

Teaching the History of the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwandan

Secondary Schools

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Executive Summary

- Teaching about the Genocide against the Tutsi is not an easy task even though teachers generally comply with the content of the Rwandan school history curriculum. Evidence from teachers' experiences has revealed that, in most cases, controversial issues related to the genocide, including genocide denial, are raised by learners but not by teachers. Moreover, confronting denial does not appear to be a specific objective among teachers when they teach about the genocide. As a result of teachers' lack of engagement with controversial issues, learners lack both the content knowledge and the skills to combat genocide denial.

- Almost all teachers interviewed in this study use a teacher-centred approach, which contradicts the learner-centred, critical pedagogical methodology recommended by the Rwandan history curriculum.

- Teachers face a scarcity of appropriate resources for the teaching of curriculum content on the Genocide against the Tutsi. Films and online resources are used in well-resourced schools, but primary sources that are recommended by the curriculum are not generally available to teachers.

Context and importance of the problem

Rwanda has suffered deeply as a result of the Genocide against the Tutsi. The Rwandan government has used education as a key strategy to promote peace in this post-conflict society, and the Rwandan history curriculum aims to help Rwandan youth to “live in harmony with others without ethnic distinctions, religious distinctions or other forms of discrimination and exclusion that have caused problems in the society like the Genocide of 1994” (NCDC, 2010, p.5).

The role of the teacher in this endeavour is crucial. The teacher is required not only to develop learners’ critical pedagogy as recommended by the curriculum but also to help them understand how genocide ideology was constructed and executed. The teacher must help learners to discover the role of different actors involved in the genocide and explain the consequences of the genocide in different ways. However, with reference to the post-genocide history curriculum (1998, 2008, 2010) some teachers tend to avoid certain difficult questions related to the genocide.

Little research has been conducted into the ways in which the genocide is taught as part of the history curriculum in Rwandan secondary schools. Our qualitative research project entitled, “The experiences of Rwandan secondary school history teachers in teaching the Genocide against the Tutsi as a controversial issue”, attempts to understand this phenomenon by carrying out semi-structured interviews with eleven secondary school teachers from Kigali City and the remaining provinces. This policy brief presents teachers’ experiences of teaching about the Genocide against the Tutsi and aims to build an understanding of these experiences to help develop more effective educational strategies. The recommendations outlined in this policy brief aim both to improve the teaching of the genocide as a historical phenomenon and to empower learners to be more critical and responsive towards human rights issues.

Teachers’ aims when teaching about the genocide

Our research shows that teachers consider prevention as their central aim when teaching about the Genocide against the Tutsi. Teachers do their best to convince learners about the importance of fighting any potential recurrence of genocide. One teacher who participated in the research underlined that the main idea is to make learners understand the importance of “never again” so that learners are not only sensitised but can also advise their parents, siblings and neighbours about the effects of divisive ideology which was at the origin of the tragedy and was promoted through teaching ethnicity. By analysing cases in which people saved others during the genocide, learners also gain an understanding of the importance of taking morally right decisions during critical times. Teachers attach great importance to living in harmony as a means of preventing genocide, even though genocide prevention is not explicitly stated as a goal of the curriculum.

Teachers are aware that the best way to avoid any recurrence of genocide is to educate young people about the importance of unity. Learners are warned not to listen to anyone who may try to divide them, and are taught about the necessity of reconciliation in Rwandan society. Morality is invoked during teaching, and some teachers borrow from religion to teach about the right to life. Many teachers also want learners to understand the present in the context of the past, teaching historical examples with the intention of strengthening relations among Rwandans.

Through teaching about the genocide, it is possible for teachers to develop learners’ critical thinking and reasoning skills so that they can defend their ideas on the genocide publicly on the basis of reason and evidence. However, one major finding of our research is that teachers do not directly attempt to combat genocide denial. One reason for the absence of this as an objective is that teachers avoid critical pedagogy, fearing that controversial ideas rooted in hatred and

division will emerge in classroom debates. As a result, learners are deprived of the opportunity to learn the main characteristics of genocide denial as well as how to design appropriate strategies to combat it.

Genocide content overshadowed by historical background

The Genocide against the Tutsi is not taught in isolation. Teachers also take a historical perspective by teaching about traditional inter-group relationships during the pre-colonial period, the role of the colonial administration in tearing Rwandan society apart, and the perpetrators of genocide in the post-colonial period. Our research shows that teachers romanticise the pre-colonial period by claiming that Rwandans lived in harmony. In portraying the past in this way, teachers' wider goal is not to promote critical analysis but to emphasise the transformational role that history can play in the post-genocide society. Our research also shows that the class content on the sequence of events that comprised the genocide is overshadowed by the historical background. As a result, little attention is paid, for instance, to the role of the international community and other actors such as religious leaders in the occurrence of the genocide.

During the educational process, learners, but not teachers, tend to raise controversial issues related to the causes of the genocide and the management of the post-genocide period. Alongside the causes of the genocide presented by history teachers, learners have proposed alternatives including bad governance and the shooting down of the presidential plane. Learners have also raised the idea of a 'double genocide', asked about the actual number of victims, and highlighted that both Hutu and Tutsi died during and after the genocide. The teachers we interviewed responded to these learners by clearly distinguishing the genocide from other types of killings. The idea of double genocide was rejected by the teachers because in their view there was no plan to exterminate the Hutu who were killed during 1994, in whole or in part. Teachers argued that Hutu who succumbed were killed not

for "ethnic" but for political reasons. In addition, the Hutu who were killed were not the main targets. When students raise questions about the number of victims, teachers cite a figure of around one million which was calculated by the Ministry of Local Government, and the teachers do not allow debate on this. Concerning post-genocide transformation, one teacher informed us that a learner expressed the view that funds for genocide survivors should be allocated to all vulnerable people. The teacher responded by arguing that genocide survivors often have no other family support, and need special attention because they were targets of a planned extermination.

