Research article

Conceptualising historical legacies for transitional justice history education in postcolonial societies

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Abstract

Addressing legacies of past injustice is a central concern for transitional justice. It has most commonly been attempted through a 'truth-telling' approach; it is assumed that if the truth of past injustices is made known, then justice can be acted upon within contemporary society. 'Truth telling' – and disciplinary approaches to learning about past injustices – is therefore a central rationale for postconflict history education. However, this article argues that 'truth telling' is not sufficient for transitional justice history education. Instead, greater attention should be paid to historical legacies, since it is beliefs about how the past impacts the present that shape reparation decision making. While the concept of historical legacies has been under-theorised by transitional justice scholars, this article demonstrates how recent work from the field of history education can be helpful. In particular, this article distinguishes between legacies as essentialised causal relationship between the past and the present, and legacies which refer to how people construct causal relationships between the past and present. By understanding legacies as constructs, this article encourages history educators to engage with how identity factors

may mediate the way in which students understand the impact of the past on the present, particularly in postconflict societies.

Introduction

The concept of transitional justice is applied to postconflict states which are undergoing reforms in the wake of historical injustices (Miles, 2018). It refers to 'the full range for processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempt to come to terms with a *legacy* of large-scale past abuses' (United Nations, 2004: 4, emphasis added). In recent years, with the expansion and refinement of the field of transitional justice, a growing emphasis on education as a partner for peacebuilding and justice has developed (Keynes, 2019). Conceptual work has shown that education and transitional justice might work together and reinforce one another in ways that contribute to transformation (Cole and Murphy, 2009; Davies, 2007; Novelli et al., 2015; Paulson, 2009).

However, the role of education in transitional justice is still 'under conceptualized' (Keynes, 2019: 113), and as a result faces many challenges. This article builds upon previous work by Keynes (2019), who argues that history education's limited focus on 'truth telling', remembrance and critical thinking might serve to undermine transitional justice in postcolonial societies and strengthen the legitimacy of the settler-colonial state. I develop Keynes's (2019) position by presenting examples from South African and Canadian history classrooms, in which a 'narrative logic of rupture' (Teeger, 2014: 72) is encouraged between injustices in the past and the present. I use these examples to advocate for the importance of a discussion of historical legacies in postcolonial history education.

In this article, I suggest that historical legacies have been given surprisingly little conceptual attention by transitional justice scholars, despite being central to the definition of what transitional justice is (United Nations, 2004). Yet a focus on legacies – rather than simply truth telling or remembrance – is particularly important in postcolonial states, whose contemporary societies have been shaped by long, complex histories of identity-based violence and injustice. In postcolonial and postconflict countries, many contemporary decisions – such as reparations and affirmative action – are determined by beliefs regarding the legacies of the past. Furthermore, differing beliefs regarding the legacies of the past can be sources of contemporary antagonism, and ongoing identity-based conflict.

The contribution of this article is to deepen the current state of research by advocating for a stronger conceptualisation of historical legacies within the field of transitional justice, as an antidote to the 'neutralising' tendencies of 'truth telling'. I suggest that historical legacies – which Wittenberg (2015) defines as a contemporary outcome that is caused by an antecedent – provide an important framework for helping young people understand the ways in which their contemporary lives are influenced by past injustices. Yet to date, there has been conceptual ambiguity in the literature as to whether the legacies that are being referred to are essentialised causal relationships between the past and the present, or whether they are constructed causal relationships between the past and the present, and thus subject to continual re-construction.

Drawing on the work of postcolonial historians such as Stoler (2016) and Wiener (2013), I suggest that scholars of transitional justice seek to understand how students construct legacies. We cannot assume that particular beliefs about the legacies of past conflict are obvious or inevitable, even when the historical 'truths' of conflict are well established. Rather, historical legacies are constructed in diverse ways, often in response to contemporary debates and identities. As ethnographic research from several postcolonial contexts demonstrates (Teeger, 2015; Robinson, 2021), history teachers at times actively engage in preventing students from constructing legacies of past injustices, while simultaneously promoting 'truth telling' about these same injustices. Furthermore, data from the South African context suggests that citizens of different races – while accepting the same set of historical facts about apartheid – draw very different conclusions as to its contemporary legacy. Addressing the legacies of large-scale past abuses (United Nations, 2004) is difficult when populations disagree about the nature and existence of those legacies.

I end the article with a discussion of what the field of history education can offer the study of historical legacies for transitional justice. I suggest that while extensive work has been done which seeks to understand how students use the past to explain the present, this work has: (1) adopted a disciplinary approach which sees students' use of the past only in terms of their historical thinking skills, rather than their identity; and (2) has not been interested in how students use the 'difficult past' to explain the present. By adopting a sociocultural, or outside-in approach to history education, as described by Epstein and Peck (2018), the field of transitional justice might benefit from a greater understanding of how and why young people in postcolonial states make sense of their societies.

Problematising truth telling

The role of truth telling is a central debate within the literature on transitional justice. According to Keynes (2019), it is a stated aim of transitional justice to establish what happened in the past in order to redress and acknowledge harms. Indeed, Keynes (2019: 118–19) argues that 'the idea of truth telling is a paradigmatic concept of transitional justice and the truth commission is arguably its chief innovation'. The role of history education within this model of transitional justice is to facilitate truth telling and remembrance among the next generation.

