

The Power of Education in Rwanda

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“Reconciliation is a process that involves the rebuilding of relations—both individually and collectively. It is not an activity that simply entails ‘being nicer to each other,’ but a long-term project that is based on the needs and interests of both groups. Long-lasting, deep and meaningful reconciliation will not occur in Rwanda without reconciliation with history.”
(Hodgkin 2006, 200)

I. Dealing with the Past

“Recognition of the genesis of the antagonism must be at the heart of our processes for managing and resolving our conflicts.” –Scholar Anastase Shyaka (Obura 2003, 99)

A. Recovering from Genocide

The 1994 genocide in Rwanda shattered the nation in many ways. Besides the horrifying deaths of nearly 1 million people, communities were ruined. Moving on after the genocide has not been a simple matter, especially considering the fundamental problems underlying Rwanda’s educational system. During the genocide, a startling 75 percent of Rwanda’s teachers were either killed or imprisoned (Cole and Barsalou 2006, 7). Many scholars also argue that the government had created a biased, antagonistic history to be taught in its schools for generations. Creating a society in which such atrocities could never again happen will involve much more effort to revamp what the next generation learns. It is not enough to acknowledge the horrors of the past; instead, Rwanda must address the underlying problems of the violence. The country needs to start with education.

B. Why Education is Essential

Scholars and human rights workers agree that post-conflict countries benefit from having an open educational discussion about their past. It is evident that President Paul Kagame has not allowed this process to take place. Instead of following a governmental decree, the Rwandan people should create their own history. Experts say that students need to have conversations about the underlying causes of the genocide, especially Rwanda's complicated history of ethnic divisions.

Developing critical-thinking skills should be foremost among the objectives. People who can think for themselves and who actively question become able to prevent large-scale violence. The Rwandan government's instinct has been to suppress any dissent among its people out of a fear of revisiting any sort of conflict. However, primary and secondary public schools are exactly the places where people need to bring up conflict and learn to deal with it. By learning about the history of Rwanda's conflicts and developing methods to peaceably deal with problems, Rwanda's next generation will be more equipped to confront threats in the real world. If students are not trained to acknowledge and understand the past and the present, it is more likely that they will resort to violence in the future.

C. Historical Problems

In order to examine the faults of the modern Rwandan educational system and to develop a genocide education curriculum, one must acknowledge the long history of problems with the country's curriculum. A UNESCO report concluded that "weaknesses in educational structure and content" have direct links to outbreaks of violence in society, write John Rutayisire et al.

(2004, 320). Rutayisire and his colleagues urge curricular developers to develop an “understanding of genocide in theories of social identity and collective memory so as to identify the social and psychological issues” that may assist in Rwandan “reconciliation” (ibid.).

Rutayisire et al. explain that before missionaries and colonizers entered Rwanda, the country’s educational system was largely informal. The elders of the land taught the children moral and social values through stories, dances, and other methods. The Roman Catholic missionaries who entered Rwanda in the late 19th century instituted the first formal educational system in the country. By the 1920s, the missionaries used the colonial education in the country as “a divisive instrument” and “stressed differences between Hutu and Tutsi pupils, putting them into categories in and out of school” (ibid., 332). Before 1950, the writers note, Rwandan students were not even taught about their own history (334).

D. Starting Over

During Rwanda’s colonial period, the Tutsi group oppressed the Hutu; after the nation’s independence from Belgium, finally granted in 1962, the Hutu masses overpowered the Tutsi to gain control. The apex of violence came during the spring of 1994, when a group of extremist Hutu killed nearly 1 million Tutsi and moderate Hutu.

Clearly, Rwanda’s governments before 1994 were not role models for future governments. Many of those regimes actively engaged in anti-Tutsi propaganda. Each government tended to rewrite earlier history to favor its side; indeed, the actual truth about Rwanda’s societal evolution is not perfectly clear due to this practice and due to the negligence

of its colonizers. The Ministry of Education needs to actively develop a more objective version of history—as hard as this may be. This cannot simply be an edict from above, but a long-term process taking many voices into consideration.

