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Sarah Warshauer Freedman

University of California, Berkeley, freedman@berkeley.edu

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Considering the Moral Complexity of Adolescents in Divided Societies

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Sarah Warshauer Freedman¹

University of California, Berkeley

The belief that the responsibility for raising a new generation of ethically and civically active young people rests with educators as well as families is as old and pervasive as it is contested. This is true of not only the United States but of other societies that are trying to navigate their internal divisions and particular connections to the events of global history, including traumatic events such as the Holocaust. The debate focuses as much on the question of whether schools should be teaching ethics and morals or "simply" socio-historical facts stripped of any philosophy and value judgment, as it does on the aims and methods of possible or actual moral education programs.

There are those who argue that teaching values is the jurisdiction of families and the clergy and insist that schools ought to stick to their academic missions alone (see Hess, 2009, for a discussion of this position and Turiel, 2002 for an analysis of the complexities of dealing with competing values). A value-neutral approach, if that is even possible, runs a double-edged risk of letting the imperative of moral lessons interfere with the precise teaching of history while

¹ Although I take responsibility for this paper, there are a number of people who must be acknowledged, for without them there would be no paper. First Karen Murphy, co-project director and international director for Facing History and Ourselves, has been essential to all of the thinking related to this project. I also would like to thank Zina Beserevic, one of our research assistants, who did a great deal of research for this paper and contributed in important ways to many of the ideas and to the writing. Our ideas come from many sources, regardless of the focus our writing takes. I am grateful to our research collaborators in South Africa, Northern Ireland, and the US for the thinking that we do together and the insights that they offer. And perhaps most important, it is the ideas of the the teacher and student collaborators in all three settings that form the essence of what we are learning.

also confusing the moral lessons by relativizing historical texts and events (Salmons, 2003). Yet when it comes to values, most parents want their children to grow up in possession of virtues and traits of character like honesty, kindness, respectfulness.

If we decide that schools do and should carry a share of responsibility in raising ethically-minded civic actors of the future, then educators are obliged to impart to their students not only the factual knowledge of history or civics, but also the moral wherewithal to ingest and channel that knowledge. The need for guidance becomes particularly acute for the adolescent age group in our study. Nucci and Turiel (2009) have found that adolescents begin to see ambiguities surrounding moral choices, with the process of making moral judgments becoming more difficult than when they were younger and saw fewer ambiguities. The process of learning to handle the ambiguities and to make moral judgements is not straightforward and Nucci and Turiel conclude that “Teaching for social and moral growth entails not only movement toward higher levels of moral reasoning, but also the capacity to evaluate and coordinate moral and nonmoral factors within social situations” (p. 157). They suggest that the teaching of morality be woven into the existing curriculum and the existing social worlds of the students, with attention to helping adolescents critically analyze the complex moral judgements that they encounter and to how context affects their decisions. Turiel (2002) and many other domain theorists contend that while some degree of moral emotional awareness and sensitivity is innate, the social environment and

development within other domains is important in developing moral emotions and sensitivity.

My particular focus on issues of morality and ethics and schooling arose from my involvement in earlier studies of the role of history education in the reconstruction of societies after mass violence, wars, and genocide, in the Balkans and in Rwanda. In those contexts, in the early 2000s, it was in many ways too soon after the 1994 end of the massive violence for the societies to be able to teach national history. The conflicts were raw, and were in many ways still continuing, albeit in less explicitly violent forms. Relevant to teaching history, the conflicts were grounded in historical legacies and remained present in the different ways those legacies continued to be interpreted. Nevertheless, educators and educational stakeholders were impatient to break ongoing moratoria on teaching history. More detail on this work can be found in Freedman, Kambanda, et al., 2004; Freedman, Corcolo, et al., 2004; Freedman & Abazović, 2006; Weinstein, Freedman, & Hughson, 2007).