The 'right to truth' has become a feature of international law since the early 1990s, and a hallmark of transitional justice since the 1995 South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC pioneered a victim-centric approach to truth telling, and provided reparation to victims and amnesty to perpetrators who cooperated, representing a departure from the restitutive focus of transitional justice. According to Bevernage (2014), it epitomised the 'historical turn' in the field, whereby officially sanctioned truth telling about the past could provide an alternative form of justice to traditional legal sanctions.

A review of the literature on transitional justice suggests that there are three reasons why truth telling is considered important for peace. The first is so that wrongs can be righted in what might be considered a judicial sense (Gready and Robins, 2020). The second is for the purposes of individual and collective psychological healing (Minow, 1998). The third is for the political process of constructing a 'foundation myth' or official narrative (Weldon, 2006). 'Part of the process of "moving on",' argues Weldon (2006: 4), 'is creating a common national identity which reflects memories that acknowledge the trauma of the past in a way that prevents denial'. This 'common national identity' is thought to contribute towards social cohesion or a sense of national citizenship (Santisteban and Bravo, 2018) in societies whose members may in the past have occupied opposing sides of a conflict.

The popular idea of history education as producing historical truth and facilitating coherent remembrance is commonly aligned with the broad aims of transitional justice. It is therefore not surprising that the most frequent educational engagement of truth commissions is to recommend educational content. An analysis of truth commission final reports (Paulson and Bellino, 2017), for example, found that 16 reports called for non-formal education programmes, and 15 reports recommended the development of new content or subject areas within formal education. Furthermore, truth commission reports have provided source material for official textbooks (Bentrovato and Wassermann, 2018) and alternative educational materials developed by human rights organisations in Guatemala (Oglesby, 2007), South Africa (Weldon, 2010) and Peru (Paulson, 2017). In the absence of a history education that facilitates truth telling, history educators warn that a 'social amnesia' (Chapman, 2007) might prevail, and 'if the origins of conflict are not addressed effectively, then instability remains' (Barton and McCully, 2006: 176).

However, transitional justice scholarship is beginning to problematise the idea of 'truth telling' (Gready and Robins, 2020), particularly in the classroom setting. Several researchers (for example, Keynes, 2019; Miles, 2018) have warned that the emphasis on 'truth telling' in postcolonial history classrooms often ignores considerations of how that truth is being told. There are two important ways in which truth can be structured to 'neutralize a history of wrongs' (Corntassel and Holder, 2008: 466) and sidestep justice. The first is by isolating acute violence (torture, sexual abuse) from structural violence (apartheid, colonialism) (Nagy, 2012). The second – which Miles (2018: 306) describes as 'temporality', and Keynes (2019: 127) describes as 'historicization' – is by closing over a history of oppression without due recognition of its persisting, structural manifestations (Corntassel and Holder, 2008). These two 'neutralising' approaches are, of course, interconnected: by isolating the violence to the level of the individual, that violence necessarily ends when the individual ceases to feel or remember the violence.

It is only when structural violence is recognised that there is a possibility for the temporal persistence of injustice.

The TRC has been heavily criticised by South African scholars such as Posel and Simpson (2002) for this reason. Posel and Simpson (2002) have argued that the isolation of acute violence from structural violence, and the TRC's controversial decision to focus only on gross human rights violations, meant that the legislated structural violence of segregation, economic exploitation and unequal education fell outside the TRC's scope. By individualising accountability, collectivising suffering and sidelining discussions of beneficiaries (Posel and Simpson, 2002; Wilson, 2001), the TRC dealt with the past. However, it did so in ways that safeguarded the majority of White South Africans from having to account for how they benefited, and continue to benefit, from apartheid.

Matsunaga (2016) echoed a similar criticism in the Canadian context, which like South Africa was a settler colony, arguing that the government of Canada understood reconciliation to be only about changing attitudes and beliefs, and therefore avoided and silenced conversations about greater structural change. Transitional justice in Canada became loosely understood as a process of reconciling relationships and changing perceptions, but not about land, sovereignty and justice (Miles, 2018). The historical narrative of national progress served to legitimise the settler colonial state, when it was the very existence of this state that mechanisms of transitional justice should have been questioning.

Miles (2018) suggests that the Canadian attempt at truth and reconciliation has also been plagued by the issue of temporality. He suggests that an example of 'closing over' a history of oppression is best demonstrated by former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, when he stated in the official government apology for the Residential Schools that this was 'a sad chapter in our history' (Government of Canada, 2010, cited in Miles, 2018: 302). Harper's statement, much echoed in the media, temporally framed settler colonialism as an event of the past, one that is disconnected from present society and current institutions. Miles argues that such a discourse, which temporalises historical injustice as a 'dark part' or 'sad chapter' (Government of Canada, cited in Miles, 2018: 302) in our history, works to deny or silence both broader historical narratives and ongoing injustices.

Indeed, Keynes (2019) argues that even referring to colonial injustices as 'history' performs a political purpose, which serves to actively establish a distance between the past and present. When used in truth-telling processes, Keynes suggests that historical discourses can close off or reinstate a past – 'border policing' – so as to validate a particular present. Therefore, beyond its 'backwards gaze' focused on recognition and truth telling, the persisting injustices cannot be easily accommodated as part of the truth commissions' 'forward-looking' reforms (Keynes, 2019). Groups who do not want to, or who cannot, leave their past behind (because it is not past) become marginalised from the transitional justice truth-telling process.

