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Gail Weldon<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Western Cape Education Department, South Africa

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# Post-conflict teacher development: facing the past in South Africa

Gail Weldon<sup>\*</sup>

*Western Cape Education Department, South Africa*

One of the priorities of societies emerging from identity-based conflict is to signal a new society, with new values that stand in stark contrast with the old. Education policy becomes a critical arena for highlighting these political values when schools, particularly teachers, are identified as key agents of social change. However, the legacy of the conflict, especially with regard to teacher identities shaped during conflict, is seldom taken into account. This paper argues that **unless appropriate programmes of teacher professional development are put in place to open the space for teachers to engage with painful personal legacies of the past, the aim of transforming society through the education system has little chance of succeeding.** Using South Africa as the case study, this article analyses the post-Apartheid history curriculum and discusses a teacher development programme, Facing the Past, which, it is argued, provides the necessary conditions for teachers to engage with the past in a way that enables them to integrate issues of moral and ethical decision-making into their teaching.

## Introduction

On the 27 April 1994 the people of South Africa went to the polls in what has become thought of internationally as the ‘miracle’ elections (Morrow, 1994). However, while the elections of 1994 formally ended Apartheid, 16 years later, in 2010, the country still grapples with its traumatic legacy. Schools and universities, as microcosms of society, reflect these tensions. In the years since Apartheid ended, there have been a number of high profile racially motivated incidents in schools and universities. In one incident, which occurred at the University of the Free State, four white male students were videotaped putting black workers through an ‘initiation’, which apparently included making them eat food that had been urinated on (South African Press Association, 2008). What is significant is that these young men did not experience Apartheid directly. They were displaying attitudes and values learned from the ‘socialising agencies’ (Jansen, 2009a, p. 331) they had been exposed to: **their families, school, church and the communities in which they grew up.**

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<sup>\*</sup>Western Cape Education Department, Private Bag X9114, Cape Town, 8000 South Africa.  
Email: gweldon@pgwc.gov.za

This incident, along with two recent studies (Jansen, 2009b; Weldon, 2009) illustrates that **insufficient attention has been paid by educational researchers to the traumatic legacy of conflict.** Drawing on both these studies that describe a new field—**post-conflict pedagogy and curriculum studies**—this article focuses on teacher identities in post-Apartheid South Africa. By considering the context of history teaching in South Africa, it raises the question of **appropriate professional development for teachers who are expected to teach in the midst of new political visions in a post-conflict society.**

### **South Africa's history of conflict**

Apartheid South Africa was a society based on legalised and institutionalised segregation aimed at 'the protection of Afrikanerdom, white power and the white race' (Beinart, 1994, p. 141). A series of laws put in place during 1949 and 1954 formalised segregation. The Population Registration Act (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1950a) classified people as belonging to different 'races'; the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (RSA, 1949) banned marriages across the racial divides; the **Group Areas Act (RSA, 1950b) identified separate residential areas;** and the Separate Amenities Act (RSA, 1954), in theory, provided equal separate amenities such as park benches, beaches, and toilets for the different 'races'. Apartheid's authoritarian system of racial domination, ethnic segregation and discrimination on the basis of race, permeated all aspects of life, resulting in deep-rooted racialised identities.

Erwin Staub (2003), in relation to the Rwandan genocide, describes how this occurs in practice. It has transferable insights for South Africa. Racial segregation enables lines to be drawn between 'us' and 'them' resulting in the devaluation of whole groups. **Whole group devaluation then serves to justify discrimination, while discrimination, in turn, maintains devaluation.** Consequently, moral values and principles are no longer applied by those devaluing to those devalued. In South Africa, moral, ethical and religious values were distorted to legitimise the Apartheid state. The result was a society mired in deep socio-economic inequalities and moral injustices.