After the genocide, the Rwandan government (led by Kagame, a Tutsi) wanted to revamp the country’s educational curriculum by starting over. Importantly, the government wanted to ensure that the education would be rooted in Rwandan values, not those of outside cultures, writes Anna Obura (2003), a researcher for UNESCO. In crafting the new curriculum, administrators aimed to avoid the euphemistically titled “errors of the past” (55). A critical stated objective was “to train people free of ethnic, regional, national and religious prejudices” who are “conscious of human rights and responsibilities ... [and] conscious also of their membership to the international community” (66).

“Rwandans have wanted to understand the genocide and to explain it to themselves, in order to prevent another genocide,” Obura writes. “They say that to eradicate the culture of hatred in Rwandan society, they must trace the genesis of the genocide” (99).

II. Rwanda’s Curricular Outline

“[T]here can be no meaningful analysis of educational reconstruction in Rwanda without giving attention to the focus of interest among the nationals themselves. At the core of that concern is the teaching of history” (Obura 2003, 98-9).

The Ministry of Education’s social studies curriculum lists the country’s expectations of student learning. The overall goals for social studies students in the first through third grades

include practicing polite behavior and learning the benefits of working together, but there is no mention of a specific emphasis on discussing violence in history. Students in fourth through sixth grades have a much more extensive list of expected “competences.” In the 52-point “Learning to know” section, genocide is mentioned explicitly as well as the effects of colonization and the development of human rights. The “Learning to do” and “Learning to be” sections of the syllabus require understanding of leadership qualities. Suggested group work activities for the general student population include field trips to *gacaca* courts and genocide memorials (Republic of Rwanda 2008).

Specifically, third-graders touch on genocide in a unit on “Dangers against unity, cooperation and development.” Fourth-graders and fifth-graders explore genocide in the context of gender. In grade six, the social studies curriculum includes a unit on genocide. According to the syllabus, the ministry expects those students to be able to define the term “genocide”; to explain the causes, effects, and resolution of the Rwandan genocide; to describe the present-day reconciliation in Rwanda; and to compare the Rwandan genocide to other past genocides (ibid.).

The Ministry of Education also details a three-year plan for history education in the secondary schools. The first- and second-year programs touch only briefly on genocide. In students’ third years, they learn about the history of Africa and other continents since the mid-19th century. The first half of the year concludes with a chapter on decolonization around the world after World War II. The second half of the curriculum focuses on “the independent Rwanda” (Republic of Rwanda 2004).

The final one-sixth of the third-year curriculum focuses on “The War of 1990-1994 and the Genocide of Tutsi.” Notably, that part of the curricular outline names Tutsi Rwandans as the only victims of the genocide—ignoring the moderate Hutu Rwandans who also died in the massacre. This definition of genocide is broadened later in the document to be the “extermination of Tutsi and Hutu opposition to the Genocide ideology.” One teaching objective that favors a biased viewpoint is to “explain the bad actions of power of Juvenal Habyarimana” in regard to the Arusha Peace Agreement that was signed by the president before the genocide. This unit also has students identify the roles of different actors and the genocide’s political, economic, social, and cultural effects. It also asks students to analyze how “negation and revisionism” has evolved since the genocide. The curriculum concludes with discussions of remaking the government and recent actions of the Government of National Unity (*ibid.*).

The documents reflect a “tradition of *syllabus* development rather than *curriculum* development in Rwanda,” writes Obura (2003, 91). He also notes the emphasis that the NCDC syllabi place on learning critical analysis skills. Importantly, the curricula emphasize the dangers of “blind obedience to authority,” he writes (87). However, Obura states that the syllabi for science, English, and French do not “carry the themes of national reconciliation across the curriculum,” an omission that “could be considered a lost opportunity” (91).

III. The Official Record

“It is generally felt that the education system, and specifically the school curriculum, failed the nation in 1994. It is felt that the curriculum was both silent in areas where it should have been

eloquent and eloquent where it should have been silent.” –Rwandan Minister of Education Romain Murenzi (ibid., 86)

A. History and Education

Rutayisire et al. (2004) cite several harmful practices performed in schools before the genocide, including “ethnically defined pupil identification files, biased access to national examinations, violent forms of punishment, discriminatory policy, as well as biased content pertaining to the teaching and learning of history and civics” (332).

Scholar Susanne Buckley-Zistel (2009) claims that the post-genocide government under President Kagame went to the other extreme. “After the genocide, the new government made it a priority to change the curriculum so that it no longer reflects the colonial discourse about ethnic identity,” she writes (42).