Yet why is establishing a distinction between past and present so problematic? Scholars such as Murphy (2017), Ladson-Billings (2006) and McCully (2012) have warned that 'closing off' the past has dangerous implications for transitional justice, since it conceals the causes of contemporary problems, and thus makes justice less realisable. As time passes, explains Murphy (2017, cited in Bellino et al., 2017), legacies of historical injustice which are not addressed become less visible and thus more normalised, so that future-oriented reforms often become disarticulated from the historical processes that contributed to challenges embedded in the status quo. Reflecting on educational disparities in the US, Ladson-Billings (2006) famously argued for a conceptual shift from 'the achievement gap' as a way of explaining and understanding the persistent inequality that exists (and has always existed) in US schools to 'an education debt' accrued through historical, economic, sociopolitical and moral injustices. In reframing educational disparities in this way, Ladson-Billings (2006) foregrounds both the historical legacies of the disparities, and the need for transitional justice in the US context.

Several scholars have equally warned that not addressing historical legacies can undermine the social fabric, particularly in already divided societies. Rafferty (2013: 28) has suggested that it is only in connecting history to present-day society that the potential of history teaching to contribute to social cohesion truly becomes manifest: 'If historical events are discussed as detached and irrelevant issues, the opportunity to develop the skills for living peacefully in present day society can be lost.' Equally, in a discussion of citizenship in 'postwar' Guatemala, Bellino (2016) argues that if students are not encouraged to seek connections between the past and present, young people who are personally disconnected from Indigenous struggles can easily dismiss them as misguided, irrational, disruptive and even harmful to the civitas. If history is indeed important for citizenship, argues Shreiner (2014), it is because citizens must

not only know history, but also must be able to effectively use history to reason about issues within the civic domain.

What these authors suggest is that 'truth telling' does not necessarily contribute to transitional justice in postconflict societies, even when it is an integrated aspect of the history curriculum; the temporal structure of the truth also matters. History education which exposes past injustices as a series of individualised events which are understood to be over is in danger of communicating to students that there are no wrongs left to right. To contribute to transitional justice, students need to understand that historical injustice can be both structural and contemporary; historical injustices can persist structurally into the present. History education therefore needs to consider the contemporary legacies of historical injustice, rather than simply the historical injustice itself.

Historical legacies for history education

The focus on historical legacies is supported by recent conceptual developments in the field of history education for transitional justice. According to Bellino et al. (2017), one of the paradigmatic tasks for education as a mechanism of transitional justice is to employ a 'dual gaze' (Davies, 2017), looking back to past abuses and ahead to the future prevention of their recurrence. Bellino et al. (2017) argue that transitional justice is both temporally and ideologically committed to past and present, and therefore requires looking forward and backward – or perhaps looking to the future through the lens of the past. Maintaining this dual gaze, they argue, demands that education in transitional justice contexts addresses legacies of conflict and division that reside within educational structures, contexts and curricula. It is not sufficient to increase access to schools without also understanding the historical reasons why certain groups still struggle to gain access.

Indeed, a review of the literature on history education within societies that have experienced large-scale injustice suggests that the need to address historical legacies has been a recurring, if not prominent, theme. McCully (2012) advocates most directly for a focus on historical legacies in history education. Faced with the challenges posed by teaching history in postconflict contexts, McCully – like Keynes (2019) – critiques the prevailing view that an enquiry-based, multi-perspective 'truth-telling' approach offers the most effective way for history teaching to contribute to postconflict understanding. Rather, he draws on empirical evidence from studies conducted in Northern Ireland to suggest that the impact of history education is limited unless the history learned in schools is made directly relevant to young people's day-to-day cultural and political experiences, that is, unless students are investigating contemporary legacies. Furthermore, empirical evidence (Barton and McCully, 2005, 2006) suggests that students in Northern Ireland actively sought a history that helped them to interpret the present.

Scholars who advocate for a greater focus on historical legacies warn that without recognising legacies of historical injustices, history curricula in postconflict societies are at risk of adopting a human rights, citizenship or peace education framework which universalises and decontextualises violence (Cremin, 2015; Horner, 2013). Often, peace education espouses a forward-looking approach promising future peace that is not grounded in an understanding of the past and its legacies in the present. According to Bellino (2014), these curricula are often implemented as abstract principles to be memorised, leaving students to make past–present connections on their own. This approach is more likely to whitewash legacies of historical injustices – or even actively dissuade students from engaging in difficult conversations for fear of rupturing a fragile peace – rather than serving the needs of transitional justice.