**At the centre of these injustices was the way in which education was employed. Education became a tool for division and repression** (Kallaway, 1984). Education policy was 'based on the principles of trusteeship, non-equality and segregation' (Ashley, 1989, p. 19). **The curriculum deliberately inculcated notions of superiority (of whites) and inferiority (of blacks).** Education for black South Africans aimed to prepare them to accept inequality as part of the unchallenged order (Christie & Collins, 1984). Whites, in being educated to superiority, were also victims—of a 'deficient education system based on white supremacy' and of 'lies and deceit' (Jansen, 2009a, p. 329).

The reality for the majority of South Africans was an insidious daily humiliation. Lindner (2006a) defines **humiliation** within the modern human rights context, as **'the enforced lowering of any person or group by a process of subjugation that damages their dignity;** "to be humiliated" is to be placed in a situation...in a demeaning and

damaging way' (p. xiv). Perpetrators are also psychologically damaged and may experience humiliation. Judith Herman, a trauma researcher, offers evidence that shows how people who commit atrocities fail to get rid of their post-traumatic symptoms. Rather, 'they seem to suffer the most severe and intractable disturbances' (Herman, 1997, p. 185). Studies on perpetrators have found that many people who engage in intense violence against others are deeply affected by their own actions—the act of killing results in psychological and spiritual wounds (Staub *et al.*, 2005) and, for many, a deep sense of humiliation (Lindner, 2006b). In the South African post-Apartheid context these effects are fully experienced, resulting in a complex and traumatic legacy.

Ariel Dorfman (2004), writing about Eastern Europe and Rwanda, speaks of the 'dilemmas that flood societies' (p. xiii) after internecine conflict, when survivors have to find a way of living with those who have killed their families and trust has to be restored to communities. Similarly, South Africa is still struggling to find closure on many issues relating to the past; partly, it has been suggested, because the wounds are still raw and partly because of the difficulty in acknowledging the depths of the trauma (Ramphela, 2008). This struggle for closure becomes evident not only in continued racism, but also in the violent nature of protests against poor service delivery, poor wages, university fee increases and in the widespread xenophobic attacks that occurred in South Africa in 2009. Staub (2003) notes that many people who have been victimised themselves become violent. This ongoing violence in South Africa can be seen to be a legacy of an unresolved past, particularly of the brutality and violent repression of mass resistance in the 1980s.

The question that needs to be asked, therefore, is how, given the traumatic legacy of Apartheid conflict, can teachers shaped by the conflict become change agents for a new, democratic society? In 2002, a new national curriculum (National Curriculum Statement or NCS) was introduced in South Africa. The overall aim of the curriculum is to develop young people who 'will act in the interests of a society based on respect for democracy, equality, human dignity, life and social justice' (South Africa Department of Education, 2002, p. 1). To ensure the infusion of issues of human rights, social and environmental justice into all subjects, the work of the subject writing teams was monitored and guided by members of the South African Human Rights Commission (Keet & Carrim, 2006; Weldon, 2009). History was considered to be one of the most important subjects for delivering a values-based education—a subject that 'helps to empower an informed citizenry [and which]...may actually help sustain a more open, equitable and tolerant society' (Asmal, 2004, p. xi).

While expecting teachers to teach a values-based curriculum, none of the official teacher training programmes for the new curriculum engaged the dual legacies of identity-based conflict and a deeply unequal and divided society. Engaging these legacies is critical to supporting teachers to become agents of change in their schools and classrooms. The Facing the Past—Transforming our Future professional development programme for history teachers in the Western Cape was set up in 2003 in response to this gap.<sup>1</sup> It recognises that conventional, in-service professional development workshops for teachers will not be enough and employs an approach that

engages both head and heart (see also Jansen, 2009a). The empirical data discussed in this paper were drawn from this project.

Each annual cohort of teachers is introduced to the methods and content of the Facing the Past programme in a four- or five-day workshop. A minimum of four one-day follow-up workshops are held during the year. The overall approach taken in Facing the Past is based on the scope and sequence of Facing History and Ourselves (Brabeck *et al.*, 1994, pp. 333–347; Schultz *et al.*, 2001, pp. 3–27; Tibbitts, 2006). This includes engaging with personal and group identity; historical case studies focusing on human behaviour and ethical decision-making (the Holocaust and Apartheid); and, critically for learners, ‘choosing to participate’—encouraging young people to take on individual responsibility in their school and community. For many teachers, it is the first time that they will have had the opportunity to work so closely together with colleagues of different ‘races’ for an extended period of time.

