

Moving beyond the toolbox: teaching human rights through teaching the Holocaust in post-apartheid South Africa

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What role might Holocaust education play in post-apartheid South Africa? What role might the teacher of the Holocaust play? This paper examines the considerations that have shaped the programmes developed by the South African Holocaust Foundation to support South African teachers teaching about the Holocaust. This programme is set against a society removed in time and space from the history of the Holocaust, but in which teachers, like other members of this society, have recently emerged from a traumatic past. Informed by the experience of working with history teachers from diverse communities across rural and urban areas of South Africa, this paper argues that, if teachers are to be active players in the process of social transformation, teacher training has to go beyond supporting the content knowledge and methodological skills of teachers. Training programmes have to facilitate not only the development of an understanding by teachers of what is meant by human rights, but more importantly, facilitate the process by which teachers can come to value human rights, and not see them as an obstacle in their path to teaching.

Keywords: human rights education; Holocaust; teacher development

Dear Teacher

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness.
Gas chambers built by learned engineers.
Children poisoned by educated physicians.
Infants killed by trained nurses.
Women and babies shot by high school and college graduates.
So I am suspicious of education.

My request is:

Help your students to become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns.
Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human.

This plea of a Holocaust survivor to renowned educator and psychologist Chaim Ginott does not appear in any official document from the South African Department of Education. However, its suggestion that teachers¹ play a role in the development of a humane society corresponds to the view of the Department and the South African Holocaust Foundation. Drawing heavily on a national research project conducted in 2002 (South African National Department of Education 2002), this paper examines whether teachers share this view of themselves. The findings of the research project

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also challenge some of the basic assumptions underlying the goals of the South African Holocaust Foundation and the South African National Department of Education. This paper examines the challenges of the report, and the implications it holds for the teacher development programmes associated with the South African Holocaust Foundation.

The South African Holocaust Foundation's education programmes assume that an understanding of the relevance of the Holocaust will prevent the legacies of prejudice playing itself out over and over again. However, to 'show and tell' the history of the Holocaust is not enough: the Foundation believes that if education programmes do not make concrete the connection between the prejudices of the past and the prejudices of the present, the only lesson the Holocaust will teach is that the past was terrible. The gravest consequence from such an approach to Holocaust history, the author believes, is that genocide and other gross human rights violations come to be seen as an inevitable part of the human experience. This perception robs both the young and old of a sense of agency. At best, the result is apathy. At worst, one need only begin with the breakdown of a sense of community in order to follow the sad trajectory of a society in which most citizens feel without control.

Accordingly, the South African Holocaust Foundation's teacher development programmes attempt to strengthen content knowledge, as well as methodology: how teachers teach is as important as what they teach. This organization sees the teaching of Holocaust history as a way to bring about a more humane society. It is clear from policy documents (South African National Department of Education 2005, 2008), that the South African Department of Education shares this view of the role of the history educator and history as an agent of change. It is hoped that the history of the Holocaust will illustrate the dangers of prejudice and discrimination, and make clear the moral imperative for individuals to make responsible choices and defend human rights. The workshops provided by the South African Holocaust Foundation also examine why people choose to act out their prejudices, the conditions that encourage such behaviour and the consequences of these choices. Exploring these questions is essential in helping teachers to see themselves as agents and shapers of their world, capable of making a difference.

Holocaust history is viewed as one of the tools in the history teacher-builder's transformational toolkit that the South African National Department of Education and the South African Holocaust Foundation hope history teachers will use to nurture a human rights culture. The other tool is the teacher's ability to develop the learner's critical thinking. It is envisaged that the learner, wielding the tool of critical thinking, will become a transformer, a 'change agent'.

The goals and vision of the transformatory toolkit in action, shared by the South African National Department of Education and the South African Holocaust Foundation, are noble. However, it is critical that, in order to come closer to achieving these goals, the basic assumptions on which the goals are based need to be identified, and the challenges to these assumptions understood. The first assumption is that learning about past human rights abuses will automatically affect the present and thus the future in a positive way. The second assumption is that teachers are skilled enough to teach critical thinking, and that they view the development of critical thinking as an important objective. Lastly, there is an assumption that South African teachers have a common understanding of the term 'human rights' and see as important the development of a human rights culture.

The first assumption is that learning about the Holocaust leads to positive behaviour. Young (1993, 13; 2000, 11) asks of Holocaust education 'To what end are people moved? To what historical conclusions, to what understanding or actions in their own lives?' The Foundation's answer would be that people would learn from the Holocaust important ethical and moral lessons. Armed with this information, they would be moved to become active citizens in a democracy, responding with compassion and respect for the dignity of others.

What are the challenges connected to this basic assumption? First, one has to ask oneself whether the feelings of anguish and indignation aroused by the Holocaust are enough to galvanize and sustain social activism. Ehmann (2001) sounds a critical warning:

no empirical surveys on the direct or long-lasting effects of Holocaust education exist to support the assertion that knowledge about the atrocities suffered by Holocaust victims will guarantee that students make a successful transfer to desirable behaviour in a contemporary context: accepting diversity, respecting cultural differences, taking over responsibility, participating actively in democracy, defending actively human rights when they are violated, helping and caring for the discriminated and persecuted today. (Ehmann 2001, 608)

Similarly, a caveat has to accompany the assertion that the Holocaust will teach ethical and moral lessons. The South African National Department of Education (2005, 8) makes the same assumption about the role that history can play: 'As a vehicle for human rights, History enables people to examine with greater insight and understanding the prejudices ... still existing in society and which must be challenged and addressed.'

