Complexities of Conflict: Interactions between Politics and Teaching History in Rwanda

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\footnote{Parts of this paper draw upon research published in Freedman, Weinstein et al., 2008 and Weinstein, Freedman, & Hughson, 2007. Thanks also to Harvey Weinstein for his comments on a draft of this paper; many of the ideas in this paper are ones we developed jointly.}
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During the 1994 Rwandan genocide over half a million Tutsi and moderate Hutu were brutally murdered in just 100 days by radical Hutu militias. Today a small but powerful minority of Tutsi, who grew up as refugees mostly in Uganda (about 1-2% of Rwanda’s population), and who formed the leadership of the Rwandan Patriotic Front that stopped the genocide, now control the government. They hold definite ideas about Rwandan history, which they promulgate as an official doctrine. Their ideas are not in harmony with those held by many Rwandans and historians (Pottier, 2002; Freedman et al., 2004; Longman & Rutagengwa, 2004; Straus, 2006). This paper presents a study of Rwanda's attempts to end a moratorium on teaching history that the government put in place after the genocide. Ending this moratorium might play a significant role in reconstructing Rwandan society (Freedman et al., 2004).

Since the genocide, it increasingly has become dangerous for Rwandan citizens to express any disagreement with Rwanda’s official doctrine about the past, even though many issues related to past events are open to debate and interpretation (Freedman, Weinstein et al., 2008). This study asks: How do everyday teachers frame the conflicts inherent in the varied points of view about Rwanda’s history that they and their students bring to the classroom? How do the teachers’ framings relate to the larger political context and to what they feel they can do in their classrooms?

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2 This official view can be found on the government website: [http://www.gov.rw](http://www.gov.rw) in the first section, entitled “History.”
Theoretical Background

An extensive body of social science literature seeks to explain why countries descend into mass violence across lines of identity (see Horowitz, 1985, 2001; Eller, 1999; Young, 1976), while a smaller amount of research has been carried out on how societies avoid conflict and how they rebuild after conflict (see Prendergast & Smock, 1999; Weissman, 1998; Young, 1998, 1999). One conclusion of this literature is that the way in which memory and history are used can either encourage inter-group conflict or help to draw diverse groups together. In the case of Rwanda, in the years before the genocide the Hutu who were in power used an inaccurate depiction of a history of Tutsi, as coming from outside Rwanda to conquer and exploit, to justify the exclusion of the Tutsi from positions of power. This ideology of the origins of the Tutsi ultimately helped rally popular support for genocide (Des Forges, 1999, pp. 65-95).

According to Stuart Kaufman (2001), myths and symbols help to define ethnicity, and ethnic violence arises from a constellation of three factors – myths that justify war, fear of annihilation, and opportunity for action. If myths and symbols can be used to trigger mass violence, can they be used to unite and prevent violence as well? Since identities are not fixed but are a relatively flexible social construction, as argued by scholars of memory and identity (Anderson, 1983; Ebenshade, 1995; Gillis, 1994; Longman & Rutagengwa, 2004; Young, 1976), then just as myths, symbols, and memories have been used to construct identities around division and differentiation, social identities may also be constructed around commonalities in a way that encourages cooperation and peaceful coexistence. In many ways, the Rwandan government, by calling itself “The Government of National Unity,” is trying to generate a sense of

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3 Parts of this section come directly from a recently published paper, Freedman, Weinstein et al., 2008.
commonality. At a group level, reconciliation involves the creation of group identity, revisiting of prior social roles, search for common identifications, agreement about unifying memories, and the development of collaborative relationships that allow for difference. Societal development necessitates the construction of networks that promote collaboration (Putman, 1993, 2001).