### Research approach and design

While educational research has failed to explore the implications of post-conflict traumatic legacies, there is a rich body of research, mainly in the field of psychology, which provides insight into the complexities of post-conflict states. The work of Volkan (2006a, 2006b), Lindner (2004, 2006a, 2006b), Staub (2003) and Staub *et al.* (2005) is particularly useful in understanding first-generation trauma along with the inter-generational transfer of traumatic knowledge. Post-Holocaust research is also informative, although it needs to be used with care. In post-Nazi Germany, unlike South Africa, the perpetrators and victims did not need to find a way of living together—Germans made sense of their past without the presence of surviving victims. The work of Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich (1975), Sichrovsky (1988), Bar-On (1989), Herf (1997), Jarausch and Geyer (2003) and Hoffman (2004) provides a range of insights into the way in which Germany came to terms with her past, both before and after reunification; the effects on children of perpetrators; and attempts to reconcile descendants of perpetrators and victims.

Besides these seminal empirical works, in examining the national processes that contributed to curriculum change, I drew on my personal experience as a participant researcher of curriculum development within South Africa. I was a member of the writing team for social sciences: history for Grades 1–9 and convenor of the history writing team for Grades 10–12. As convenor I had the overall responsibility for delivering an appropriate history curriculum within the national guidelines. I was also a co-founder of the Facing the Past programme and have co-facilitated teacher development workshops since 2003.

Data were gathered through analysing ideology and pedagogy in education policy documents; examining historical and political contexts; observing teacher evaluations during professional development workshops; and scrutinising a video-taped presentation made by learners on the Facing the Past programme for a school parent evening. All relevant data were transcribed in addition to detailed observation notes

being made during workshops. Furthermore written teacher evaluations from workshops held in 2008 and 2009 were consulted, as well as notes made by independent observers during selected workshops. A total of 105 teachers, from all 'racial' groups and from a variety of schools from the four ex-education departments represented in the Western Cape (former 'white', 'coloured', 'black' and 'Indian'),<sup>2</sup> attended initial workshops between 2003 and 2008; 50 of these teachers attended multiple workshops.

Data were coded using open coding. Thereafter I read through the data sets several times looking for expressions of teacher identity and the legacy of Apartheid; grappling with changing identities in a society in transition; and the ways in which teacher identities filter curriculum knowledge in the classroom. The use of multiple sources of data, such as documents, workshop observation and individual and group interviews, helped to triangulate the findings.

I also reflected critically on my role as both national curriculum developer and as researcher within Facing the Past. In particular, I considered myself both insider and outsider within the history subject writing group (Jansen, 2009b, p. 34; Meyerson, 2003). The notion of insider is, in itself, very fluid. The group dynamics experienced during the writing processes, as group members, myself included, manoeuvred for various ideological positions, led to interesting shifts in my positions as insider and outsider. I was bringing several identities to the process, including that of a white, English-speaking South African, which further positioned me at times as an outsider. I attempted to apply the same critical self-reflection to my work with Facing the Past. One major evaluation of the programme conducted by Felisa Tibbitts (2006) has been valuable in that, amongst other contributions, it has allowed me the opportunity to compare and contrast some of my own findings against those of an external evaluator.

## Facing the Past

It became clear at the first Facing the Past workshop with teachers in 2003 that the programme would need to provide teachers with the support needed to examine the ways in which the Apartheid past had affected them as individuals and as teachers. It was hoped that this, in turn, would help them to facilitate difficult conversations about the past with learners, in a way that would work towards a democratic future.

The work of John Paul Lederach—an internationally recognised practitioner in the field of conciliation and mediation—on the moral imagination provided a useful conceptual framework for this aspect of the Facing the Past programme. Lederach (2004, pp. 4–5) identifies four key elements of moral imagination. The first, which is central to the approach taken in the teacher workshops, is the capacity for people to imagine themselves in a web of relationships even with their enemies. The other elements are: the discipline to sustain curiosity; an eternal belief in the creative act; and the willingness to take a risk.

