY AND OURSELVES IN POST-CONFLICT SOCIETIES

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*I met again with the teachers of College of St Andre Preparatory School. We gathered in a classroom just as a storm was breaking out. The electricity went out and we had just enough light to read and write. I really am appreciating what we are doing, sitting in this circle, the 10 of us. I read and Innocent (the Rwandan who is facilitating the workshop with me) translates line by line. Translation in Kinyanwanda is a community activity. I know the group is following along with my reading but I am unsure if they understand it all, but when they start debating Innocent's word choice, I see that major concepts have been understood, they are choosing the best words to capture what I've read. I read "Hell has No Bottom" and "Choiceless Choices", two very difficult readings from Holocaust and Human Behavior in any case but somehow more powerful and touching sitting in the dark in a place where the memory of genocide is fresh. Each line that Innocent translated inspired comments, efforts at precision in translation, sometimes gasps, sometimes active expressions of disgust or sadness. In both readings, morality came up and I heard a word that sounded familiar. I asked them to spell it. UBMUNTU- It means something like ubuntu, the idea that your morality is tied to your humanity, your respect for humanity and that your humanity is diminished by diminishing someone else's humanity.*

The workshop on which the Director of International Programs at Facing History and Ourselves was reporting took place in Rwanda in 2008. Facing History and Ourselves has been working in secondary schools and classrooms in North America and Europe for over three decades, providing a model of educational intervention and professional development that helps teachers and their students make the essential connections between history and the moral choices they confront in their own lives. Through in-depth study of cases of mass atrocity and genocide, Facing History engage teachers and students in a critical exploration of the steps that led to full scale violence and destruction, as well as strategies for prevention and positive participation to sustain democracy.

Since 2003, the global work of Facing History and Ourselves has included the facilitation of teacher training seminars in South Africa, Rwanda and Northern Ireland and the development of appropriate follow-up strategies tailored to each country's needs and educational context. Importantly, each of these countries is emerging from a history of violence, division and betrayal and each is at a significant point in the process of transition. These countries are places where the leftovers of recent conflict remain painfully present, and where teachers, charged with the responsibility of imparting to their student historical narrative that is itself still the subject of intense controversy, are struggling with the burden of their own memories. Facing History's experience in each of these countries demonstrate the enormous challenges that confront educators, who, too often, are left to address conflicts and to promote reconciliation without the necessary tools and support.

The intellectual and pedagogic framework of Facing History and Ourselves is built upon a synthesis of history and ethics for effective history education.<sup>1</sup> In its classrooms, a carefully structured methodology is utilized to provoke thinking about complex questions of citizenship and human behavior. The focal case study is an in-depth study of the failure of democracy in Germany and the events leading to the Holocaust. Its core resource text, *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior* embodies a sequence of study that begins with identity—first individual identity and then group and national identities with their definitions of membership.<sup>2</sup> From there the materials examine the failure of democracy in Germany and the steps leading to the Holocaust—the most documented case of twentieth-century indifference, de-humanization, hatred, racism, antisemitism, and mass murder. It goes on to explore

difficult questions of judgment, memory, and legacy, and the necessity for responsible civic participation to prevent injustice and protect democracy in the present and future. The language and vocabulary that are taught throughout are tools for entry into the history – words like perpetrator, victim, defender, bystander, opportunist, rescuer, and upstander. Students learn that terms like identity, membership, legacy, denial, responsibility, and judgment can help them understand complicated history, as well as connect the lessons of that history to the questions they face in their own worlds.

In Facing History classrooms, middle and high school students learn to think about individual decision-making and to exercise the faculty of making moral judgments. The pedagogy speaks to the adolescent's newly discovered ideas of subjectivity, competing truths and differing perspectives, along with the growing capacity to think hypothetically and the inclination to find personal meaning in newly introduced phenomena. Young people come to their schooling already struggling with matters of obedience, loyalty, fairness, difference, and acceptance, rooted in their own identities and experience. By exploring a question in an historical case such as - why some people willingly conform to the norms of a group even when those norms encourage wrongdoing, while others speak out and resist- Facing History offers students a framework and a vocabulary for making connections and to ask how they can make difference in the present and future.