The caveat to these liberal aspirations is the fact that historical events do not occur in order that future generations can learn to be more human. The past can be recruited to teach whatever lessons we wish it to teach – the past can also be used to teach bigotry and justify human rights abuses. This does not mean that one does not find resonance in events of the past that can impact positively on one's behaviour and attitudes. It means that teachers must not assume that telling learners what moral lessons they can learn from the Holocaust will attain their agreement. The challenge to Holocaust teachers and, in turn for the trainers of Holocaust teachers, is to allow time for learners to reflect and find for themselves the meaning in the history that they study, and make this a central part of their lives.

The 2002 report (South African National Department of Education 2002) challenges another assumption on which the goals of the South African Holocaust Foundation and the South African National Department of Education are based, i.e. because teachers might consider the development of critical thinking skills as a valuable and necessary skill, they will therefore know how to facilitate the development of these skills. The report (41) found that while teachers did not reject the idea of promoting critical thinking, 'they neither engaged with the vision fully, nor believed it was practical in the context of the understanding of teaching and learning'.

Although teachers claim the issue of practicality as an obstacle, the author believes the key lies in the context of the teacher's understanding of teaching and learning not being considered or understood. As long as teacher development programmes view teachers as automatons or 'vehicles' for change as opposed to complex human beings, programmes to encourage teachers to view themselves as having agency will falter. Teacher development programmes that engage with the teacher's context begin to

model the creation of the safe learning spaces that are congruent with a teaching approach that promotes human rights. Implicit in the construction of the role of the teacher as a builder of a society based on the values of the Constitution of South Africa is the assumption that teachers understand what values the Constitution upholds, and that they perceive these values, to be important. How accurate are these assumptions?

Research conducted in 2002 (South African National Department of Education 2002) into which values teachers considered important revealed that many teachers were ambivalent about human rights, as they believed that the lack of discipline among learners was the fault of a human rights culture. The findings of this report have serious implications: teachers create an environment that can either nurture the learners' commitment to human rights values or undermine it. Teachers, for whom the issue of human rights is either abstract at best or anti-educational at worst, are not likely to create a pro-human-rights environment. Teacher programmes thus have to make the bridge from an abstract and inaccurate understanding of human rights to something that is concrete, relevant and vital. Teachers need to internalize the value of human rights if their teaching is to promote a culture of human rights. One can only internalize and value what one understands. What should teacher development programmes look like in order to encourage teachers to teach within a human rights framework?

First and foremost, teacher identity has to be considered: What do teachers think they should be teaching, how do teachers think they should be teaching, and why is this so? The South African teacher carries a large part of the burden of responsibility for social transformation. However, what is overlooked by the South African National Department of Education, and often by teachers themselves, is the other burden South African teachers bear: the memory of their experience living in a racial state, and how this experience shaped and shapes their identity even today. It is in the history classroom in particular, that the teacher feels the weight of these burdens. My contention is that teachers must have the opportunity outside their classrooms to examine their past and come to an understanding of the value of human rights through that examination. If denied this opportunity, they will be unable to shoulder their responsibility to the learners they teach. Instead, they will retreat to the barren island of an authoritarian methodology which undermines the goal of promoting a culture of human rights.

Secondly, teachers need to learn what constitutes a 'human right'. They need to experience a methodology that promotes human rights values. There needs to be time for teachers to reflect on their assumptions and what their responsibilities are towards creating a safe learning environment. Thirdly, in developing teaching skills, teachers need to understand why the skills that they are teaching are important. Perhaps the most powerful strategy that education workshops can employ is to model teaching and learning within a human rights framework. The teacher needs to experience a safe learning environment, and discover that it is practical and possible and educationally sound, to encourage critical thinking in their learners.

The teacher programmes of the South African Holocaust Foundation have responded to these demands by moving away from one-off workshops to programmes spread over a number of sessions. Teachers can practice what they have experienced and share this with other teachers. A network of support and encouragement is developed. Workshop facilitators model best practice in the presentation of the workshops, as opposed to telling. The issue of human rights is examined. Time is built in for reflection on the connections between the past and contemporary issues.

The South African National Department of Education states: 'History promotes non-discrimination, raises debates, confronts issues and builds capacity in individuals to address current social and environmental concerns ... [and] promotes Human Rights' (2005, 9; 2008, 10). It is not history that does this. It is the teacher of history who is central to whether these aims are achieved or not. Education development has to start with the teacher, centre on the teacher and end with the teacher if it is to succeed in achieving its transformative goals.

If teaching about the Holocaust in diverse classrooms is to be a vehicle for social transformation, the way in which teachers view their role and the way in which teachers are viewed need to be transformed.

Note

1. The term 'educator' is used in South Africa to refer to teachers.

Notes on contributor

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