Like every other governmental entity in the country, the current Ministry of Education overtly ignores the existence of ethnicities (Obura 2003). The official narrative of the educational system is one that emphasizes equality and merit. The Ministry has been especially careful that schools no longer accept or deny admission to students based on ethnic quotas. Secondary and tertiary schools now admit students only based on test scores (ibid.). Scholar Marian Hodgkin (2006) writes that parents, teachers, and students are generally pleased with the implementation of the new strategy.

However, the Rwandan government has attempted to form “one unchallenged history, which the population has received from above rather than participated in creating,” Hodgkin writes (205). She argues that this strategy could be counterproductive in trying to create a

peaceful society because it discourages citizens from thinking critically. “Any history that is not multifaceted, analytical and inclusive of all opinion, and arrived at through challenging myths and critically deconstructing received truths, could easily mutate into an absolutist history of the kind that motivated and perpetuated past violence,” Hodgkin argues (ibid.).

A group led by Sarah Warshauer Freedman (2008) acknowledges the difficulty of revamping an entire country’s curriculum, but the group notes the success of countries that have used democratic processes and international consultation to create reform. A main goal in history classes should be for students to “learn to think like historians by using historical evidence to construct narratives,” they write (675). By implementing an official narrative, however, it appears that the government has deprived Rwandan students of learning how to formulate their own histories.

B. Acknowledging Beliefs Regarding Ethnicity

The Kagame government’s ban on ethnicity affects the way that students interact with each other and learn together—both positively and negatively. In the pre-1994 era, schools used ethnicity to divide their students and breed hatred among them. Yet, this new attempt could distort the way in which Rwandans think about themselves. “Hutu and Tutsi *do* have different historical origins,” writes scholar Peter Uvin (2001). “People were conscious of these differences. The colonizer did not invent them from nothing” (78).

“It is not the existence or nonexistence of ethnic groups that is important,” Rutayisire et al. (2004) write. “The problem is that people believe in them and then behave accordingly” (358). The way to move past ethnic divisions is to acknowledge ethnicity’s role in Rwanda’s history and discuss how to move forward. Rwandan people deserve a way to develop “a consensus as to the truth about them,” the authors state (ibid.).

Buckley-Zistel (2009) argues that the Kagame regime “engages in a deliberate effort of narrating the country’s history in a manner that, so it argues, will result in nation-building and unity” (33). She writes that the government is actively seeking a single true narrative for its history. The government’s policy on unification eliminates key differences among people from the historical record. “The government insists on the truthfulness of its account and any deviation is legally prosecuted as ‘divisionist,’ a criminal offence added to Rwanda’s penal code in 2002” (ibid., 46).

Buckley-Zistel points to a 2004 paper by the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission to show that the government has already settled its version of history. The report states—inaccurately—that Hutus and Tutsis did not distinguish between ethnicities before colonization and that conflicts between the two groups have mostly been based on politics. “This implies that if conflict in Rwanda is neither racial, tribal nor ethnic, but the result of political calculation and manipulation, this process can be reversed and un-made in order to promote unification,” Buckley-Zistel writes (40).

C. A Closed Curriculum

In 2006, Rwanda's Senate produced a 209-page report titled "Genocide Ideology and Strategies for Its Eradication." The report defined as "a set of ideas or representations whose major role is to stir up hatred and create a pernicious atmosphere favouring the implementation and legitimisation of the persecution and elimination of a category of the population" (16). The Senate acknowledges, "Fighting the ideology of genocide has to be done through activities such fighting ignorance through school as well as family education" (162). However, the Kagame government has forbidden the teaching of history since the end of the genocide (Hodgkin 2006, 203).

Experts agree that eliminating a history curriculum is detrimental to Rwandan children. Not only is it imperative to teach history, but curricula must reflect both positive and negative aspects of the past, they say. "What should be avoided is the distortion of information to suit one group or the other," writes Rutayisire's group (2004, 359). The key to forming a curriculum is impartiality. According to Rutayisire et al., impartiality in the classroom fosters "honesty, uprightness in students, and the willingness to fight against cruelty and instil fairness" (364). The unquestioned, one-sided narrative does not serve to advance past the problems that led to the genocide. Buckley-Zistel (2009) writes, "Due to the top-down nature of the government's history discourse, its censorship of alternative accounts as well as the deep scars of the genocide division and resentment persists" (31).