Using a case study of another time and place, in which universal themes of human behavior, choice and decision making are embedded, which is the core of Facing History and Ourselves, is critical to eliciting significant discussion, analysis and reflection about that history. Examining the collapse of democracy in Weimar Germany, the rise of the Nazis, the role of propaganda, conformity and obedience in turning neighbor against neighbor, and examples of courage, compassion and resistance have provided the needed perspective to

talk about both the past and the present. Studying such resources as an interview with a concentration camp commander; a story of a university professor in Germany; and a video about a village in France where Jews were hidden have offered entry points for discussion of perpetrators, bystanders and rescuers as well as the meaning of ethical decision making in both a particular and a universal context, all with a distance that talking about their own history does not yet allow.

In South Africa, Rwanda and Northern Ireland, Facing History and Ourselves has generally begun its work by collaborating with others to support teachers and build the necessary bridges for reconciliation. Working an outside organization, Facing History can and has acted as a medium for bringing together individuals and groups that do not have a history of working together or who have been on opposite sides of the conflict. In each country the work has been profoundly shaped by the socio-political context, the history of the conflict and the way that the major violence ended.

During the period of apartheid in South Africa, history and civic education was used for the purposes of indoctrination. In 1996, Curriculum 2005 (named for the year in which its provisions would be fully implemented) one of the first curricula interventions in the post apartheid period removed history from the required course of study. Over the next five years, amidst a new socio-political context, dramatized by the ongoing hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission as well as increased violence and more distance from the transition, and, importantly, the appointment of a new Minister of Education, a series of proposals and reports on

curricula revision called for the re-emergence of history - but framed as human rights education with a clear emphasis on the ideals and practices of a democratic society. The revision further emphasized that history education would best be done through a process of inquiry and assumed that teachers and students would acquire both the skills and the dispositions necessary to subject versions of historical truth to rigorous analysis.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as Gail Weldon, Senior Curriculum Planner ((History) for the Western Cape Education Department, has pointed out,

“A society emerging from conflict is relationally fragile. Rebuilding what has fallen apart is centrally the process of rebuilding relational spaces that hold society together, and lasting peace requires changes in the attitudes of people in each group towards the other and changes in ways of handling conflict. For education to succeed in inculcating new democratic values in a non-racial society, it is the attitudes of educators, forged by apartheid racism, that need to change in order for the trans-generational transfer of racial ‘knowledge’ to be interrupted in the classroom. What is currently being demanded of history teachers in South Africa is that they become change agents for democracy, teaching new values and civic responsibility. However, little regard has been given to the years of conditioning of attitudes and prejudices under apartheid; to the extent to which the trauma is still raw; and the ghosts of the past that are refusing to be exorcised. Change at classroom level is the most difficult to achieve, and yet it is there where it matters the most, not only in terms of curricular knowledge, but for inculcating the democratic values for the new society.”<sup>4</sup>

It was in this context that Facing History and Ourselves began working in South Africa, beginning as a partnership with South African organizations to create a teacher support program called “Facing the Past-Transforming our Future”.<sup>5</sup> The program was specifically designed to align with the required curriculum for years 9 and 11, and to meet a gap that the current education system could not fill. Using the model created by Facing History and Ourselves, Facing the Past is creating resources to teach about the history of Apartheid in South Africa. It also offers professional development in the form of in-depth seminars to help teachers confront a divided past and then to think about how to engage their students in approaching that history and think about its legacies for their

present and future. In addition, follow-up workshops and individualized follow-up not only help teachers to implement the resources and methodology, but also provide a critical medium for support.

In Rwanda, in the wake of the 1994 genocide, the new government called for a moratorium on history education and the development of history resources. This action was an explicit acknowledgement of the role that history education played in the genocide and in the history of the country before 1994. Successive governments then looked to the teaching of history to shape a new and unified Rwandan identity. In 2004, Facing History and Ourselves was invited to collaborate in a project that would respond to the absence of education in reconciliation and to develop resources for history education that would focus on decision-making and not treating events, in this case genocide, as inevitable.<sup>6</sup> During this time, Facing History also provided training to the over 60 participants in the project, emphasizing the close connection between content and methodology.