For the work of Facing the Past, the first key element of moral imagination is critical. Extending the capacity to imagine the web of relationships that holds society



together is a desire to understand our enemies from their point of view—thinking in the presence of others, because the others are still present (Lederach, 2005). What is particularly pertinent to working within the legacy of identity-based conflict is the importance Lederach gives to understanding the past in order to comprehend the cycles of violent conflict. ‘Lived’ histories encompass the communal experiences that create and reinforce the stories of their collective lives and shared memories. The history of the formation of the group’s identity, the construction of the group’s future and its very survival are all about finding place, voice and story (Lederach, 2005).

Moral imagination does not see the past as something to be overcome, laid aside or forgotten in order to move toward a better future. Instead, the narratives that give meaning to people’s lives and relationships must be told and the repetitive patterns acknowledged so that healing can take place (Lederach, 2005). People must attempt to discover where they have been, who they are, where they are going and how they will make this journey together. For teachers dealing with the legacy of internecine conflict, this provides a context not only for personal change but also for engaging in difficult conversations about the past and present with their learners.

The personal journey embarked on by Facing the Past teachers during the four-day introductory workshops is one of beginning to ‘re-story’ their pasts—of uncovering and confronting the influences Apartheid had on them personally. One point of entry is a session called ‘silent conversation’. Sets of extracts containing personal narratives of ordinary people from different ‘race groups’ living under Apartheid, are placed on sheets of newsprint. Participants move from one narrative to another, in silence, reading and writing personal responses to the narratives and to one another’s comments. The session is drawn together in plenary. Many tell their own stories in the plenary session—some for the first time in a ‘public’ space.

Sharing narratives, both during this session and in the follow up workshops is, for many, a journey through cognitive dissonance (Weldon, 2005; Gorski, 2009), which begins to break down stereotypes and starts to build trust. Moving towards trust enables participants to start to imagine the former ‘other’ within their own web of relationships. It also involves Lederach’s fourth element, risk-taking, as teachers share deeply personal stories.

### Teachers and moral imagination

For teachers’ involved in the Facing the Past programme the ‘silent conversation’ process allows those who find it difficult to talk about the trauma and hurt caused by the past, to express their feelings in safety and anonymously should they not want to share in the plenary session. By talking about what they or others have written, many also take a risk when they share their experiences and emotions in the plenary discussion. By the end of the workshop, and increasingly as the teachers come together over the years, they respond to the safety of the space provided, by talking more openly and more frequently to one another about Apartheid’s legacy. Significantly, in the evaluation by Tibbitts, when teachers were asked in what ways the workshops had been valuable to them personally and professionally, the most frequently mentioned

answer (from nearly half of the participants), related to **increased self-awareness** (Tibbitts, 2006, p. 17).

The comments that follow illustrate the various stages of some of the personal journeys through which teachers move. A number of comments indicate the extent to which humiliation experienced during Apartheid has been internalised. A black teacher wrote:

I believe many Africans can identify with this. **We still feel very much inferior to whites.**

(Black female, township school, Facing the Past workshop delegate, 2003)

There are those who remembered their own painful experiences and emotions when reading an extract. A coloured teacher shared with the large group that her father looked white but her mother had a darker complexion and how this affected an outing to the beach:

My father once wanted to take us to a beach 'whites only'. We got there. The police stood at the turn-off. They would allow my father to go in, but not the 'meid [domestic worker/servant] and her kids'. All of us, including my father, cried all the way home. (Coloured female, urban black township school, Facing the Past workshop delegate, 2003)

For many white teachers the workshop experience results in growing self-reflection and engagement with emotions felt while growing up. A white male teacher wrote of his conflicting emotions when, as a child, he moved between an Afrikaans home environment and an English boarding school:

I grew up in such a community [Afrikaans]. I was an 'insider' and 'outsider'. I had mixed emotions, mixed culture, mixed ideologies. I felt both humiliated and angry, as well as supremely embarrassed at how each community—Afrikaans, English, coloured and black—treated each other. It is still part of my consciousness. I was too often a bystander. I felt powerless and afraid. (White male, urban area affluent former white state school, Facing the Past workshop delegate, 2003)

Some teachers expressed the way in which their assumptions about 'the other' had been challenged:

The stories of the 'white' teachers especially were significant. I think **there are many generalisations that this group had no need to complain and that they all benefited from the old system.** I think **there is also a stereotype that those who did suffer must just get on with it, move on.** What the Facing the Past workshops have done is to give us space and acknowledgement that our stories are powerful too. (Anonymous evaluation, Facing the Past workshop delegate, 2008)

Some teachers reported that the workshops helped them to **have a greater awareness of their role in the classroom and responsibility towards learners.** At the end of a Facing the Past workshop session during which the white activist Denis Goldberg—fellow accused at the Rivonia trial and sentenced to life imprisonment along with Nelson Mandela in 1964—spoke of his role in the struggle and experiences in prison, a black teacher commented:

I was not always aware of my own prejudices prior to my participation in this project. **I always saw myself as a victim of other people's prejudices** and as **generalisations such as**



'whites are racists' never bothered me. But when Denis Goldberg told us of his involvement in the struggle against Apartheid I decided to re-look at how I view others. (Black male, rural township school, Facing the Past workshop delegate, 2008)

The comment of a white male principal-designate of a state school in the process of being set up to take learners from the existing, still largely segregated, primary schools in the area, reflected the first steps in the journey towards self-knowledge:

I needed to search my own heart for my own prejudices and my own thoughts and be confronted with my own inadequacies. ... (White male, rural state school in new area, Facing the Past workshop delegate, 2008)

Experience with the programme has provided evidence that **personal change in a divided society is a complex process.** The need for constant self-reflection was expressed by **a teacher who has participated regularly in the programme since 2003.** In the discussion session after Denis Goldberg's talk he made the following comment:

**I have just realised how much I still teach resistance to Apartheid in a biased way...**over the years I have tried to be unbiased in all of my teaching...but I now realise I have to work that much harder when it comes to resistance. (Black male, independent/private school, Facing the Past workshop delegate, 2008)

**Evidence from the workshops suggests that the way to reconciliation and entrenching the values of democracy is not through forgetting the past or denying the ongoing racism that underpins South African society.** After engaging with the issue of segregation in the USA in one session, a coloured teacher wrote of the connections he made with South Africa:

What was so noticeable is **the deep hatred that is still hiding in some of us.** It is unhealthy to be walking around with such feelings. What will happen if these feelings explode? It really worries me. We'll have to find a way to release our feeling in a positive way; otherwise it is going to affect us negatively for the rest of our lives. (Coloured male, rural former coloured school, Facing the Past workshop delegate, 2009, Author's translation from Afrikaans)

A black teacher wrote of the same session:

There were a lot of emotions—for some it did bring up bad memories. There is a lot to be done to get away [from] that hurt and hatred. All of us were victims of Apartheid, for some more than others. **We as a group [teachers at the workshop] can't take blame for what happened but we have a chance here to improve and try to correct the past...**to go and make a drastic difference in our communities. (Black male, rural township school, Facing the Past workshop delegate, 2009)

One of the participants who appeared to be most deeply affected by the experience of the four day workshops was a white Afrikaner male. In his final evaluation of the workshop, he wrote:

The fact that I was willing to share my deepest emotions with people I did not know four days ago, actually set me free. I realised I can talk about stuff without the fear of being labelled a racist or a privileged white man. (White male, rural state school in new area, Facing the Past workshop delegate, 2008)

The Facing the Past workshops reflect the conditions for reconciliation set out by Staub (2003), who highlights the importance of experience of the 'other', and Chaitin (2008), who emphasises 'joint dialogue through the sharing of personal stories and experiences connected to the traumas and through the creation of "safe spaces" for communication' (p. 35). She further maintains that while interpersonal reflection is important, the intergroup reflection is even more so. The teachers' comments reflect the personal journeys taken by many participants, critically in dialogue with 'the other'. Risks were taken in sharing deeply personal pain; in owning up to continued prejudice; and acknowledging that there is still deep hatred that needs to be confronted. One of the most poignant comments was that of the feeling of release expressed by the teacher who wrote of being set free by being able to 're-story' his life by acknowledging the past in the safe space created by fellow teachers.

