

# Experimenting with a reconciliation pedagogy in South African primary school history classrooms: Constraints and possibilities

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## **Abstract**

In the South African context, the need for peacebuilding is sometimes not acknowledged in a post-conflict society, although there are ongoing everyday examples within the educational sphere that challenge this assumption. A way of addressing the need for peacebuilding in education is via a reconciliation pedagogy, which uses oral history tasks and cooperative learning in the history curriculum. By drawing on the similarities and differences between a reconciliation pedagogy, and reconciliation as articulated by the '4R' framework for peacebuilding, this article shows that there are constraints and possibilities inherent in this process at school level. The main argument is that there are a number of practical constraints within and beyond the classroom which hinder peacebuilding in practice.

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Using a method of narrative inquiry, this article focuses on the results of the research conducted by a history teacher educator who observed and interviewed eight teachers in history primary school classrooms in Johannesburg. While some of the successes of using a reconciliation pedagogy show that it has the potential to facilitate peacebuilding from the 'bottom up', teachers' intentions and how they implement a reconciliation pedagogy affect whether or not sustainable peacebuilding is possible in the classroom.

**Keywords:** Peacebuilding, Reconciliation pedagogy, '4R' framework, Oral history, Cooperative learning, Primary school history teachers, History education

## **Introduction**

In the South African context, the need for peacebuilding is sometimes not acknowledged. One of the reasons is that given the transition to a democratic state in 1994, and the holding of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (1996–1998), there is a belief that both events addressed the conflict in South Africa in a comprehensive manner. While this view may be partially true, one of the unfortunate legacies of apartheid lingers on in the form of overt and covert social conflict. An example from the field of education is how the social barriers of the past continue to affect the present, as is shown by tensions in relationships among pre-service teachers in some South African university lecture rooms (Carter and Vandeyar 2009; Nussey 2012). This problem is symptomatic of the need for peacebuilding initiatives, not only in the university context but in schools too, to deal with the ongoing effects of apartheid. But what is meant by peacebuilding and what role could education play in this process?

Novelli and others (2015:10) have argued that peacebuilding is a 'slippery' term, with a variety of meanings, from establishing safety to putting in place measures to transform a society in a post-conflict setting. Furthermore, they suggest that there is a lack of knowledge about peacebuilding on the part of educationalists as well as a reductionist view of education held by

peacebuilders. To address these disparate views, Novelli and others (2015:10) developed the '4R' framework of 'redistribution, recognition, representation and reconciliation', which is a 'normative, but non prescriptive vision of the broad components of a peaceful and just society' and applied it to the education sector (Novelli et al. 2015:3). For example, 'redistribution' implies an 'equitable distribution of resources'; 'recognition' refers to 'status equality' of all participants; 'representation' indicates 'involvement in decision making at multiple frames'; and, finally 'reconciliation' focuses on 'building positive relationships' (Novelli and others 2015:13). This framework aims to achieve social justice in a post-conflict situation, and is informed by Nancy Fraser's (1995) ideas on justice, Johan Galtung's (1976) conception of positive and negative peace and John Paul Lederach's (1999) ideas on reconciliation. It intends to provide a comprehensive overview of a relationship between education and peacebuilding.

Novelli and Sayed (2016:17) have applied these ideas to a research focus which emphasises 'the role of education in promoting peace, social cohesion and sustainable development from a "4R's perspective"' as part of a peacebuilding framework based on a few post-conflict societies, including South Africa. 'Reconciliation' is one of the 4R's in this framework, and for the purpose of this paper, I propose to focus on articulating the relationship between education and reconciliation, because it is impossible to do justice to the whole of the 4R framework in this article. Furthermore, I propose to use Novelli and Sayed's (2016:19) conception of reconciliation, which they define as 'dealing with past events, injustice, and material and psychosocial effects of conflict, as well as the development of trust'. In a table, they outline the relationship between education and reconciliation as follows:

- Teaching the past, present and future
  - Understanding one's own positionality when teaching the past, present and future
  - Healing and 'understanding that humanises'
  - Teaching multiple narratives and histories
- (Novelli and Sayed 2016:19)