Facing History has continued to provide professional development to Rwandan educators in the form of seminars and follow up support. Thus far more than 250 educators have been trained, including pre-service instructors at the National University of Rwanda and the Kigali Institute of Education. to develop resources for a new curriculum including the introduction and growth of democratic teaching methodologies. The challenges were apparent from the outset, including that of introducing a pedagogy that embraced student centered inquiry and learning into traditionally authoritarian, teacher-centered classrooms. Moreover, teachers were being asked to engage in open discussion about competing historical narratives in a political context in which such

openness could be seen as divisive and leading to the disunity that threatened government policy. Teachers in professional development seminars often branded the investigation of such subjects as identity, group membership, ethnicity, and genocide itself as too risky in an environment where divisions still exist.

The Facing History and Ourselves case study on Weimar Germany and the steps that eventually led to the Holocaust, however, provided Rwandan educators with the intellectual, psychic and political distance to confront their own past.. The case study does not ask teachers to make facile comparisons to Rwandan history and the events leading to the genocide. Nor does it create parallels between the Tutsi and the Jews of Europe or the Hutu and the National Socialists. Rather, the resources allow educators to engage in critical discussions and to identify universal themes, resonant historical patterns and aspects of human behavior.<sup>7</sup> Making connections from the Weimar resources to Rwandan history, for example, teachers have identified economic instability in the 1980s and 90s as well as increasing racial discrimination, a rise in propaganda and an emphasis on conformity and obedience to authority. And, in the discussion about the Holocaust in the workshop cited at the opening of this article, Rwandan teachers raised questions about the implications of collaboration by victims, the challenges of decision-making *in extremis* and a need to maintain what they referred to as morality or a commitment to humanity, even in the most desperate situations. The conversation was filled with references to the period of the genocide and decisions made by people they knew, including family members, colleagues and themselves.

Compared to Rwanda and South Africa, Northern Ireland is often considered more stable. Owing a good deal to its location in the west, its participation in the

European Union and its firm designation as a developed country, the Northern Ireland that was captured in black and white photographs in the 1970s has been transformed. This economic transformation, however, masks a long brewing conflict, commonly referred to as “the troubles”. While major violence ended in the 1990s, the ingredients of the conflict are very much at work and have become the normative context for the people of the country. A dual system of Catholic and Protestant schools has existed since the 1930’s; more recently integrated schools have been established although still educating a small minority of the country’s young people.<sup>8</sup> A review of curriculum currently being implemented asks teachers to address past and present conflict by seeking

“to develop young people’s knowledge, understanding and skills and, more specifically, to encourage young people to see themselves as individuals, contributors to society and contributors to the economy and environment. The history curriculum is organized around the same over-arching themes: thus, young people will be encouraged to explore how history has influenced their own personal identity, the historical use and justification of stereotypes, and the motives and legacy of individuals who have taken a stand. Under the society strand they will explore the notion of citizenship, examine how key events or ideas have impacted on the way of life of culture of communities, and consider situations in which ethical (or unethical) decisions have been made. In all of this work they will be encouraged to identify issues in history which are contested and learn about the use of evidence to explore different understandings and perspectives.”<sup>9</sup>

As in South Africa and Rwanda, the work of Facing History and Ourselves in Northern Ireland offers an intervention with teachers and students that explores an historical case study of prejudice, hatred and mass violence that is distant enough to allow critical analysis and yet illuminates the issues of human behavior and moral decision making that are embedded in the current struggle. Doing so, however, has clearly confirmed the need for intensive and systematic teacher training that several studies have articulated.<sup>10</sup> It has also elicited the apathy, indifference and fatalism felt by so many teachers who, in the

words of seminar facilitators, “are ill prepared for the classroom, particularly in a divided society for they have all been worn down by this conflict, and...they are tired; they are weary; they want to come out the other side, and they, as a whole, do not believe they have the leadership to do it. They have learned to get along through silence...”<sup>11</sup>

Northern Ireland’s conflict is deep and thoroughly integrated into the culture, language and politics of the place—in fact the inability to *name* this place poignantly captures the challenges that citizens—and, importantly, teachers—face. A Catholic or Republican or Nationalist might refer to the area as the North of Ireland or as Ireland. A Protestant or a Unionist or a Loyalist might say Northern Ireland or the UK or even Britain. The agreement that stands for peace similarly represents the conflict—to some it is the Good Friday Agreement, to others the Belfast Agreement. Calling it by a particular name reveals a good deal and can shut down conversation before it begins. Silence has allowed people to adapt to the conflict and its legacies. It is, however, an impossible tactic for teachers to use if they are to meaningfully address the past, make connections to the present and support their students in doing the same.