Two obstacles that hinder open education are the lack of textbooks and the prevalence of censorship. Students and their parents often complain about the lack of books in class. When the Ministry of Education re-opened Rwandan schools in September 1994, the department

repudiated the past curriculum and had no immediate textbook replacements (Obura 2003, 86). The lack of sufficient formal textbooks continues today to some degree, which troubles many. “Teachers are less vocal about the lack of textbooks and this could, ominously, be interpreted to mean that many of them have spent so many long years without books that they are now used to not having them,” Obura writes (128-29).

D. Whose History?

Because of the nature of the Kagame administration, the government’s interpretation of history inherently contains substantial biases. Although less than 15 percent of Rwandans are of the Tutsi ethnicity, Tutsis compose about 50 percent of the government (Ansoms 2009, 74). Many of these Tutsi officials did not grow up in Rwanda, but in exile, primarily in Uganda (Ansoms 2009, 75; Warshauer Freedman et al. 2008, 675).

Warshauer Freedman’s group concludes, “The most powerful figures in Rwandan politics and society today are themselves primarily people who grew up in refugee camps in Uganda, and their experiences in exile have convinced them of the importance of promoting an official narrative of the past that will prevent their ethnic group from facing persecution in the future” (675). She cites a study that found that former refugees tend to seek a narrative that highlights their common persecution (ibid.).

The regime’s mindset inherently harms Rwanda’s educational system. Teaching an undisputed and unchanging history prevents students from developing the skills to assess historical evidence, she writes. Rwanda’s teachers are unwilling to mention “productive

disagreements that could lead to learning” (ibid., 678). In the classrooms, teachers stress “truth” about classroom discussions, not fully acknowledging the gray areas of the past (ibid.). Primary among the unmentionable topics is ethnicity. Some teachers accept this doctrine because they believe it would be dangerous to teach about the previously dangerous topic.

IV. Learning About Peace and Morality

“If more persons become conscientized to liberation, freedom, and the rights they have inherited as human beings, they will be less likely to be manipulated into oppressing and robbing others of their rights, or allowing themselves to be similarly treated” (Hurwitz 2007, 60).

A. Peace Education

Rutayisire et al. (2004) write, “Peace-building education ... will help to make youth capable of valuing the peaceful resolution of conflicts” (354). Obura (2003) claims that the goal of a comprehensive peace education curriculum in Rwanda has largely gone unfulfilled. In 1994, the Ministry of Education urged a “civic and moral education” that would lead to a “responsible, creative and progressive citizen,” (ibid., 67). UNICEF and UNESCO each reported that there was a plan to teach peace education both formally and informally (ibid.).

By all accounts, though, such a curriculum never developed, according to Obura. She writes, “There was a problem across the board with the notion of ‘reconciliation’. The terrors of the genocide were still fresh in everyone’s minds. For some, if peace education necessarily meant incorporating reconciliation, then there was a problem” (ibid.).

The Ministry of Education collaborated with UNICEF in the late 1990s to develop a peace education program through the Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sport. Soon, though, the program became understaffed and underfunded. Obura analyzed the efforts as “far too slight” and wrote that “it might seem as if the Ministry left this programme till last” (77-79).

Her report concludes that the efforts have resulted in little success. “While peace elements and elements of the history of Rwanda are in the syllabuses, there is no evidence that they are being taught, and informal observations to the author would indicate that they are not being taught,” she writes (79).

B. A New Pedagogy

The United States Institute of Peace issued a special report, written by Elizabeth A. Cole and Judy Barsalou (2006), that detailed the necessities of history curricula in countries that are recovering from violent periods. Cole and Barsalou urge countries to adopt curricula that enable students to learn critical-thinking skills and consider different perspectives of history.

“Pedagogy—the *way* teachers teach—is critically important to reform efforts,” the authors conclude (1). “Pedagogy that emphasizes rote learning, uncritical thinking, and the authority of a narrowly defined, ‘true’ narrative is unlikely to permit new understandings of former enemies and promote social reconstruction,” they add (10).

Perhaps afraid of contradicting the official governmental narrative, many Rwandan teachers are reluctant to have students engage in debates about history. Warshauer Freedman

and her colleagues (2008) write, “[T]he teachers expressed a strong need for ‘truth’ about any narratives that entered the classroom” (678).