Discussing the legacies of historical injustices with students – while important for transitional justice – therefore risks creating conflict in the classroom, since it has potentially disruptive implications for contemporary power relations (Robinson, 2020). McCully and his teacher colleagues (McCully et al., 2002), for example, recall an instance in which a student teacher in Northern Ireland taught a lesson to Unionist students on the response of British authorities to the Easter Rising of 1916. It was clear that the majority of the class understood that the response of the British military was a cause of the growing support for Sinn Fein. However, when the student teacher suggested a contemporary analogy – that the British response to the Hunger Strikes had caused a swell in support for the Provisional IRA – a significant number of students, who had earlier engaged enthusiastically, refused even to recognise the legitimacy of the exercise. As McCully et al. (2002: 7) note, 'it was as if mention of contemporary events had caused an emotional wall to ascend'. This difficulty in discussing contemporary legacies

might explain why empirical studies from postcolonial contexts have repeatedly reported that teachers – while teaching the 'truth' about a difficult past – actively seek to undermine or 'neutralise' students' beliefs that the past has a contemporary legacy. This is particularly the case in diverse classrooms, or when causally connecting the past and the present might lead to feelings of discomfort.

Teeger (2015), for example, in an ethnographic study of two mixed-race schools in Johannesburg, found that teachers worked to prevent students from constructing contemporary South African society as a legacy of the apartheid past. Black students, in particular, were discouraged from causally connecting their current poverty with historical injustice. She reports a White teacher as saying: 'If [the apartheid section] is not taught correctly, it can lead to more division because you can have that whole idea of "But that's how much we suffered" and "I should get this". But if it's taught correctly it should not do that; it should do the opposite' (Teeger, 2015: 1192). 'Teaching correctly' involved emphasising that 'both sides' (Black and White) had good and bad elements, that Black people were also racist, that none of the students should feel guilty or uncomfortable when learning about apartheid, and that White people also suffered under apartheid. While this approach did not appear in national curricular guidelines, all teachers introduced this narrative into their teaching in order to solve micro-interactional dilemmas emerging from the content of the official curriculum. These dilemmas included minimising conflict in their classrooms, maintaining their position as authority figures in mixed-race schools, and assuaging students' feelings of guilt and anger.

Teeger (2015) observes how students internalised the message that many White people were victimised by or resisted the apartheid regime. For example, students were three times more likely to mention that not all White people supported the apartheid system after they had been exposed to the apartheid section in school than beforehand. The study therefore offers evidence of how teachers and schools shape the way that students construct contemporary legacies of historical injustices, all the while maintaining a focus on the 'truth' of what happened in the past.

In an earlier ethnography of South African history education, Dryden (1999) reported similar findings among White teachers. For example, a White teacher that Dryden (1999: 41) interviewed believed that apartheid legacies were unclear, and he questioned the notion of a single culpability:

> You can't really say what did happen. You know, with the white and black wars, who were the culprits? From the white side, then the blacks were the culprits and then, from the other side, the whites were the culprits . . . there is not one group that is wrong and the other were right.

This statement suggests that the teacher constructed a moral equality between the White minority and the Black majority, and an implication that past injustices cannot explain current inequalities.

More recent research conducted in Canadian history classrooms (Miles, 2021) suggests that while injustices in Canada's past have become a central part of the curriculum, they have also been framed as discrete and easily resolvable historical events. Using interviews with teachers and students in British Columbia, Miles (2021) argues that students are encouraged to see the apology and the TRC as a moment of transition away from the historically unjust past, and thus contemporary legacies of injustice are not discussed. Students report that 'we get it already' when it comes to learning about Residential Schools. This is problematic, since not only do many Indigenous people suggest that transition has not occurred, but it also distracts from the ongoing implications and realities of settler colonialism in Canada. Miles (2021) therefore demonstrates how mainstream history education deals with the 'truth' of Canada's past injustices, while simultaneously preventing students from recognising the ongoing legacies of those injustices.

However, the tendency to avoid using the past to explain the present was not universal within these contexts. The Black teachers that Dryden (1999) observed, for example, held historical discrimination directly responsible for current poverty, since connecting the past and the present in this way was politically powerful and pedagogically valuable. Black teachers encouraged students to realise the injustice of their current situation, and empowered them to do something about it, even when the students themselves felt politically apathetic: 'to show them that the New South Africa is in fact a legacy of what happened then and how it will actually affect them now' (Dryden, 1999: 81). There was a strong emphasis on constructing causal connections between the past and the present. The lessons that students were learning about the legacies of apartheid were therefore very dependent on their teacher.

Equally, ethnographic research that I conducted in Cape Town history classrooms (Robinson, 2021) demonstrated that when teachers were teaching only Black or Coloured students, they emphasised historical legacies. One teacher, for example, encouraged students to use the apartheid history that they

had learned to explain contemporary racial segregation in Cape Town. The students that I interviewed from this class were eager to explain almost all aspects of their lives as being a result of apartheid.

The failure of history education to address historical legacies in a consistent way may pose a risk for social cohesion or shared citizenship, even in societies where there is a well-established historical understanding of past injustices. In postconflict societies, many of the most pressing policy decisions are implicated by past injustice. In South Africa, for example, the 2019 general election foregrounded issues of land redistribution to Black farmers who had been disenfranchised under apartheid. The UK's Brexit debates forced a revisiting of the Northern Irish question, and the significance of the border with the Republic of Ireland. In the US, slavery reparations and affirmative action for African-American citizens is a perennial question that divides the political landscape. Where one stands on these contemporary debates is often a question of how one understands the legacies of injustice, and it can act as a polarising force in identity politics.