As our own research has developed, we have become aware that more attention needs to be focused on community processes that contribute to social identity formation. What seems missing in Rwanda is any acceptance of difference. Besides the “Government of National Unity,” another oft-heard slogan in Rwanda is, “We are all one Rwanda; there are no Hutu, Tutsi or Twa.” In spite of official attempts to erase ethnicity, ethnic tensions still simmer below the surface, with no way to address them. Schools are among the major influences on identity development and attitudes towards “the other.” Our work suggests that schools serve as a focus of political manipulation as well as a forum where societal schisms are played out (Freedman et al., 2005). The government’s attempt to develop a “super-identity” in order to create unity underscores a tension between the collective memory of origins and the question of state-building where the fear of a recurrence of violence is the driving force. According to Hintjens (2009), this “top-down and authoritarian” denial of a public expression of ethnic identity “has prevented the emergence from below of potentially more complex forms of political identification, which could form the basis for more inclusive forms of Rwandan citizenship in future” (p. 6).

Data Collection and Analysis

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4 See government website.
Data for this study were collected as part of a project to develop materials for teaching history in Rwanda. The goal was to help Rwandan policy-makers and educators find a way to break the moratorium on teaching history. The project was led by UC Berkeley's Human Rights Center, in collaboration with the Rwandan National Curriculum Development Center of the Rwandan Ministry of Education, the National University of Rwanda, and US-based Facing History and Ourselves (Freedman et al., 2008). Forty Rwandan educational leaders and stakeholders participated in curriculum writing workshops and 260 teachers participated in follow-up teacher education workshops spaced across several years time and still ongoing. Both the curriculum writing and teacher education workshops focused on creating entry spaces for the kinds of productive conflict that underlie learning while at the same time aiming to use what happens in the classroom to help diminish the potential of further violent conflict. The complexity of teaching history in Rwanda comes from the fact that in Rwanda ethnicity and history are inextricably intertwined.

Data include interviews as well as the evaluations, materials, and field notes connected to the curriculum writing and teacher education workshops. Data also include tape-recordings of one week-long teacher-education workshop.

Data were coded for direct and indirect discussion related to conceptualizations of: (a) history, (b) teaching methods, and (c) ethnicity as it related to teaching Rwandan history. We were interested in how the data shed light on both the productive potential for identity formation by working through conflicts in the classroom and the destructive potential of conflict for violence both in the classroom and in the society at large. We also were interested in how these conceptualizations changed across time.
Findings

We focus this paper on one major finding, that a strong tension existed around the official insistence on having one official historical narrative and the officials’ and teachers’ desires to embrace democratic teaching methods that foster skills thought to be essential for successful participation in an increasingly global economy, skills such as critical thinking and debate.

This tension emerged at the start of the project when we were creating sample materials about Rwanda’s history. It waned at times when the U.S. partners led workshops about and illustrated democratic teaching and the positive uses of conflict in the classroom. But it recurred as the political situation in Rwanda became more and more repressive and as teachers grew fearful of expressing or allowing the expression of varied points of view. Given the tradition of testing and the value of “right” answers in Rwanda, there were many obstacles for the teachers to overcome if they were to implement democratic teaching; however, those obstacles paled in comparison to the obstacles posed by a growing culture of fear around any issues related to ethnicity.

Examples from the data show how this tension unfolded. In the workshops for Rwandan educators and stakeholders who would be creating curricular materials, we formed a working group for each of four eras in Rwandan history; each working group developed a historical case that was central in that time, replete with background material, primary source materials, and sample lessons (see http://www.hrcberkeley.org/specialprojects/index.html for the materials created by the working groups). During these workshops, we introduced central concepts underlying
democratic teaching—using historical cases to examine varied points of view about historical events, engage in debate, and learn skills of critical thinking.

The introduction to the curricular materials written by Rwandan team leaders introduces the tension. The writers began by showing that they understood the importance of participatory teaching methods that would allow varied points of view to enter the classroom:

1. . . . “The teaching of the Rwandan History: the participatory method” presents guidance about methodology, about the choice of significant historical changes or focal points, about the use of sources of first or second hand information, and finally about examples of illustrations and decision-making in the interpretation of data.

2. We present historical sources and materials on Rwandan history rather than simply writing the “History” of Rwanda, and we used the “Facing History and Ourselves” methodology, which is critical, and at the same time encourages the participation of the researcher or student in the personalized development of interpretation judged as the most appropriate in relationship to the reality and the truth of facts in order to find their causes and consequences. This is well and good and a classic historical, but participatory method.