The link made between reconciliation and education is not a new idea (Akhlualia et al. 2012; Bekerman and Zembylas 2011; Magill et al. 2007; Paulson 2011; Zembylas et al. 2011), and the concept of reconciliation is contested (Bloomfield et al. 2003; Cole 2007). Nonetheless, the strength of Novelli and Sayed's (2016) conception of reconciliation is that it combines key ideas in a manner that shows how reconciliation and education could contribute to peacebuilding in an insightful and holistic way. However, this framework is broad, and it raises the question of how to translate these peacebuilding ideas into practice at the level of the school classroom. I suggest that a reconciliation pedagogy is able to put aspects of Novelli and Sayed's (2016) framework into practice, because both use parts of Lederach's (1999) ideas concerning reconciliation to inform their theoretical underpinning (Nussey 2012). Another similarity is an emphasis on the importance of teaching multiple narratives and histories while teaching about the past, present and future. A reconciliation pedagogy implements this in the classroom by using oral history, which encourages the emergence of multiple narratives about the past, and shows the interconnection between past, present and future in a concrete manner. Furthermore, a reconciliation pedagogy's use of cooperative learning, where learners work in heterogeneous groups on a task based on their respective oral histories, opens up the possibility of developing, in Novelli and Sayed's (2016:19) framework, an "understanding that humanises" in the classroom. Yet, there are differences too between Novelli and Sayed's (2016) framework and a reconciliation pedagogy, as they emphasise the importance of the teacher's positionality and include the possibility of healing (I will discuss the relevance of these ideas at a later stage in this article).

But it is insufficient to discuss the similarities and differences between Novelli and Sayed's framework and a reconciliation pedagogy at a theoretical level alone, because if these ideas are going to contribute to sustainable peacebuilding, then they need to be put into practice, and evaluated for their efficacy. Given the similarities between a reconciliation pedagogy and Novelli and Sayed's (2016) framework, the former term is used to cover both conceptions in this article. But where there are differences,

then a distinction between the two is made by referring directly to Novelli and Sayed's (2016) framework. This leads to the main question that this article addresses: What are the constraints and possibilities of using a reconciliation pedagogy as a peacebuilding tool in history classrooms at primary school level? To answer this question, I provide a brief overview of oral history and its role in the South African history curriculum, the rationale for my classroom observations in eight primary school history classrooms in Johannesburg, and interviews with eight teachers. Then I describe the methodology used, and how I collected the data for this project. Next, I report on the findings to the research question posed, and discuss some of the constraints and possibilities of using a reconciliation pedagogy in some South African primary schools.

### **Rationale: Oral history, social justice and teachers' practice**

Oral history has been used since time immemorial, but it has gone through periods where its importance was downplayed in the discipline of history, and then enjoyed a resurgence of interest internationally (Portelli 1998; Ritchie 2015; Thomson 2007). Broadly speaking, 'oral history [is] the term used for the recording of any kind of memory of the past ... [and it] focuses on just one theme, or one phase in life' (Thompson and Bornat 2017:viii). In the South African context, oral history has played an important role (Bonner 2013; Field 2008; Lekgoathi 2007, 2010) in reclaiming knowledge of events in the country's history that were passed down from generation to generation according to a rich oral tradition. Oral history has played a role in establishing social justice, as it has helped to capture people's stories, particularly those from the perspectives of black people, whose views were largely excluded from the historical archives.

The value of social justice informs the South African schools' curriculum, where an explicit link is made to the South African constitution (1996), which aims to '[h]eal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights (Department of Basic Education 2011:5). History, which is linked

to geography as part of a learning area called the social sciences, is often tasked with addressing social justice issues. The history curriculum uses oral history projects as a way of implementing this aspect of the curriculum. This is one of the reasons why it is important to research how practising teachers are using oral history tasks in the classroom, and if these tasks are being used to foster social justice and reconciliation as part of peacebuilding. But there is research that suggests that some practising teachers are experiencing difficulties in implementing oral history tasks in the classroom (Kros and Ulrich 2008), as well as coming to terms with their own personal backgrounds (Weldon 2010). Many of the teachers grew up during apartheid or continue to feel its effects in the present, which suggests that there may be constraints for teachers using oral history tasks in the South African school context.