An earlier study by Teeger (2014), for example, demonstrates how different legacy thinking manifests in contemporary debates around crime in South Africa. In interviewing young South African professionals on the causes of crime, Teeger (2014) explores the racial variation in how respondents organically introduced the country's apartheid past. Her analysis suggests that while both Black and White interviewees highlighted present conditions as a cause of crime, Black respondents also proposed several ways in which current crime had its roots in the country's apartheid past. Contemporary crime rates were considered to be a legacy of apartheid for her Black respondents, but not for her White respondents, implying that solutions to solving criminality might be also racially divisive. This may be one explanation for the highly racialised voting patterns in South Africa.

A review of the literature on history classrooms suggests that a consideration of historical legacies is important for transitional justice. History education scholars – such as McCully (2012) – advocate for history education which helps students to interpret their contemporary societies, and which links the past and the present. As Teeger (2015), Dryden (1999) and Miles (2021) have demonstrated, whether or not legacies are addressed in the curricula, history classrooms are already spaces where historical legacies are being contested and negotiated. Of concern, however, is the way in which some teachers in postcolonial societies teach students to reject historical legacies that may motivate a disruption of the status quo.

Conceptualising historical legacies

Having made the argument for the importance of historical legacies, I now turn to a discussion of how we might conceptualise legacies for the purposes of history education for transitional justice.

Historical legacies are foundational to transitional justice as a political project, and it has served the political project to remain opaque regarding the nature and extent of historical legacies. That 'difficult pasts' have 'legacies' which need to be 'addressed' (Bellino et al., 2017: 317) is a largely unquestioned assumption in the field of transitional justice. To question the existence of historical legacies – or the nature of that existence – would arguably undermine the essential work that many of these scholars seek to further.

However, if history education is to contribute to transitional justice, I suggest that a more robust and critical theoretical engagement with historical legacies is required. In this article, I foreground two aspects of the debate. The first is to problematise the portrayal of essentialised relationships between the past and the present, which some within the field of transitional justice simply summarise as 'legacy'. In this regard, I draw attention to the work of Stoler (2016), who highlights the complex and shifting 'entailments' of the past. The second is to understand that legacies are social and political constructs that do 'work' in the present. They do not exist as an abstract truth, waiting to be learned or realised; rather, they are constantly fashioned and refashioned in light of contemporary needs, questions and interests. In this regard, I draw on the work of Wiener (2013), who traces the various constructions of colonial legacies. In doing so, I suggest the importance of a research agenda which seeks to investigate how legacies are constructed in postcolonial societies, rather than assuming that the historical 'truth' speaks for itself.

As I have discussed above, several scholars have touched upon the need for a history education that addresses historical legacies. Yet a review of literature on young people and history teachers in postconflict societies suggests that the term 'legacy' has lacked conceptual clarity. It is frequently used

interchangeably to evoke both an unquestioned essentialised relationship between the past and the present, and to refer to the ways in which participants construct and use this relationship. McCully (2012: 145), for example, advocates for a history education that deals critically with 'legacies of the more recent past'. In this regard, he implies that legacies are 'self-evident and unproblematically identified and accessed' (Stoler, 2016: 4). Teeger (2014, 2015) jumps between these two conceptualisations. She evokes a realist understanding of past–present relationships when she describes how history lessons 'threaten to mute the realities of systemic oppression and to blind individuals to legacies of these histories in the present' (Teeger, 2015: 1196). Yet, in another article, she describes how Black respondents highlighted 'a variety of structural legacies that contribute to contemporary social problems' (Teeger, 2014: 72), suggesting that these legacies are racially mediated constructs. Wills (1996), by contrast, suggests an entirely constructivist view of legacies, as he describes the different ways in which teachers and students in a Californian classroom make connections between the past and the present. Yet, he then implies that the students have constructed the 'wrong' legacies, and thus advises that the curriculum be changed.

This brief review of how the term 'legacy' is used suggests that it requires more sophisticated theorisation. Although relatively little has been done to conceptualise historical legacies, scholars within the field of postcolonial studies have begun to engage in the question of how to think about the impact of the past on the present. I suggest that these insights may help further both history education pedagogy, and research on history education. For the purposes of this article, I focus on what it might offer the scholarly field of history education and transitional justice.

Stoler (2016: 4) argues that there are no 'self-evident' legacies. Indeed, she questions whether 'postcolonial studies has too readily assumed knowledge of the multiple forms in which colonial pasts bear on the present and has been too quick to assert what is actually postcolonial in current situations' (Stoler, 2016: 343). Rather, she argues that colonial pasts are 'so ineffably threaded through the fabric of contemporary life forms they seem indiscernible as distinct effects, as if everywhere and nowhere at all' (Stoler, 2016: 5). The question, therefore, is not whether the past and present are in relationship, but rather 'how to convey how those histories remain present' (Stoler, 2016: 24). Models of 'rupture' and 'continuity', suggests Stoler (2016), both get us in trouble, since they leave unaddressed the most difficult issues around the durability and distribution of colonial entailments that cling to the present conditions of people's lives. 'Can we provide an adequate vocabulary to identify what a "colonial presence" looks like?' (Stoler, 2016: 26) is her central question.