Up to this point in the document there seemed to be near total endorsement of participatory and democratic methods that encouraged critical thinking and debate, with one ambiguous reference to “truth in facts” that could be interpreted as either individual truth or absolute truth. Next, a set of procedures was set forth for organizing the lesson:

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5 All material below comes from the English version of the curriculum document and has been edited for grammaticality and at times to clarify meaning. The original is available in both French and English at http://www.hrcberkeley.org/specialprojects/index.html.
8. The sixth point is about the normal running of lessons in ways that exploit participative methods, summarized in the following 7 sub-divisions:

i. Introduce the study theme and sub theme.

ii. Distribute teaching and reference materials.

iii. Invite learners for silent and individual reading and interpretation.

iv. Ask comprehension questions to learners.

v. Put different answers to the black board and carry out their critical analysis.

vi. Give learners home assignments.

vii. Give a summary of the lesson that the learner will copy in his/her exercise book.

Finally, this is a type of analysis that constitutes the right participatory method. It is a method that maximally reduces controversy to enhance historical truth by exercising critical thinking.

Note that in the seventh step, after the critical analysis, the teacher is directed to take control of the conclusions students draw when they “give a summary of the lesson that the learner will copy in his/her exercise book” and in their conclusion the writers frame this method as one that “reduces controversy” and “enhance[s] historical truth,” all in the name of “critical thinking.” Although the writers seem to understand something of the essence of democratic teaching, there was also a move to embrace a view that holds that there is a single truth.

In each subsequent workshop when we tried to help teachers use the materials and teach about their difficult past, we tried to explain how to include democratic and
participatory teaching in the curriculum. In one of the later workshops, the following monologue shows how the workshop leader introduced the approach:

This week . . . we are going to take a journey.

[TRNS-KY] We're not going to look at history like it's a march through time, like this [draws line on board].

[TRNS-KY] We're going to look at a process.

[TRNS-KY] [laughter over difficulty translating the word "process" into Kinyarwanda].

Then we're going to go deeply into history, using a case study.

[TRNS-KY] When we look at many events at a time, history can seem very long and thin. . . and horizontal.

[TRNS-KY] But when we go deep and we choose one event or a place in time and we go way down, we can see certain choices, aspects of human behavior, and decision-making that allows us to truly make connections. So we are going to look at human behavior and decision-making.

[TRNS-KY] We aren't going to look at history as something that just happens to people.

[TRNS-KY]

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6 [TRNS-KY] means that at this point in the talk the language was translated from English to Kinyarwanda.
We are going to look at history as a series of choices.

[TRNS-KY with elaboration].

And there are certain kinds of decisions we will look at. We'll look at the decision to be a bystander.

[TRNS-KY].

We will look at the decision to be a perpetrator.

[TRNS-KY].

We will look at the decision to be a rescuer. And we will look at the decisions of everyday citizens to make a positive difference.

[TRNS-KY].

The U.S.-based leader attempted to relate her sense of how democratic teaching methods open a space for thinking of history as multiple and contingent rather than as a single received truth.

In the early days of the project, we thought that this notion of a single truth was not widespread. After one of the workshops, the leaders wrote a summary of the results of a series of focus groups held for purposes of evaluating the workshop. The leader noted that some of the participants’ wanted to promote a single “true” version of history but attributed this view to “a few people,” not something that permeated deep into the group:

People [Rwandan educators] spoke about “critical thinking” and “democratic teaching methods” in ways that demonstrated a good understanding of these principles. In fact, they spoke about the applicability of the methods in classes other than history class. A few people did speak about the project helping to
develop a “true” Rwandan history in contrast to the “false” history previously taught, which does not reflect the approach to history that we were seeking to promote, but in general participants seemed to understand the importance of allowing discussion and not teaching a single “true” version of history. Many participants noted in this regard the importance of primary documents that allow students to make their own critical analysis.