Working in Rwanda, in an attempt to move beyond the moratorium on history teaching there, in collaboration with colleagues at the National Curriculum Development Centre and the National University of Rwanda, as well as with Facing History and Ourselves, we found that by using Facing History case studies and materials about other, more distant histories, in particular the events leading up to the Holocaust, we could get teachers to make connections to their own lives

and begin to discuss their legacies and consider ways to develop a history curriculum (Freedman, Weinstein, Murphy, & Longman, 2007, 2011).²

In this paper, I will focus on another research project. Continuing from our collaboration in Rwanda, Karen Murphy, International Director for Facing History and Ourselves, and I began a new study in which we turned our attention to Northern Ireland, South Africa, and the United States. Although history is taught, it remains a high stakes endeavor. Alternate histories vie for a place in schools and classrooms, and divisions within the societies play a role in the debates about what to teach, to whom, and when (see Gallagher & Murphy, 2009).

In our earlier work and in this project, a major affordance in studying history teaching has been its very contested nature. The debates around its teaching index and make it possible to see clearly the ongoing divisions within a society as well as the roots of those divisions. Engaging with those debates and working to understand and when possible to resolve them is essential to dealing with ongoing social ruptures and ultimately to building a harmonious and peaceful social world. From the local points of view, history teaching also is especially important because of the ethical and moral issues that historical debates raise for young people as they think about shaping their futures and the future direction of the polity (see also Cole, 2007a, 2007b; Cole & Barsalou, 2006; Freedman,

² We understand that there are controversies about whether we can and should, with the same sweep of the hand be teaching moral lessons through the lens of genocidal and other complicated historical regimes; whether historical narrative lends itself well to addressing issues of social injustice, prejudice, conformity, violence, racism, individual responsibility whether in the process of extracting a moral lesson, we take away from “history” so as to add to the “narrative” (Salmons, 2003; Wertsch, 2000; Wolfgram, 2006).

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Kambanda, et al, 2004; Gallagher & Murphy, 2009; Hoepken, 1999; Holt, 1990; Wertsch, 2000; Weinstein, Freedman, & Hughson, 2007).

The Research

The research project I discuss is called DECIDES, which stands for Developing Civic Actors in Divided Societies. DECIDES is concerned with studying adolescent-age students (grades 9-10) and the educational resources they use, or indeed, require to adequately reconcile personal and global history with personal and global current affairs. We are particularly interested in how young people develop as ethical civic actors in the face of the divisions in their societies.

We chose Northern Ireland, South Africa and the United States because they are disparately divided societies, each laden with a moral burden in the present rooted in a particular past. Examining ethical and civic education in any of these societies brings us to that contested part of the curriculum which addresses issues of moral identity and action through the study of the pasts of these societies, most particularly legacies of slavery and immigration in the US, apartheid in South Africa, and the Troubles in Northern Ireland. We focus our research on understanding teaching about social divisions, conflict, and the future, including the moral values that underlie ethical decision-making and effective social participation. Our ultimate goal is to contribute to carving a path to a common aim—a generation of youth who are morally astute and civically engaged.

In each setting, we work with local research teams to examine students' attitudes and reasoning about citizenship, social responsibility, and social division across their 9th and 10th grade years, from their points of view and their teachers' points of view. Our data come from one case study classroom in each locale, focus groups in two contrasting schools in each setting, a group of teachers from a variety of types of schools, and surveys of teachers and students. Since we are interested in those aspects of students' lives, development, and identities that bear on issues of moral responsibility and civic engagement, in terms of temporal focus in school this means observing the students at points in their education when they are studying issues of group identity, racism and intolerance.

In all locales, the students used materials from Facing History and Ourselves, and their teachers had participated in workshops on using those materials.³ All of the students in our study are in classrooms that are trying to help them come to grips with the legacies of difficult histories, including their own. In all three settings, students study their own histories as well as issues that faced those who experienced other difficult histories, including the Holocaust, and possibly also the Armenian genocide, the Rwandan genocide, the Balkan wars. Additionally, across all three sites, students in our case study classrooms studied apartheid in South Africa, slavery in the U.S., and the Troubles in Northern Ireland. These discussions took place in civics classes, life skills classes, and history classes.