Duckworth (2015:109) suggested that oral history could be used in peace education as a way of dealing with traumatic events, such as 9/11 in the United States of America, which allows students 'the opportunity to create their own meaning around this event'. She argued that the doing of oral history tasks allows for diverse views of the past to emerge, which challenge master narratives of this past. In addition, Duckworth (2015:110) suggested that this approach also encourages agency, because those who do oral history tasks become 'authors of history' and not simply readers of history. The advantages Duckworth (2015) identified in using oral history tasks resonated with my own experience, as in a university history methodology course in 2006, diverse narratives emerged during an oral history assignment on 'Life before and after 1994'. The participants were pre-service primary school teachers and they were active agents in the oral history process, so that there was a shift to becoming authors instead of readers of history. This provided the starting point of this project, which developed into further research with former students once they became practising teachers in the primary school classroom between 2008 and 2011.

However, there is an underlying assumption in Duckworth's (2015) book that the doing of oral history is an easy task in itself, which reveals a rather simplistic understanding of the nature of oral history. The process of doing

an oral history may appear to be simple, for example: you identify someone to interview, request an interview (and if granted), ask the interviewee questions, transcribe the interview, and then present it in different ways. But this process hides a number of complexities. I have discussed these issues in detail elsewhere. For example, within the discipline of history, there are concerns raised about oral history with regard to ‘claims to knowledge, such as “the truth” ... and the omissions and commissions of memory’ (Nussey 2016:15). However, my purpose in this article is to move beyond these theoretical concerns, to focus on the constraints and possibilities of using oral history in practice in the classroom as part of a reconciliation pedagogy, and to explore the implications for peacebuilding.

### **Research methodology and data collection**

The methodology used follows a ‘narrative inquiry’ qualitative approach, suggested by Clandinin and Connelly (2000:49), where research is the study of experience. There was triangulation in this research between policy documents such as the social sciences curriculum (intermediate phase) according to the Revised National Curriculum Statement (Department of Basic Education 2011), the classroom observations and the interviews with the teachers about the oral history tasks, and their potential link to a reconciliation pedagogy. A brief description of how this triangulation worked follows. The policy documents informed the research at two levels: the values of ‘[h]uman rights, inclusivity, environmental and social justice ... as defined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa’ (Department of Basic Education 2011: 5), which underpin the whole school curriculum; and, the use of oral history, which is a form of ‘valuing indigenous knowledge systems: acknowledging the rich history and heritage of this country as important contributors to nurturing the values contained in the Constitution’ (Department of Basic Education 2011: 5) in the history curriculum. This research aimed to understand how teachers interpreted both the values and the use of oral history found within the policy documents from their own perspective and in practice

in the classroom, and whether this triangulation showed the need for peacebuilding via a reconciliation pedagogy.

The sample for this research evolved organically from interviewing students about the 2006 university oral history assignment, once they became practising teachers at primary schools. In an interview conducted with Zahiera<sup>1</sup> at the beginning of her teaching career (2009), she agreed to a follow-up observation in her classroom at school A. There were three more social sciences teachers, Cathy, David and Eva, who had been part of the 2006 history methodology class at school A, and they agreed to participate in this research. For the purpose of comparison with these first year teachers, four more experienced social sciences teachers, Nancy at school A, Kagiso at school B, Joyce and Robyn at school C, volunteered to be included in this study.

These teachers taught history as part of the social sciences curriculum at different levels of the intermediate and senior phases of the primary schools, and they taught at the intermediate phase (grades four to six), and part of the senior phase (grade seven).<sup>2</sup> In total, the research sample included one grade four teacher (Eva), four grade five teachers (Cathy, David, Robyn and Zahiera), one grade six teacher (Joyce) and two grade seven teachers (Kagiso and Nancy). In order to conduct research in the classroom, I requested that they combine an oral history task with cooperative learning, which is an approach to pedagogy informed by social psychology, and based on ‘the most widely accepted theory of positive intergroup relations: Allport’s (1954) contact theory’ (Slavin 1985:11). This theory suggests that if diverse groups come into contact with one another, then this will lead to ‘familiarity and attraction’ (Miller and Harrington 1990:47). Cooperative learning is a form of group work, which is best described by Alexandre Dumas as ‘all for one, and one for all’. It is an approach based on the

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1 The names of all the teachers in this article are pseudonyms, and the data is sourced from my unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Nussey 2012).