At that time, we also thought most of the resistance to allowing multiple points of view and discussion of conflicting ideas came in the form of worries about the time this approach took and the obstacles of national examinations:

[S]ome expressed concern about the amount of time that interactive teaching methods would take, given the requirements of preparing students to pass national examinations.

We also noted that those with the most power were the most resistant to allowing multiple interpretations, but still we attributed their resistance to worries about issues of practicality:

The university professors were the most skeptical group about the project and how well it could actually be implemented in the classroom, while the secondary school teachers, students, and parents were quite enthusiastic on the whole.

In one of the early workshops we analyzed the results of a survey given to the participants. Although participants felt strongly that they were free to talk and express their opinions during the workshop (3.76 on a 4-point scale), they were less sure that history was open to interpretation (3.33). They did, however, feel more strongly that

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7 Specific information about which workshop is referred to is omitted to protect the identity of the participants.
disagreement about history was healthy (3.52). Importantly, they expressed their opinions about the health of disagreement on anonymous surveys and even the lower rating about history being open to interpretation was fairly high in absolute terms.

In their more open-ended but still anonymous responses, these workshop participants explained their reasons for their opinions. They especially praised the concepts of participatory teaching methodology, in particular the use of debate and brainstorming. As one wrote:

The workshop was very good because it has strengthened the importance of participatory method of teaching history. This method will benefit the Rwandan history learners to have a variety of historical facts from various people. For example, from fellow students, parents, community leaders and other teachers. Also the teacher is guided a way to teach a lot of things in few hours.

This participant even felt confident about the practicality of the method.

Another explained:

What I personally like most and that I find useful for Rwandan schools is the methodology that we applied, the way or manner of teaching. In the past … the process of allowing a learner to feel free to think and criticize a lesson was rare. Teachers used to come in and dictate what they have prepared without any resistance. … I liked very much this methodology [from the project]: allow a student time and a way of finding out himself and then criticize what he thinks should be criticized.

Still another wrote that the workshop "provided us with means of involving students in finding answers to the questions during the lesson."
Most importantly, participants in this workshop felt that participatory methods meant "you have an opportunity to develop the democratic culture and its values in the mind of the children" and further that "that will bring after many or few years a great contribution in rebuilding the country.” In all, many seemed to understand the value of introducing debate and tension into the curriculum.

The teachers seemed to be able to envision discussions that included conflict in their classrooms. We wrote to our funders:

[O]ver the year, we had seen increasing openness on the part of the participants to exploring the construction of identity that led to the genocide. (Final Report to USIP, 2005)

As long as government support was clear and visible for our project, the teachers were relatively comfortable. After writing the materials and after beginning to support teacher workshops, we explained in this same report:

[W]e were asked by the Ministry of Education through the NCDC to formally handover in a public forum the materials that had been developed. We had known from the beginning that the Ministry was invested in opening the door to the teaching of the country’s history and we saw their request as their opportunity to demonstrate their commitment and success. Professor Weinstein attended the meeting, held at NCDC on February 24, 2006, as the project team representative. The ceremony was attended by more than 60 people and was broadcast on national television. On the dais, were Professor Byanafashe, the Dean of Humanities and head of the department of history at NUR, Professor Weinstein, Professor Mugisha, [National University of Rwanda representative] and Charles
Gahima, the director of the National Curriculum Development Centre. Several of our workshop participants from Kigali attended as well. The MINEDUC [Ministry of Education] was very positive about the resource book and materials and there was much excitement in the room from the attendees. It was apparent that the Rwandans themselves had taken ownership of the project and felt proud of the work product that we developed. . . . new director, Charles Gahima, who committed himself and his agency to the realization of the project. At the February 24 meeting, he outlined the next steps. He proposed that work on expanding the modules into a full history curriculum begin at once (Phase 2) with the goal of developing the curriculum by the end of the summer of 2006; Phase 3 would utilize groups similar to ours to develop teaching manuals using a participatory approach; Phase 4 would roll out teacher training and the commission of textbooks based on the curriculum. At the same time, the training of teachers using the FHAO approach would move ahead and the modules we developed would be tested in the schools. His goal was to have a full history curriculum in the schools by the end of 2007-8. (Final Report to USIP)

As we began the teacher education workshops to work with teachers in the field to use the curriculum materials that we developed, we ran into difficulty with materials reproduction. In spite of what appeared to be an auspicious beginning, materials were not been reproduced by NCDC in ways that got them into the hands of large numbers of teachers. In fact, NCDC turned the job back to the National University. We struggled to produce materials even for those who participated in the workshops. Although we were
not told that the government was not supportive of the work, we saw signs of passive resistance.