The Case Study

³ See especially materials in Strom, 1994,

This paper focuses on one of our case study students in the United States, who offers a particularly complex look at issues of division and ethical civic development. The student, Pete, is a white immigrant from South Africa, studying in a multi-ethnic and multi-racial school in the United States. He confronts his South African legacies in the context of a foreign school system, which is working to help U.S. students confront their own legacies. We watched Pete across two, one-semester, citizenship classes, spaced across the two years of observation. The classes used Facing History materials as a base. They are required, but not graded. Importantly, the entire school community fostered the values embedded in these classes. When the school presents itself to the public, the brochures feature a focus on citizenship, which is described as a program “which engages students in complex studies of prejudice reduction, social justice, and participation in a democracy.”

Pete’s school was a public magnet school and a small school of just over 250 students. It prides itself on 100% college acceptance of its graduating seniors, and its ability to serve students across socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic lines. Almost 70% of the students are on free and reduced lunch. Pete chose to leave his more homogeneously white and middle class neighborhood schools after elementary school. He did not like those schools and did not do well when he attended them. What he disliked was his perception that these schools focused on just making students learn a lot of “uninteresting facts.” When he moved to more diverse city middle school, he did better and was happier. He chose his current

high school because he liked the friendly atmosphere and the emphasis on college preparation.

Pete initially described himself as an outcast among his peers, who wanted to be part of others' groups but felt that others did not accept him as he is because in his words, "Everybody's just trying to stay in their world. They are trying to stay safe." As time went on, he made friends at his school and began to feel included. Just as he began the study feeling like an outcast at school, he described himself as the "blacksheep" in his family. His family, he said, was very religious but he was not. He lived with his mother, stepfather, and three younger siblings, two brothers, one a newborn, and one sister whom he especially loved and who, he said, could do no wrong in the family while he could do no right.

At the start of our research, when discussing his identity, he thought it was determined solely by what others thought about him. He saw himself as someone who did not identify with particular groups but instead belonged to all groups. He said that he liked to "break down walls" between groups. Consistent with his views of belonging to all groups and of being an outcast, Pete saw himself as belonging to many countries but in some ways belonging to none:

My aunts and uncle are in Germany. My grandma's in England. My grandpa on my dad's side is in South Africa. We're just all around the world, that it's hard to think of myself as American, or German. It's just hard to think of myself as that, and so the way that I like to think of it is that we're not all part of one country. (Interview, 101216)

In his citizenship/Facing History classes, the first-year curriculum focused on identity, stereotyping, the failure of democracy and events leading to the Holocaust; the second year included units on the Armenian genocide, apartheid in South Africa, the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and material related to race in the US. The goals were always to use these in depth case studies to help students think about the role of social divisions in state violence, the responsibilities of citizens, and the importance of social justice as well as to make connections to and see distinctions with their own lives, communities and histories.

Like the other students in our research, Pete was trying to make sense of how the legacies he inherited fit with the world as he saw it and wanted to shape it. The special complexity for Pete surfaced when he found himself studying apartheid in the context of the US. While South African history was distant for others in the class, it was close for him. Although he had no live memories of the apartheid regime, his parents did. From the start, just being in the US and thinking with his class about issues related to race relations here helped Pete see South Africa through a new lens. He explained in his first interview before the class studied South Africa:

I was born in South Africa. Like I didn't really see how . . . bad things were. I just saw it as life. And that I should be accepted by it. But when I . . . came to America, it opened up to me, saying that what they are doing there isn't right. And as I learned about slavery, I compared it to the way . . . certain things were in South Africa. And I said "It's [apartheid] a form of slavery." Even though things have changed so much. (Interview, 101216)

Across the two years of our observations, we watched Pete actively work to come to terms with what he considered a shameful legacy of South African apartheid. He found himself making connections to the many difficult histories the class studied. Interestingly, for Pete US history was a distant history, while for the others in the class the legacy of slavery was the more familiar history and in this mixed race class was the more difficult for most US students to face.