Rutayisire et al. (2004) recommend that Rwandan schools emphasize cooperative learning and other group activities in order to develop “openness to others, dialogue, cooperation, negotiation, and collective construction” (356). They also urge teachers to discuss nonviolence and negotiation strategies as a means of establishing conflict resolution skills.

Because schools in post-conflict societies tend to operate under a sense of fear and passivity, teachers have to reinforce the need to participate in society (Cole and Barsalou 2006). “History should be taught in a way that inspires young people to believe in their own ability to effect positive changes in society and contribute to a more peaceful and just future,” Cole and Barsalou write (4).

The writers warn that history might not seem real to students unless they learn about the history of their communities and their connections to the broader society. Furthermore, educators should not present history as a stale, distant record of life. Conflicts do not necessarily end at a certain point, Cole and Barsalou write, “because conflict almost always continues at some level, and violence takes new forms” (6). Fifteen years after the genocide, it is imperative that Rwandan schoolchildren do not feel distant from events that happened to their parents and their older siblings. By addressing the incorrect teachings of the past and inaccuracies of current accounts, teachers can create “teachable moments” that resonate strongly with students, Cole and Barsalou note (10).

C. Moral Education

One of the scariest facts of the genocide is that many of the people who committed atrocities were highly educated. To enhance modern education—both in Rwanda and elsewhere around the world—people must consider the ethical and moral learning that takes place in schools.

Nicholas Tate (2004), the director general of the International School of Geneva, writes that a comprehensive moral education is imperative to avoiding future massacres. Looking back at the genocide, Tate was startled at the facts of the violence. “The killings in Rwanda were not some spontaneous ‘tribal’ eruption: they were carefully planned by educated people,” he writes.

What role, then, can schools play in students’ development of proper morality? Tate believes that such education happens through many informal means, such as a teacher’s handling of a conflict in class and the community that the students form with each other. Although teachers need to avoid indoctrinating their students, developing healthy classroom behaviors is essential. In the area of moral education, teachers should consider differences among their students, but they need to realize that the students do not live in a “values supermarket where a completely free choice [is] permitted,” Tate advocates.

Trying to remain open-minded does not mean that teachers cannot express certain definite moral and ethical principles. “Obviously there are many controversial matters on which students must make up their own minds, but over-emphasising these can obscure the core purpose of schools which is actively to transmit certain sets of values shared by all men and women of good will,” Tate writes.

V. What's Next?

Since the genocide, the country indeed has invested in education. Spending in the educational sector reached 5.5 percent of Rwanda's gross domestic product in 2001, the highest percentage ever, according to a World Bank study (2004). By 2004, the total number of students in Rwandan schools exceeded that of the pre-genocide era (ibid.). Continued emphasis on educational funding is critical, as 44 percent of the population is younger than 15 years old (Morrison 2009). Still, the education that Rwandan students learn is extremely censored. Facing History and Ourselves, an international organization that promotes history lessons on morality, established a program in Rwanda, but many people doubt if it is able to teach without government interference. As long as Paul Kagame remains in charge of the government, teachers will be very limited in what education they can bring to Rwandan students.

Inside Rwanda, the people need to understand that history continues to impact us today and that the underlying reasons for past violence may still exist beneath the surface. The current history curriculum does not provide an accurate depiction of what happened during the genocide and beforehand. In fact, the government has actively suppressed the discovery of the true history because of the rush to establish its version of the past and then move on. This is not good enough.

The best way to facilitate post-genocide reconciliation is through an honest, open process. As experts agree, this needs to start with a discussion about the historical creation and division of

ethnicities in Rwanda. Kagame is harming Rwanda by attempting to censor history and pretend that neither ethnicity nor ethnic conflict existed outside 1994. Educators also need to revamp the curriculum so that it includes education about morality and peace. Learning conflict resolution in schools is essential to bridging differences in society. Additionally, whatever history exists in the schools cannot solely be dictated by Kagame or the Ministry of Education. This history needs to be the people's history, untainted by bias due to ethnicity or other factors. A governmental decree will not make the history go away, as tragic as the events were. Nor will a presidential order eliminate the underlying problems in Rwanda that led to genocide in the first place. Rwanda's citizens have to acknowledge their history and all the pain that comes with it so that students of the next generations can understand. It is this understanding, learned through public education, that is the key to ensuring that such violence never happens again.