All history teachers who participated in our research are aware that some aspects of the Genocide against the Tutsi are controversial. Teachers are confronted with an official version to be taught, and an unofficial version, some aspects of which come from deniers of the genocide. Teachers' silence concerning controversial genocide-related issues stems partly from their lack of confidence and skills in dealing with such themes. Another reason for teachers' reluctance to discuss contentious issues may be their lack of content knowledge. For example, specific funds that already support other vulnerable children were not mentioned by the teacher discussed above when the learner asked about funds allocated to survivors of the genocide. A third reason that teachers tone down controversial discussions may be the temporal proximity of the atrocities committed in 1994, which are still in the personal experiences of teachers and in the minds of learners. A final reason that teachers are reluctant to discuss difficult issues is to avoid extreme positions in class.

The dominance of teacher-centeredness

The 2008 and 2010 history curricula emphasised the active participation of learners in the learning process and the role of teachers as coordinators and guides. However, there is evidence that a range of educational activities are conducted with a teacher-centred rather than a learner-centred approach. The

following phrases gleaned from our research bear testimony to this: ‘I expose’ and ‘after this introduction I provide my class a summary of the history of the genocide’. Although teachers argue that this approach allows them to transmit the appropriate educational message, it impedes learners’ opportunities to develop critical skills as required by the curriculum. However, we found instances in which teachers used a learner-centered approach through group presentations and eliciting comments on pictures and films. Teachers are also aware that group work helps learners to internalise content and increases cohesion among them.

Alongside the teaching activities proposed in the curriculum, some teachers have developed their own educational strategies to teach about the genocide, for example starting with the least controversial topics such as the consequences of the genocide before continuing on to more challenging themes such as its causes. Some teachers link the Rwandan situation to the ‘stages of genocide’ theory as developed by Gregory Stanton, which includes classification, symbolisation, dehumanisation and organisation. This is done most frequently in homework assignments and during discussions that aim to develop learners’ understanding of the processes that led to the genocide. Another innovation that transcends the curriculum is that some teachers make the teaching of genocide a whole-school activity. In this regard, one teacher who participated in our research developed an anti-genocide club which gathered the whole school on some Fridays to discuss genocide-related issues. In the process, learners who were not studying history benefited from this opportunity to learn and to share their views with others. The teacher affirmed that the club contributed to building a culture of peace at school.

The reasons mentioned above that teachers do not discuss controversial issues with learners in the classroom also explain the predominance of teacher-centeredness. Other reasons for the lack of a full implementation of a critical pedagogical approach include a lack of time due to the extensive nature of the content

to be covered, poor understanding of the language of instruction either by teachers or learners, the lack of a reading culture and the lack of appropriate teaching resources.

Scarcity of teaching resources

Resources prescribed by the history curriculum include audio-visual sources such as films and photographs. Resources may also include visits to memorial sites and museums, as well as the use of first-hand stories. Films are mainly used in well-resourced schools. In our research, only one teacher from a poorly-resourced school screened genocide-related films for the class. Although films are not extensively used by teachers, some can traumatise learners due to the horrific images they portray. The curriculum does not recommend any specific film. Evidence from teachers’ interviews indicates that internet resources are not extensively used in schools, and any use of the internet is done carefully to avoid websites that could contribute to the propagation of genocide ideology or to the denial of the truth of the genocide. Only one teacher in our research used maps when teaching about the genocide, which assisted the explanation of the expansion of killings during the genocide and the regions most affected. In general, analysis of media extracts, comparing documents related to the Genocide against the Tutsi with other genocides, films and UN documents are not frequently used due to scarcity of these resources. Even if ‘resource people’ such as survivors of the genocide are not identified in the curriculum, they support teachers by providing first-hand information to learners. On the rare occasions that they occur, memorial visits help learners to attain a tangible sense of the genocide and to be sensitised against denial. Despite the scarcity of teaching resources, all history teachers interviewed in this research acknowledged the small but positive contribution given by the availability of the *The History of Rwanda. A Participatory Approach. Teacher’s Guide for Secondary Schools*.

Recommendations

In view of the prevalence of teacher-centred approaches in the teaching of the genocide as a topic in Rwandan schools, we recommend permanent teacher-education programmes that enhance teachers' capacity to discuss sensitive and controversial aspects of the genocide through a more participatory teaching approach. Such an approach would not only enable learners to defend their ideas publicly but would also support the development of transferable skills such as the interpretation of statistics, map reading, researching and writing skills, and would also increase learners' social cohesion.

Given that teachers are disinclined to discuss certain issues in class in order to prevent learners from creating divisionism or engaging in genocide denial, special training should be offered to in-service teachers. Moreover, teacher training colleges should focus specifically on this problem. In their professional development, teachers should discuss how to use different types of sources to teach about the genocide. Specific content on genocide denial should be elaborated in teachers' guides and learners' textbooks. This can contribute to the fight against genocide denial.

The Rwanda Education Board should focus more on the development and dissemination of teaching material related to the genocide such as maps, audio-visual material and learners' textbooks appropriate to the Rwandan school context. Special attention should also be given to resource material not mentioned by the teachers in their interviews such as UN documents or documents related to other genocides, as well as relevant government policies. Parents and other 'resource people' should also be sensitised, via educational programmes, about their role in providing suitable information to learners.

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