As we observed Pete, we saw him grapple with both his moral identity and his understanding of the complexity of his South African history. A major part of his apartheid legacy seemed to be his notions about governments and government officials. In his first year in our study, he showed a deep suspicion of all politicians. He wrote in his journal, "So I just feel like the leaders of the world are just liars, and cheaters." (101216)

He expanded on this world-view in his first interview, using incorrect facts and faulty logic to support his feelings:

I don't like thinking of myself as part of a single country because of the leaders of the countries. I always feel like they're cheating, uh 'cause it's either twenty out of a hundred-twenty or a hundred out of, like, somewhere in between those two numbers, uh millionaires are in Congress. And that, I feel that . . . it's liar, it's lying and cheating. And also monarchy is a way of cheating. Because your family is in power. And no one else gets to have a chance. So I just feel like the leaders of the world are just liars, and cheaters. (Interview, 101216)

Interestingly, Pete does not disapprove of South African leaders, but rather of leaders in the US and the UK. His triple repetition of “feel” is particularly telling and seems consistent with his approach to important decision making. His language is similar to that in his initial interview when Pete explained that he chose his school because it “felt” good to him.

By the start of his second year, Pete had refined his views somewhat, realizing in his writing that “People usually blame other people for their problems because they don't like their self image being destroyed. People tend to blame the leader not the subordinate.” The leaders, he came to recognize, are not the only problem in a society. He worries about people who do not take responsibility for their problems. At this point, he sees the individual as solely responsible for his or her destiny and does not recognize structural factors that might play a role in the destiny of the individual. Still his notions of the power of leaders is growing in complexity.

With respect to apartheid itself, Pete was always clear that it was evil, and he was able to sort through similarities and differences between apartheid and the other difficult histories he was studying. However, as he learned more about apartheid in an academic setting, including how to evaluate evidence, see historical events from the points of view of varied stakeholders (the government and members of anti and pro apartheid groups), and gather facts about the consequences of apartheid, his responses increased in complexity while his moral ground began to shift and show some fissures. Many of his responses centered on his position as a US and global adolescent as well as his relationship with his

parents and their involvement growing up white in South Africa during apartheid. Others seemed related to not knowing how to maintain his moral ground while opening his ideas to revision through developing academic ways of thinking.

Pete's family values and relationships were pivotal to his moral and ethical development. When we first met him, he talked a great deal about feeling rejected, disempowered and wanting to run away. He was especially angry when his father's new wife came to the US and wanted to connect with him (on behalf of the estranged father). Pete wanted to meet her, but his mother refused to allow the meeting. Pete felt that the decision should have been his. Over time, though, Pete stopped talking about his anger with his family and seemed to settle into school life, making friends and generally feeling more confident socially.

A turning point in Pete's relationship with his mother and stepfather seemed connected to an event in the second year when the class was studying apartheid. This event also opened possibilities for growth in his moral and ethical thinking. His teacher invited his mother and stepfather to talk to the class about what it was like to grow up as a white South African during apartheid. Their talk was a great success, and Pete was proud of them. His teacher described the visit as "really powerful for the whole class and it was certainly really powerful for Pete. He wrote in his journal for that day:

I got to see a new side of my parents that I had never seen before. This is an experience that I will never forget. (Journal, 120405)

This moment of pride can be juxtaposed with a three-month earlier journal entry in which Pete worried that members of his family, perhaps including his parents, were guilty of “immoral deeds”:

Families should not need to hide their history from others especially from younger members of family because it allows children to take pride in their heritage even if members of their family have done immoral deeds. (Journal 120131)

His teacher explains the complexity behind the visit and the effects on Pete’s thinking and moral understandings. His parents told a story of their initial inability to see what was happening around them and their growing awareness of their failure to look and see:

Growing up as young people and then being young adults in South Africa under apartheid and they . . . told these stories . . . about on the one hand sort of being kept blind to the injustice all around them. . . his dad literally would talk about like you know, “I lived in this building where we look in this direction and not that direction.” He further explained, “Then I got to university and suddenly [there was] that sort of burgeoning perspective on . . . what they had been . . . either made blind to or made themselves blind to or some combination thereof right?”

Pete’s teacher explained that “his parents are able to articulate on the one hand ‘we were unaware’; on the other hand ‘there is still a moral responsibility for having lived in this world.’”

By contrast, she said about Pete:

I think that there's a level on which he's taking some of the lack of awareness as a way to make them and white South Africans less morally responsible . .

. I don't think he's at a level where he could articulate that.

Pete wanted his mother and stepfather to have acted morally, so he justified their “not seeing” as not their fault in any way and so consistent with a moral stance.

Pete’s ability to take an academic stance on apartheid seems to have given him a way to reframe his parents’ participation and make it more moral than it was.