2 Grades four to seven are usually part of a primary school, even though grade seven is considered part of the senior phase.

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following principles: to establish heterogeneous groups, so that the groups are not friendship based; and to divide a class into groups of between four and six members, where the members of these smaller groups were formed by mixing different languages, genders and races. All the members are equal (which links to an important aspect of the 4R framework, namely, 'recognition' [Novelli et al. 2015:13]), and a common task is used to foster (among others) '*positive interdependence*' (italics in original) among the members of each group: this means that they either 'swim or sink' together, and there is both individual and group accountability in terms of assessment and '*group processing*' (italics in original) of the task (Johnson and Johnson 2010:229).

The time spent observing the teachers using oral history and cooperative learning tasks ranged from a single to a double lesson (Zahiera, Eva, Cathy, David, Nancy, Kagiso) to two days in their respective classrooms (Joyce and Robyn), and the interviews averaged an hour with each of these teachers. There were variations in the time spent observing teachers for the following reasons: it depended on the amount of time the different schools and teachers were willing to allocate for this research; and, the realisation during the research period that I needed more time to observe the teachers within the classroom setting. While this sample is small, and it is impossible to make generalisations based on these findings, nonetheless this research offers valuable insights as to the constraints and possibilities of using a reconciliation pedagogy for peacebuilding in practice.

## Findings

### Teachers' approaches and intentions

For the purpose of the classroom observations, all the participants were requested to do an oral history task, based on a topic of their own choice. Two of the teachers linked this request to the sections they were busy teaching: one included a comparison of prices in the present and the past, while the other asked why and when the learners' families moved to Johannesburg. These topics generated animated discussion among the learners, but their

engagement with the past seemed to be rather superficial. While some different narratives about the past were present, these oral history tasks did not encourage much ‘dialogue about memories’ (Field 2008:1) nor did they generate a discussion that raised issues related to social justice. This may have been the result of the age of the learners, who were in grades four and five. But these observations challenged the view that the doing of any oral history task could necessarily be linked to reconciliation as a form of peacebuilding, and it also showed how important the choice of topic is, as well as a teacher’s reasons for doing an oral history task.

The majority of the teachers chose to do a topic that involved a comparison between the old and new South Africa, such as, the old and new South African coat of arms, apartheid and democratic legislation, and life during and after apartheid. Again, this emphasised how important the choice of topic is, and it showed that it was possible to do in-depth oral histories with grades five to seven learners. I observed a number of multiple narratives about the past, and the learners engaged more thoughtfully with these tasks, which suggested that these topics had the potential to assist peacebuilding.

### **Learners’ prior knowledge of apartheid**

For those teachers who chose to focus their oral history tasks on a topic related to apartheid, it was a challenge to introduce the topic in a way that the learners had sufficient background to conduct their interviews. For the most part, the teachers gave the learners worksheets on the oral history project, and went through it with them. This meant that they drew on the learners’ prior knowledge about apartheid, which was appropriate in some cases. However, in other cases, the learners appeared to have insufficient background to conduct their oral histories, and this negatively affected the quality of their oral history tasks.

### **Interviewees: challenges and successes**

Another constraint, concerning the use of oral history tasks in the classroom, was the request to the learners to find someone to interview about a South African history topic. There is an assumption that all of the learners have

someone that they could easily interview, which is not necessarily true. Some of the children were recent immigrants/refugees or children whose parents or grandparents were no longer alive, and these learners battled to find someone to interview. There were also parents who felt that they did not have much information to offer on the topic, or who did not want to speak about the past, 'because it made them feel sad' (Journal observation, 23 October 2009). This comment hinted at the ongoing effects of apartheid on an older generation, and the importance of and the difficulties of being interviewees in an oral history task on this topic. Overall, this meant that it was not an easy task for many of the learners to find a suitable person, who had a knowledge-rich background, to conduct an oral history interview.