As government support waned, the teachers in the teacher-training workshops that followed the development of the curriculum model became increasingly fearful. Subsequent workshop participants seemed to worry more and more about introducing multiple points of view. Throughout we tried to help the teachers see how to use distancing techniques to allow open discussion and then to bring the discussion (even a private one) closer to home by making connections. In one later workshop, we found that although participants generally seemed to understand notions of critical thinking and the role of multiple points of view and the complexity of varied actors in history and although they showed nuanced understandings of some issues, they might include somewhat propagandistic versions of a single truth alongside these more complicated remarks. For example, one wrote that students needed to learn nuances: "In Rwandan genocide just like anywhere else there were bystanders, perpetrators and people who chose to rescue others." That same person suggested that students should adhere to a mono-causal explanation of what led to the Rwandan genocide: "The bad events . . . were initially initiated by colonialists who sewed seeds of divisionism and hatred." Finally, they wanted students to come away with a spirit of "tolerance, solidarity, and patriotic values." Another mentioned students should also come away with a sense of "reconciliation, justice, and democracy."

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8 Workshop leaders modeled organizing discussions of highly emotional and controversial topics (a) through the lens of a distanced historical case (Germany’s Weimar Republic), which initiated discussions about identity as it related to genocide and to connections with the Rwandan context; (b) through literature, including a fable called “The Bear that Wasn’t”; and (c) through “connections” activities that gave students choice about whether or not to respond publicly (e.g., writing opportunities).
In the past two years, we have seen other signs in the society that indicate that teaching "democratically" may be difficult if not impossible in Rwanda today. Hintjens (2009) provides a chilling account of the increased tightening of government authorities, including accounts of assassinations, disappearances, abductions, house arrests and false accusations of those perceived to disagree with the regime. Hintjens also reports that “almost anyone can find themselves an enemy of the regime” and that in 2004 there was a major purge of “judges, mayors, officials and teachers” (p. 19). It is, therefore, potentially dangerous for teachers even to allow discussion of multiple points of view about Rwanda’s history. As schools were used by the former government to promote fear and hatred, it is now the case that, besides purging teachers, schools have become a focus of government concern as teachers and students are being accused of promoting “genocide ideology.” A January 18, 2009 report from the National University of Rwanda explains the concept:

"Genocide ideology" is a term used to describe the notion genocide perpetrators used to instill a hate campaign that creates divisions among two distinctive groups, usually ethnic groups.”

(http://www.rwandagateway.org/article.php3?id_article=7887)

Teachers accused of "harboring genocidal ideology" could lose their jobs or be imprisoned and students could be expelled or imprisoned. It is questionable where there is due process for impartial investigations and likely that accusations target opponents of the government and may be politically motivated. Hintjens (2009) explains that “Critics accuse the present government of using the law as an instrument to protect and promote the interests of a tiny, interconnected and mostly anglophone political elite (Pottier, 2002;
Rafti, 2004; Reyntjens, 2004)” (p. 17). Increasingly dangerous topics include any discussion of the genocide; any discussion of ethnicity; any discussion of migration, that is of who came to Rwanda first, a topic that had been used to incite the 1994 genocide but one that is central to the history of origins, of how people came to inhabit Rwanda.

Although these accusations are independent of our project, teachers felt the effects and knew they could place themselves in danger if they publicly disagreed with the government in any way. An August 8, 2007 article in the government controlled newspaper, *The New Times* provides an example of the form of the accusations:

A Parliamentary Commission has been instituted to investigate students and teachers accused of harbouring Genocide ideology in schools. The six-member commission comes in the wake of recent reports that some students and teachers of Groupe Scolaire de Muhura Secondary School in Gatsibo District were arrested on allegations of spearheading a hate campaign against Tutsi students.