While activities are tailored to meet the particular needs and time frames of the individual countries, the overall format and direction of Facing History’s approach in South Africa, Rwanda and Northern Ireland have been the same. Facing History and Ourselves has not come into these countries with another dominant or official historical narrative to replace existing counter-narratives. Instead, Facing History’s method met the need to look at history from multiple perspectives, to explore issues of ethics and decision-making, to not treat historical events as inevitable, to locate individual, moral

agency and to understand the process of history-making itself. By introducing a discussion of historiography, teachers are brought into the process of transition within the context of history education, providing them with tools to understand and deconstruct the official narrative as well as to better understand the basis and background for the curriculum they have been given to teach. Understanding the role of historical narrative in the aftermath of conflict is vital, for it not only helps teachers better understand how history education is being used in the transition into post-conflict society, but also clarifies their own critical role in that process.

Yet, grappling with that role entails confronting a very difficult recent history that is often within the memory of the educators who now must impart its meaning and lessons to their students. In each of these countries, memories of division, discrimination, hatred and violence are still very clear. “Teaching apartheid is like removing a big stone hanging around your neck”, said a seminar participant from South Africa. “It feels like discussing the feelings that you were not allowed to speak about. Your experiences and how you dealt with them should be used sensitively so as not to incite learners but to warn them against the dangers of judging others negatively”.<sup>12</sup> The Facing History and Ourselves model of constant interchange between facing the present and confronting history has allowed participants in professional development seminars to reflect upon their own identities, to think about the impact of identity on behavior, to contemplate how such thinking and actions can produce a sense of “we and they” and to use those reflections as entry points to their own history. Moreover, using a case study of another time and place, in which universal themes of human behavior, choice and decision making are embedded has been critical to eliciting significant discussion, analysis and

reflection about that history. Examining the collapse of democracy in Weimar Germany, the rise of the Nazis, the role of propaganda, conformity and obedience in turning neighbor against neighbor, and examples of courage, compassion and resistance have provided the needed perspective to talk about both the past and the present.<sup>13</sup> Studying such resources as an interview with a concentration camp commander; a story of a university professor in Germany; and a video about a village in France where Jews were hidden have offered entry points for discussion of perpetrators, bystanders and rescuers as well as the meaning of ethical decision making in both a particular and a universal context, all with a distance that talking about their own history does not yet allow.

In all three of these countries teachers are being asked to play a critical role in the efforts toward transition and reconciliation, at a point when, in addition to struggling with their own memories, the political climate in which they work is still uncertain, and thus articulating a particular historical narrative and perspectives may well be risky. Even the use of a personal journal, normally a basic component of Facing History classrooms and seminars, was considered unsafe by teachers, whose past experience had caused them to remain careful about writing something down since, if it was in writing, it could be used against them. As a teacher from Belfast noted, “we were told for years to keep the conflict outside the classroom in order to keep our students and schools safe. Now we are being told that we need to bring the conflict into the classroom in order to promote reconciliation. But we don’t know how to do this.”<sup>14</sup> At the same time curricula revision and reform that is tied into the transition generally calls for classroom methodology that is student-centered and democratic to replace traditional, teacher centered pedagogy.<sup>15</sup>

Teachers need the tools and the ongoing support to implement that methodology in ways that allow them to help their students confront the complex lessons of the past.