### *Young people and border crossings*

The ultimate aim of all teacher development in the Facing the Past programme is the cognitive, social and personal development of the pupil in the classroom. While the collection and analysis of data from young people taught by Facing the Past teachers is still in its early stages, one comment from a black pupil aged 15 in Grade 9 at a private school, when addressing a parents' evening in 2007, indicates that some learners are beginning to think in more complex ways about moral and ethical decision-making and the consequences of their behaviour:

Studying the beginnings of Apartheid and Nazism in history brought me to the revelation that small comments can isolate people and can create an avalanche of hatred and violence. I realised how merciless I was being if I belittled someone when I talked behind their back or cut them off from 'my world' because they didn't 'belong'. I believe that history has opened up my way of thinking and understanding in all of my subjects. It is still difficult not to talk about people but I find it easier to speak out when friends talk about somebody and to be friends with someone 'outside' my group of friends. (Black female student, aged 15, affluent private school)

What is significant is this young person's recognition, not unlike that of the teachers who participated in Facing the Past workshops, that change is a process that needs continuous work.

## **Conclusion**

Democracy in South Africa is fragile. While the Constitution guarantees basic political, civil and human rights, democratic practices depend on a culture that values and promotes these rights. Education cannot on its own be responsible for inculcating a democratic culture among youth, but schools and teachers do have a key role to play in preparing young people to become responsible citizens who value democracy. In a society undergoing transition, teachers may themselves have different views on the meaning of democracy and democratic practices. Teachers are not a homogenous body: they lived in different communities and had different

experiences during the conflict years. Identities become deeply internalised, bolstered by group memories. One of the most fruitful fields of further research would be on how exactly the autobiographies, emotions and beliefs of teachers not only filter curriculum knowledge in the classroom, but impact on the way in which democratic values are taught through classroom interactions. Very little is known about this in divided societies.

I have used data from the Facing the Past programme because I believe that it is the only professional development programme in South Africa that takes teacher identities and the traumatic legacy of the past into account. There have been both internal and external evaluations of the programme and the evidence emerging from these evaluations and the workshop observations point to promising results in opening the way for teachers to make personal connections to a traumatic past. What has also emerged from this research is that personal change after internecine conflict is a long and complicated business.

Evidence from research conducted by Harland and Kinder (1997) indicates that lasting professional change comes only when there is value congruence between the policy message about 'good practice', or, in this case, required new values, and the teachers' own 'codes of practice' or values; that is, when policy intentions and teachers' beliefs about good practice or values coincide. In a post-conflict society this includes recognising and coming to terms with inherited attitudes and values and trauma of the past so that this self-knowledge can inform the change process towards new values. Furthermore, meaningful personal change in the post-Apartheid context cannot happen in isolation; it occurs within rebuilt 'relational spaces' (Lederach, 2005) in which meaningful interaction and the willingness to cross borders (Giroux, 1992) can take place. Teachers on the Facing the Past programme have only just begun their journeys of personal change. A moral approach to history teaching, such as that provided by Facing the Past, offers an important model for teacher development in the context of a society emerging from identity-based conflict.

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## Notes

1. Originally a partnership between Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO), Boston, the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) and the Cape Town Holocaust Centre, it is currently a partnership between the WCED, FHAO and Shikaya, a non-profit organisation based in Cape Town, South Africa.
2. For the purposes of understanding the composition of the group of teachers, the classifications in force under Apartheid have been used (RSA, 1950a). These are still used in many official surveys and documents for the purpose of ensuring employment equity. South Africa is also still a deeply racialised society and struggles to find ways of identification that are not race-based.

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