The school was closed for weeks but re-opened later.

MP AbdulKarim Harerimana heads the Parliamentary probe commission named on Monday . . . .

The Speaker of Parliament Alfred Mukezamfura said that schools in areas where Genocide ideologies are bred have most students as victims.

"The constitution gives us the right to form a commission in such a situation, it is to this that we sanction some of the deputies to investigate the matter," Mukezamfura explained.

The commission was given forty-five days to complete investigations and present a report on October 6 when return from a two-month break.
During their work, MPs on the commission will cross-examine the accused teachers and students and consult local authorities as well. More recently, a March 7, 2009 article in *The New Times* appeared entitled, “Genocidal Ideology: Lawmakers form another ad hoc commission”; this article targets the Minister of Education and her State Minister:

PARLIAMENT - The Chamber of Deputies has established an ad hoc commission to further scrutinise a recent parliamentary probe report that revealed alarming cases of genocide ideology in several schools.

The six-person commission, headed by MP Bernadette Kanzayire, has also been mandated to summon Education minister Jeanne d’Arc Mujawamariya to give further explanations on what the ministry is doing to fight the problem.

Mujawamariya and the State Minister for Primary and Secondary Education, Joseph Murekeraho on Tuesday and Wednesday this week appeared before the Chamber but their explanations were unconvincing to the infuriated legislators.

The commission was formed on Wednesday evening after a day-long session in which some lawmakers, at one time, insinuated that Mujawamariya could herself be harbouring genocide ideology.

The minister denied she harbours the destructive ideology when she came under intense fire. . .

The new House ad hoc commission has 15 days to complete the exercise.

Mukabalisa chaired a six-man parliamentary probe commission which on Monday last week released a report that revealed damning revelations on the
extent of genocide ideology in some schools, with some secondary schools registering 97 percent cases of the ideology.

The institution of a second commission to study the report and get further explanations from the education ministers comes after Mujawamariya and Murekeraho failed to give satisfactory answers as to what the ministry is doing to curb the problem.

Among the commission’s duties is to explore stringent measures together with the ministry to check the ideology, which some MPs have described as ‘cancerous.’

Vice Speaker Denis Polisi said that the move will provide the two ministers enough time to give detailed explanations to a “selected team of MPs” (the ad hoc commission) on their strategies to address the ideology, which, at its height in 1994, led to the slaughter of at least a million Rwandans.

Later, Polisi said, the commission will give a report to a plenary session, which will further scrutinise it.

“Should the plenary find the report lacking, the (Education) minister will be summoned once again in a plenary session as the law stipulates,” Polisi explained.

The commission head, Kanzayire, said: “It is the opportunity for the minister to give a comprehensive explanation on the issue.” Mujawamariya welcomed the setting up of the commission with some relief. She said that it would give her enough time to explain her ministry’s strategies to curb genocide ideology in schools.
“We shall discuss the report findings in detail, which will help us understand more about the intensity of the problem and to come up with tough measures against the vice,” Mujawamariya said yesterday.

MPs blamed Mujawamariya for not taking the matter seriously and warned that they would do anything to ensure that political leaders responsible for schools act accordingly.

As this article makes clear, the Minister of Education is in effect being forced by Parliament to discipline the schools harshly or she herself will be accused of harboring genocide ideology.

Conclusions

Ironically, most of the teachers we worked with understood that in any inclusive society, it is necessary for multiple points of view, which are related to the complex identities of its citizens, to find their way into the nation’s history. Although the teachers now are experiencing times when many may have to choose not to act on their understandings, most seem to remain hopeful that a time will come when they will be able to act. We have concluded that an educational reform project that carries a high political load can build capacity but teachers’ abilities to act depends on many factors, most important in this context being the degrees of freedom provided by those in power. Truly democratic teaching requires a truly democratic society.
References


Rwandan History Curriculum Materials:

(http://www.hrcberkeley.org/specialprojects/index.html)