The necessity of careful, thorough professional development and support for educators in these post-conflict societies has been made abundantly clear. With such support, teachers may be able to move beyond their own histories in which they saw themselves as victims or bystanders to recognize that they are citizens who have a role to play in their democracy today. For example, in a South African seminar, a teacher used a connection to resources on obedience and conformity go beyond the apartheid past but instead about the African National Congress today and how he felt that it was the role of citizens in a democracy to criticize the political parties and leaders and that criticism is essential to the health of the country. Facing the Past recently convened a follow up workshop in support of its teachers and in view of the outbreak of xenophobia and violence in South Africa, facilitators raised the question of how to treat that topic on their classrooms. These teachers had witnessed major violence in their communities and needed to create a safe classroom environment that would provide their students with the opportunity to reflect critically on what was taking place. The workshop leaders used the video “Not in Our Town”, a Facing History resource which describes how the citizens of Billings, Montana stood up for their neighbors in response to a series of hate crimes in their community. “They found it to be the perfect connection for teachers. In the specificity of Billings, Montana, these teachers, three thousand miles away and in crisis, found a community and a group of individuals they could identify with and whose story could be the basis for looking at what was taking place in their schools, on their streets and in their communities. That session led to a discussion of participation within a

society under stress...what is possible...what can teachers, schools and school communities do to make a positive difference right now...what role do they play in addressing the issue of xenophobia and citizenship in the longer term.”<sup>16</sup>

The Facing History and Ourselves professional development seminars often represent the first time that teachers are afforded the opportunity to engage in discussions about the past tailored for them as professionals. Indeed, in order to teach young people about the violent past and in order to help their students develop the skills necessary to critically evaluate decision-making in the past and their own decision-making today, teachers need to first practice these things themselves. In all three countries, traditional pedagogies, with an emphasis on lecturing and exams, have played a dominant role both within the context of the violent past and during the transition. Increasingly, education departments are recognizing that interactive strategies and participatory methods represent an opportunity for modeling and practicing democracy. Again, however, teachers must first learn these skills themselves and practice them. The seminars provide that opportunity---to develop new skills and to engage difficult, often controversial, content in a safe, facilitated environment

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<sup>1</sup> For a complete description of Facing History and Ourselves see Martin E. Sleeper and Margot Stern Strom, “Facing History and Ourselves” in Maurice Elias and Harriett Arnold, eds, *The Educator’s Guide to Emotional Intelligence and Academic Achievement* (Corwin Press, 2006) pp. 240-246.

<sup>2</sup> Margot Strom, *Facing History and Ourselves Holocaust and Human Behavior* (Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, 1994)

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<sup>3</sup> Gail Weldon, “History Education and the democratic nation in post-apartheid South Africa”. Paper presented at the Ninth Berlin Roundtable on Transnationality-Civic Education in Divided Societies (October, 2008)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp.9-10.

<sup>5</sup> The project began as a project among the Western Cape Education Department, the Cape Town Holocaust Centre and Facing History and Ourselves. As of 2005, the non-profit Shikaya has taken on the day to day management of the project and serves as a lead partner with Facing History.

<sup>6</sup> The project was initiated by researchers from the University of California at Berkley’s Human Rights Center and Education Department. The research team had spent several years in Rwanda and Bosnia studying justice and reconciliation. Among their finds was the critical absence of education in these processes. Facing History’s subsequent collaboration included the Rwandan National Curriculum Development Centre and the National University of Rwanda.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Warshauer Freedman, Harvey M. Weinstein, Karen Murphy and Timothy Longman, “Teaching History after Identity-Based Conflicts: The Rwanda Experience” in *Comparative Education Review* (November, 2008) forthcoming.

<sup>8</sup> Tony Gallagher, “Teaching History in Northern Ireland: a consideration of patterns and problems” presentation to conference on Unite or Divide: The Challenge of Teaching History in Societies emerging from Violent Conflict. United States Institute of Peace (November, 2005) [www.USIP.org](http://www.USIP.org)

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6

<sup>11</sup> Facing History and Ourselves, Belfast seminar report (June, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Facing the Past Workshop Advanced Teacher Programme-Old Mutual Business School, July, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Freedman, Weinstein, Murphy and Longman, pp. 36-37.

<sup>14</sup> Facing History and Ourselves, Corrymeela Seminar Report (October, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Freedman, Weinstein, Murphy and Longman, p.31.

<sup>16</sup> Facing the Past Workshop report, June, 2008