However, Joyce, at school C, was successful in identifying suitable interviewees for her class, as she benefitted from an opportunity that arose during a Grandparents' Day held at the school. When the grandparents visited her classroom, many observed that the classrooms at their old schools were 'not like this', and Joyce request their help with the oral history task. The grandparents volunteered to be interviewed about their lives during apartheid in front of the whole class, and this addressed the problem of learners not having suitable interviewees within their own families. This successful solution showed the importance of including and briefing the school's community when an oral history task is given to learners, and it shows how a task of this nature has the potential to foster peacebuilding within and beyond the classroom.

### **Drafting of interview questions**

Furthermore, another constraint to doing an oral history task effectively at primary schools was related to who set the questions for the interviews. In most cases, the teachers gave the learners set questions. While teachers could provide guidance at primary school in terms of the kinds of questions that the learners might ask, in practice, this approach created difficulties for the content of the oral history task. The result was that many of the learners were not as invested in their interviews when a teacher set the questions. In some cases, the learners did not understand the purpose of the questions,

nor did they probe the interviewee's answers. The teacher's questions were also open to misinterpretation by the learners. For example, the question set by Eva, at school A, was, 'Why did your family come to Johannesburg?' It led to some unexpected answers, such as, 'By foot or by train' (Journal observation, 23 October 2009). These answers were understandable given the context of the theme of transport that was being covered in this grade four class, but the learners interpreted the question the teacher asked as a 'how' one, instead of exploring the reasons why their families moved to Johannesburg. This showed the importance of learners understanding the purpose of the question, and for the teacher to mediate that understanding. It also showed that not every oral history task could be used for the purpose of reconciliation and peacebuilding.

However, an alternative and more successful approach to the setting of the interview questions about apartheid was demonstrated by Robyn at School C. She presented her class with some set questions about the topic, and then allowed them to devise their own additional questions for the interviews through a cooperative process. After this process, there was a discussion of what made for good or bad questions in a whole class setting. Further, she viewed all these new questions devised by the learners before they did their oral history interviews. The reason why Robyn followed this approach was that she did not want her learners to ask inappropriate or offensive questions during their interviews.

Some guidelines for international oral history projects recommend that the learners should devise their own 'meaningful' questions (Ritchie 2015:201), which is applicable to the South African context too. Learners need to ask questions that they feel are relevant to their own lives and also to be able to probe the answers they receive from the interviewee, so that the oral history interview forms part of a genuine enquiry process. If an aim of doing oral history tasks is peacebuilding, then it also seems even more appropriate for the learners to ask their own questions. However, Robyn's caution regarding the learners' own questions might be necessary given the controversial issues that an oral history task about apartheid could reveal. She also explained to the learners before they did the interview that

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apartheid was a traumatic experience for many people, and ‘if someone refuses to do the interview, it’s not that they don’t like you, it’s because apartheid is a sensitive issue’ (Journal observation, 22 October 2010).

### **Awareness of sensitivities**

There is also the possibility that ‘when interviewing trauma survivors, who display hypersensitivity, a mistimed question can severely unsettle the interviewee’ (Field 2006:36). This does not mean that oral history tasks about contentious issues should be abandoned, but that a certain amount of care should be taken, as demonstrated by Robyn. However, if an interviewee is re-traumatised as a result of an oral history interview, then a school needs to offer counselling services to help the interviewee deal with this situation. Alternatively, the schools need to arrange for other sources of help from members within the community who are able to assist the interviewee.

The preparation and some of the results of the oral history interviews revealed constraints and possibilities for both the teachers and learners in terms of the task and for peacebuilding. But the quality of the oral history tasks in practice depended on how the teachers approached the oral history task and what their intentions were in doing so. It also depended on the following: the amount of background the learners had as prior knowledge; who was identified as knowledge-rich interviewees and how this identification was made; the kinds of questions that the learners asked and who formulated them; as well as an awareness of the sensitive nature of particular topics of some oral history tasks, and what impact this could have on the broader community. It also showed that the doing of oral history tasks did bring multiple narratives and histories into the classroom, but that this did not necessarily contribute to peacebuilding in all cases.