At the end of the school year all of the students at Pete’s school present what is called a Gateway project, explaining to the faculty important things that they have learned across the curriculum. Pete chose his study of South Africa and apartheid as one of his focus points. He demonstrated that he knew, as he knew from when we first met him, that apartheid was wrong, evil, and immoral. But as he learned more about apartheid from varied points of view, he developed ways of excusing the government “they wanted to keep control” and excusing the white population “they were afraid; they did not know what was happening.” Looking from varied points of view seemed to have confused him.

He opened his Gateway with an overgeneralization, claiming, “your view is based on the other's perspective.” Then he explained the perspective of the government by first presenting a rationale for the government-enforced township housing policies:

“It seems as though the government was just doing things to keep it under control. Uh the government had housing for people who were of a [uses fingers to make quote signs] "insignificant" race uh by color of their skin or

housing for those whom in fact the government had parts of South Africa kept for these people.” (Gateway, 120529)

He went on to explain the population disparities between blacks and whites, to show that “the black people did have the largest population in South Africa.” And he commented that they only had a very small percentage of the land. He took a moral stand but offered the hedge “probably,” saying, “it probably should have been the larger population given the larger amount of land.”

He continued to develop his moral stance against apartheid by calling the government policies genocidal, evoking the Armenian genocide but differentiating what happened in South Africa from what happened in Armenia:

“But if you look at the government's point of view, they didn't want that. The government tried to eradicate um the lesser race the [uses fingers as quotes] “the lesser races” through um means of a genocide but it wasn't a genocide uh quite like the Armenian genocide, but it was a genocide of something that happened over a long period of time.” (Gateway, 120529)

He then related the deadly consequences of the government's policies, including disease and infant mortality, “70% of the children born in these small, small areas were-- would die before they reached the age of two.” He went on to comment that in the city “it was a bit better but if you were of a lesser race your child had a one in three chance of dying.” And in comparison, “for the white population it was much better as you would expect.” He continued to discuss other laws that gave whites privilege in salaries and in freedom of movement, concluding that the government tried to instill fear of the other.

At this point he showed a good understanding of the evils of apartheid, but he moved on to evidence his problems understanding issues of responsibility and using a moral grounding to evaluate points of view. He repeated a distorted version of a story his stepfather told about anti-apartheid celebrations.

His stepfather's narrative included memories of celebratory "dancing in the streets" as apartheid was coming to an end while his white university responded to the dancing with fear by "calling a code red." His stepfather further noted that he saw the dancing and demonstrations as something beautiful.

In his presentation Pete extended these demonstrations to other parts of the world, likely conflating them with what he had learned in his civics class about the pressure other countries applied through divestitures of investments, something he did not mention. He picked up his father's language and portrayed the imagined demonstrations around the world, as joyous occasions full of dancing and contributing to the end of apartheid.

"People would get together and they would dance and I heard it was a very beautiful thing. I didn't get to see it but hopefully I'll never be in a situation . . . (unclear) apartheid by the government should not exist. (unclear)" (Gateway, 120529)

Pete missed his father's point about the fear of the white university, when there was nothing to fear. His teacher noted that Pete "acknowledges that multiple perspectives are complicated" but she worried that, as with the dancing, he was missing important parts of the complexity. The moral compass against which he was judging these varied points of view was in some flux. She reports that "when

it came to the Q and A I asked him essentially how do you judge whether two perspectives are equally valid? And how do you incorporate moral questions when you're looking at one perspective versus another." She explained that in an effort to move away from the South African example and give him some needed critical distance, she asked him about the US Civil Rights movement:

"I said what if there's a perspective that segregation is absolutely the way to go and that one race is superior to another how do you deal with that perspective? How do you evaluate it?"

Pete had difficulty answering the question, even when the teacher tried to help him gain critical distance. He said he would look to research on the validity of the perspectives: "I look to the sources." Then he explained how he evaluated the validity of a source, repeating what he had learned about critical analysis—"where their research came from and whether it was first hand or whether it came from other people's research and how well established it was." To some extent he began to address the moral question:

"it would be interesting to talk to those with the particular [apartheid] perspective but I hope that I never will because we hope that apartheid never happens again because it's a terrible system."