While Stoler's work provides no straightforward answers, it does encourage us to be sceptical of those who position historical legacies as natural or 'self-evident'. Indeed, as Stoler suggests, our expectations about what the connectivities between past and present should look like at times prevents the recognition of 'colonial genealogies' (Stoler, 2016: 133). When teachers and students – or indeed scholars and academics – discuss legacies as essentialised relationships, we should be attuned to how these relationships are being selectively chosen, and then 'deployed strategically' (Stoler, 2016: 344) for social, emotional or political purposes. I suggest that this is true even when those political purposes are in the service of transitional justice. Stoler's (2016: 345) insight is particularly important in the context of postcolonial societies, where constructed legacies have implications for 'redemption, apology, and retribution'.

In this regard, Wiener's (2013) work on the changing 'colonial legacy' of the British Empire finds congruence with that of Stoler (2016). He reflects on the constructed nature of historical legacies, and the social, emotional and political work that they do. To most scholars during the last half-century of the British Empire, he argues, the damaging legacies of empire were largely ignored in favour of emphasising the material and institutional advancements from which colonised countries benefited. Today, this view of the empire has not only been rejected, but inverted. The idea of a strong 'colonial legacy' remains pervasive, but now in highly negative terms. Wiener (2013: 2) argues that in contemporary historiography 'most of the problems new states have encountered have been attributed at some point to the legacy left by former European colonial rulers'.

Most interesting, however, is Wiener's (2013) analysis of why these new 'negative' legacies arose. He suggests that disappointment that the end of colonialism had not yielded better results led many to locate the source of these postcolonial problems outside the control of the new states and their peoples. Although this both exaggerated the impact of colonialism, and downplayed the precolonial violence, Wiener (2013: 31) suggests that scholars have been discouraged from scrutinising the role of post (or pre) colonial actors out of fear that they would appear to be abandoning the 'side' of the formerly colonised. What he therefore points to are the ways in which our understanding of historical legacies interacts with

our own identities and ideological positions in the present. At least in part, we use historical legacies to support contemporary positions. It is important therefore to recognise that historical legacies are influenced by the present; as our identities and ideologies change, so too does our analysis of historical legacies.

Together, Wiener (2013) and Stoler (2016) point to the need to problematise what the legacies of colonialism are, and how we engage with them. The limitation of the United Nations' description of transitional justice is that it assumes a self-evident and widely shared understanding of what the legacies of past injustice are. Yet there is nothing self-evident about how the past impacts upon the present (Stoler, 2016), and our beliefs about historical legacies are likely to be shaped by our identity and positionality in regard to the past, as well as by our historical knowledge. A history curriculum that promotes a shared historical narrative, but which does not actively seek to consider or address how students think about legacies of past conflict, may prove ineffective at best and divisive at worst. In other words, history education for transitional justice needs to move beyond 'truth telling' and remembrance, and towards an understanding of how people choose to connect the past and the present.

'Outside-in' history education

In furthering the theorisation of historical legacies for transitional justice, I now turn to a discussion of what the field of history teacher education can offer in this regard. While rarely framed in the service of transitional justice, history educators and history education researchers have long considered the ways in which young people make connections between the past and the present. Most notable in this regard is Rüsen's (2014) work on historical consciousness. Rüsen (2014) argues that historical consciousness functions to aid us in comprehending past actuality in order to grasp present actuality. Yet, as he acknowledges, there are multiple ways in which the past can be used to understand the present, and as such the competence of interpretation lies at the core of the meaning-making activity of historical consciousness.

I suggest that disciplinary debates regarding historical thinking skills prove useful when theorising about the role of historical legacies in postconflict societies. Historical thinking skills refer to the use of critical thinking skills to process information and construct meaning about the past (Trombino and Bol, 2012). A closer alignment between the fields of history education and transitional justice – particularly regarding how students learn to think about causal relationships between the past and present – might also guide future development of postconflict curricula.

Cause and consequence is one historical thinking skill (Sexias and Morton, 2013) that is of particular interest for how this article conceptualises historical legacies, and it provides insight into how historical legacies are addressed in history classrooms. The way students think about causation is likely to influence how they construct historical legacies and – most important for transitional justice – influence how they explain contemporary phenomena.

In his book *What is History?*, E.H. Carr (1961: 87) famously declared that 'the study of history is a study of causes'. Evans (1997: 157) has similarly argued that 'in the end, everybody knows that the present is affected by the past, that what happens today can affect or cause what happens tomorrow or the day after'. He goes on to say that historians 'see it as their duty to establish a hierarchy of causes and to explain if relevant the relationship of one cause to another' (Evans, 1997: 158). It is therefore not surprising that history educators have placed great emphasis on how students learn about causal reasoning. As Harris et al. (2014: 156) have argued, 'because an understanding of causation underpins not only our analysis of so much in history but also our ability to understand and analyse different and often competing accounts of the past, it is worth exploring what causation actually means with students'.

Two studies are of particular interest when thinking about how students use causation in history to interpret contemporary society. The first is Foster's (2008) widely cited study which sought to investigate how UK students' frameworks of the past are structured and employed. One interview question in particular was explicitly targeted to explore the ways in which students made reference to the past when thinking about the present and the future: 'People say that the USA is the most powerful country in the world. Will the USA always be the most powerful? How do you know?' One of the most significant findings was that of the 81 recorded temporal references to the question, 76 per cent offered no explicit historical perspective. Indeed, the most common response was for students to assess the relative strength of the USA in the contemporary world without drawing on any historical knowledge or

understanding. Although some demonstrated an ability to connect the present and the future, many students never left the present. The responses of only a small minority of students demonstrated a capacity to refer to the past to inform contemporary and future perspectives.