Pete's teacher explains that he is acknowledging unequal moral value of different perspectives and yet has a

"hard time reconciling, I think, this desire to acknowledge multiple perspectives with a baseline understanding that he has a perspective and that it may be different from others [. . .] he has a discomfort about just

simply saying like "But this is what I believe to be right" or "This is what I know to be fact."

His teacher knows that she and Pete still have two more years together to work on these issues. Her teaching, and she hopes his thinking, do not stop here.

In Conclusion

Stepping back from Pete's case, I will offer a number of observations that could be important for teaching young people about the difficult pasts of others and their own legacies, and most importantly for teachers, helping them grapple with issues of division in their societies in ethical and moral ways.

- 1 Adolescents, like Pete, seek to make comparisons between historical events they learn about so as to reach a deeper and more comprehensive understanding. Moreover, when they come from troubled and divided societies they seem to depend on those comparisons for understanding their own legacies. Therefore, helping young people articulate and explore the bases of their moral reactions builds on a response that occurs in the teaching of the past. As Pete writes, "It does matter if a major event in history is forgotten because we learn more from events that are major than from other pieces of history. It also allows us to prevent certain incidents in the future." Students draw their own connections. What seems to matter is their appreciation of distinctions between historical events they are comparing. Letting them notice and think about the similarities seems just as instructive as letting them see the differences. When teachers carefully guide this process, it can help young people become morally reflective and

sensitive while placing themselves and their scope of analysis into a wider, more global context.

- 2 When adolescents begin to learn academic ways of reasoning, including taking the point of view of others, a technique meant to help them dislodge fixed and one-sided views of the world, like Pete, they participate in a process that inspires dissonance. Part of what keeps this process from leading to moral relativism is providing young people with opportunities to judge (Bardige, 1988). Pete shows us the tension between an academic stance and a moral/emotional stance, with students needing to learn to hold their moral ground, while understanding why others act as they do. When teachers are alert to these issues, as Pete's teacher is, they have a starting point helping young people develop a more complete academic and ethical stance. Such dilemmas require young people to discern the competing interests and values at stake and ultimately to render a judgment that—depending on the nature of the dilemma—gives due weight to one's own well-being, concern for others, respect for law and tradition, and principles of justice.
- 3 When adolescents are members of groups who live with legacies of having been oppressors, as they work to incorporate their families' involvement with their own understanding of that past, varied values can come into conflict (e.g., loyalty to family vs social justice and responsibility). Pete illustrates the tensions and selective hearing that can arise when young people need to see their parents as heroic in some way. Only once

teachers are alert to tensions and (mis)understandings that can lead to dangerous reasoning about who was and was not complicit in past events of evil, can they begin to help young people work through the issues. See also research on revisionist memories across generations related to the Holocaust (H. Welzer, Sabine Moller, and Karoline Tschuggnall and published in German under the title *Opa war kein Nazi* by S. Fischer-Verlag, 2002 and English version by H. Welzer, for American Jewish Committee, "Grandpa wasn't a Nazi," 2005).

- 4 Moral and academic development occur across time; we left Pete in the middle of a process, which his teacher was well aware of. We hope to follow him through his 11th and 12th grade years and see how the story continues to unfold. Pete showed us that gradually he comes to understand the historical narratives and their context, but the development of such understanding requires time and attention and pedagogical support. What we are able to see is a process in motion, not a completed one, with a number of obstacles and setbacks along the way. He has to work hard to better understand how varied historical narratives relate to his own legacies and to the societal divisions in his past and current reality. These processes require time and attention and sophisticated pedagogical support.

Ultimately, DECIDES studies how young people learn to become ethical civic actors and even more importantly how might they be aided on their journey, be it

to action or to self-awareness. We chose to study students in learning environments and using curricula that offered frequent exposure to moral emotions, virtues, concepts, and dilemmas. As students work to take the perspective of others and as they study examples of caring and justice as well as insensitivity and injustice, they work through and learn to analyze complex moral emotions and stances. Pete's case shows importance of teachers' staying alert to the complexities of their students' development and to the dilemmas the students face in this process of learning to analyze, to distance, and to think critically.

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