Duquette's (2015) study similarly investigated whether the way that Canadian students used the past to understand contemporary issues was related to their historical thinking skills. She tested this relationship by posing contemporary problems, for example, international economic disparity, immigration and voluntary enlistment in armed services. She then examined the ways in which students invoked history (or did not) in explaining these problems, both before and after explicit lessons in historical thinking. She found that students were indeed more likely to use history to explain contemporary problems after they had been taught historical thinking skills.

These two studies suggest that the way that students use the past to reason about contemporary or future contexts is not necessarily determined by the historical content that they know. Rather, studies of this nature suggest that students' use of the past is a historical thinking skill. Indeed, as Duquette (2015) demonstrates, the likelihood of even constructing a contemporary problem as a historical legacy can be increased by teaching historical thinking skills.

Yet, what these studies miss in effectively assessing whether or not students interpret the present as a legacy of the past is the constructed nature of legacy thinking that Wiener (2013) describes. Notably absent from Foster's (2008) work, for example, is a discussion of how students' identity might impact their response to a question about US dominance. UK students might have offered no historical perspective in 2008, but in 2021 – with the rise of China – the role of history may be more present. Similarly, UK students might not reach for historical explanations on this question, but Russian or Vietnamese students might feel that history is very pertinent. These differences might not reflect superior historical thinking skills, but rather a sociocultural predisposition to questioning US dominance – a need to employ history for contemporary political purposes.

The different interpretations of the students' answers – historical thinking skills versus identity – reflect a distinction made by Epstein and Peck (2018: 4) between a 'disciplinary approach' and a 'sociocultural approach' to thinking about history education. Each approach differs in its assumptions about historical thinking and the nature of historical narratives. While recognising that these two approaches are not dichotomous, it is valuable to explore each in turn. In doing so, I suggest that while transitional justice has often been interested in disciplinary approaches to history education, it might instead benefit from greater consideration of the sociocultural approach.

Disciplinary approaches, according to Epstein and Peck (2018: 4), often conceptualise historical thinking from the 'inside out'. According to Epstein and Peck (2018: 4), 'an individual evaluates and synthesizes historical evidence to construct an argument about the causes, consequences or other aspects of historical events or other phenomena'. Within an understanding of a disciplinary approach, a person transcends their own perspectives and positionality, in order to 'rationally evaluate evidence to construct an interpretation' (Epstein and Peck, 2018: 4) about the past in a way that is as objective as possible. Epstein and Peck's (2018) description of disciplinary approaches reflects Fulbrook's (2002: 185) conception of history as 'like seeing through a glass darkly': it is neither a transparent window on the past, nor a picture, constructed in the present, replacing a past which we can never really know. This is the approach to historical investigation that history educators such as Seixas and Morton (2013) seek to promote in the history curriculum.

Disciplinary approaches are also those most often advocated for within a 'truth-telling' paradigm of transitional justice history education, since history becomes about investigating the 'truth' of the past. As Keynes (2019: 121) has noted, 'disciplinary models of history education are regularly championed for their capacity to foster in students the skills of the historian, which are seen to be useful for societies striving to overcome division fuelled by simplistic or inaccurate narratives about the past'. These models, according to Keynes (2019), are thought to encourage students to emulate the disciplinary competencies of the historian, which enable them to understand the constructed and provisional nature of historical narratives. They are considered 'effective for fostering inclusive citizenship, social cohesion and reconciliation', since 'rebuilding a fractured citizenry around a plural set of narratives rather than a single "truth" is considered important for establishing a lasting peace' (Keynes, 2019: 121).

In contrast, sociocultural approaches – according to Epstein and Peck (2018: 4) – view historical thinking from the 'outside in'. Within a sociocultural approach, it is understood that an individual's evaluation of historical evidence and construction of arguments about the past are heavily influenced

by the historical, political and cultural contexts – the 'outside' – in which an individual has learned to act and think. As Epstein and Peck (2018: 4) describe:

> While an individual can become aware of her and others' mental models, she can never entirely escape the mental model or framework she has constructed of how human thought and action operate. Every historical narrative, including those of the most professional historians, reflect the internal culturally mediated framework – which in turn reflects broader societal beliefs and knowledge – that the individual draws upon to think historically.

Scholars such as Keynes (2019) are beginning to suggest that all disciplinary approaches should in fact be treated as sociocultural in the context of the classroom, and that this is particularly important in settler-colonial contexts. Keynes (2019: 130) warns against the ways in which causal relationships can be depoliticised – and made to seem 'natural' – through a disciplinary focus on historical thinking skills. Students are taught to discern and construct the actions and intentions of historical actors, leading to both intended and unintended consequences. These actions are made meaningful when they are connected into a synthesised historical narrative which gives retroactive form to their deeds. However, 'by constructing the past as sequences of causally connected events which have produced the present,' argues Keynes (2019: 130), 'students' perceptions of the present are shaped by the illusory logic of historical causality, and flawed understandings of history as an authoritative, explanatory framework are reinforced'. She goes on to say:

> When forms of historicization such as the production of historical distance and the demarcation of temporal boundaries are not treated explicitly, and instead remain latent, history education continues to imagine that disciplinary history occupies an epistemologically foundational position capable of producing 'truth' from the historian's expertise and neutral authority. When historicizing effects like these go unspoken in the history classroom, the illusory authority of historical discourse and the idea that historians inherently 'know' the 'proper' place of phenomena in time, as if epochs are naturally given and not constructed by history-makers, continue to be reproduced. (Keynes, 2019: 131)

Keynes's (2019: 131) discussion of the limitations of disciplinary history education as a tool for transitional justice is as relevant for researchers as it is for teachers and curriculum developers. It foregrounds the methodological importance of not assuming the 'neutral authority' of causal reasoning, even if in the classroom the 'relevant relationship of one cause to another' (Evans, 1997: 158) is treated as a 'neutral, disciplinary science' (Keynes, 2019: 132). Rather, transitional justice scholars and educators should be interested in how power, positionality and identity inform or mediate the legacy thinking of both young people and history curricula. How does one's identity shape the ways in which the legacies of past injustice – rather than past injustice itself – are constructed?

Surprisingly however, little research has been conducted on the sociocultural dimension of legacy thinking. While studies situated in the field of history tend to look at legacies of the past (looking from the past and working forward), education researchers have more typically been interested in how young people use history in the present (looking at contemporary issues and working backwards). History research which looks at how students use the past has not referred explicitly to their sociocultural context or to the colonial past. Transitional justice research which looks at history education in postcolonial societies has not considered how students learn to construct the contemporary implications of the history they are learning.

So, what are the future directions of history education for transitional justice? Keynes (2019) has argued that for history education to contribute to reconciliation agendas, the field requires a comprehensive rethinking of the nature and purpose of disciplinary models of history education. She suggests that, at a minimum, history educators ought to engage explicitly with the processes and effects of historicisation. I agree with this analysis, yet further her argument by suggesting that historical legacies are an important concept that history education must grapple with if it is to contribute to transitional justice. In particular, history educators and transitional justice scholars should pay attention to the sociocultural factors which mediate how historical legacies are constructed among young people, rather than assuming that historical content knowledge will result in an interpretation of contemporary society that is both shared, and motivates social justice.

For history educators in particular, this might involve a more explicit focus on addressing historical legacies. Yet in addressing historical legacies, teachers need to be careful to avoid the trap of 'organising

the past to enable it to answer our current practical concerns' (Lee, 1991: 42). Questions such as 'should the UK pay compensation for the transatlantic slave trade?' (DfES, 2007: 107) may be relevant for transitional justice, but it is not a question that any history teacher would claim that history could answer (Jerome and Shilela, 2007).

Maintaining a historical focus on the question of legacies is likely to require teachers to direct greater attention to the historical thinking skill of interpretation. Crucially, this would include an understanding not only *that* the past has been interpreted in different ways, but also *how* the relationships that are constructed between past and present (cause and consequence, continuity and change) are also interpretations, as well as *why* these different interpretations have been made by different people (Chapman, 2011). In focusing on the relationship between identity and the historical interpretations of causality, teachers may engender greater self-awareness among students as they develop their own relationships to the difficult past.

Conclusion

History education in postcolonial and postconflict societies is often motivated by a desire to contribute towards transitional justice and social cohesion. Within the framework of truth and reconciliation commissions, the particular role of history education has been characterised as 'truth telling' and remembrance. This has been facilitated by a disciplinary approach to history, in which students are taught to evaluate evidence in order to understand how different perspectives shape our understanding of the past.

History education as 'truth telling' is a noble goal, yet it has limitations. In particular, it ignores the reality that in postcolonial societies, the histories of injustice and division span hundreds of years and have inevitably shaped the contemporary social landscape. The tendency to both individualise harm and situate injustice in the past means that history education is at risk of perpetuating a logic in which the injustice is over and the harm is no longer felt. This either leaves students ill-equipped to understand and address contemporary problems, or it creates societal division when beliefs about the nature of historical legacies – and their policy consequences – become aligned with identity politics.

In this article, I have suggested that the field of transitional justice and history education might benefit from a greater conceptualisation of historical legacies. While a central assumption of transitional justice is that past injustices have contemporary legacies, the term 'legacies' has not enjoyed conceptual clarity among transitional justice scholars. However, postcolonial historians, such as Wiener (2013) and Stoler (2016), do offer some direction in this regard. They suggest that one's understanding or beliefs about legacies are not obvious or inevitable, but rather are constructed to fulfil needs in the present. Considering the ways in which historical legacies are constructed in the history classroom for social, emotional and political purposes is important for understanding how young people are likely to respond to postconflict reform. Developing curricula and training teachers for greater systematic engagement with the contemporary legacies of past injustices will be important for improving history education for transitional justice.

Lastly, throughout this article I have drawn on literature from a range of fields: transitional justice, ethnographic research on history classrooms, postcolonial historiography and history education. While I demonstrate the productive interconnectivity of these fields, I have suggested that history education's work on students' understanding of causality might prove particularly helpful to the field of transitional justice. In particular, I have advocated for a sociocultural approach to understanding how young people reason about the implications of the past for their lives.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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