There was another part to the process of doing this oral history task, that is, the pedagogy used by the teachers either during the preparation for the task and/or the presentation of the results of the class’s oral history interviews, namely, cooperative learning. In the next section, I present some of the

constraints and possibilities I observed when teachers used this pedagogy during their lessons, and the implications of adopting it for peacebuilding.

### **Constraints and possibilities of using cooperative learning in the classroom**

While oral history has been linked closely to the pedagogy of cooperative learning in other countries (Ritchie 2015) as well as peace education (Johnson and Johnson 2010), this was not a common approach used by the teachers I observed. The more experienced teachers (Joyce, Kagiso, Nancy and Robyn) acknowledged that they had not thought of linking an oral history task to the pedagogy of cooperative learning in their classrooms before my request for them to use this approach in the classroom. But all the teachers were aware of the theory of cooperative learning as a teaching and learning strategy from their university methodology courses, although some of the first year teachers battled to implement it in practice, because they mixed up different cooperative strategies with ordinary group work. However, the more experienced teachers were able to use this pedagogy extremely effectively in both the preparation and presentation of the results of the oral history tasks.

I observed different ways of structuring the cooperative activities: where a group selected the most interesting story within the group to be shared with the whole class (Zahiera, Clare), used the stories to fill in a table (Joyce), or created a joint mindmap of the oral histories (David). Another way was when a group selected aspects of each member's oral histories, then combined these selections into a coherent whole by using dramatisations (Eva, Nancy, Robyn).

There are some practical problems regarding the use of dramatisations as a way to present oral histories in the classroom. The first issue is that it was a time-consuming activity, which makes it difficult for teachers to include this kind of activity while working with a curriculum that has strict time-frames. Another practical issue that proved to be a constraint for the teachers was the following: dramatisations need space for the learners to move, both while they work in groups to prepare for the dramatisations and

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for the final presentations too. This is a problem, especially in overcrowded or small classrooms. But this issue was addressed in innovative ways by two teachers: Nancy split a class of forty-nine learners into two adjoining classrooms, and then moved between the two rooms while the learners were preparing for their dramatisations. Robyn used the school playground as a space for the learners to practise, and then organised the school hall for the presentations of the learners' dramatisations. Both teachers developed successful solutions to the problem of insufficient classroom space for a class's dramatisations. Nonetheless, the issue of space remains a challenge to implementing a reconciliation pedagogy in practice at schools.

However, dramatisations provided an effective approach as a cooperative strategy for a reconciliation pedagogy for the following reasons: it encouraged the learners to engage in greater depth with their own oral history narrative, as they explained more about their respective interviewees to the group; they also entered into in-depth 'difficult dialogues' (Tupper 2014:469) with the other members of their groups as they discussed multiple narratives which emerged from one another's oral histories. This in-depth engagement happened during the process of preparing for the group's dramatisation, which showed how the link between an oral history task and cooperative learning has the power to contribute towards peacebuilding in the classroom, by developing an "understanding that humanises", as well as 'trust' (Novelli and Sayed 2016:19). In Robyn's class, one of the girls approached her to say 'I almost cried!' (Journal observation, 22 October 2010) when she learnt more about apartheid from her group.

But there is also the space for conflict and disagreements to emerge during this process, and this is a valuable part of peacebuilding too. Conflict can highlight differing perspectives about a contested past, and by locating them within oral histories, it can help to make these perspectives more accessible to learners at a personal level, and help to develop their understanding about them. This is part of the difficult process of truly engaging one another, as Johnson and Johnson (1994:69) argued that '[c]o-operation and conflict go hand-in-hand', so that skills in conflict resolution also play an important part of peacebuilding. An example of

conflict that Kagiso described in his interview was a boy who reported that his white interviewee stated: ‘but during apartheid ... the transport system was better, the level of education was higher ... certain things about apartheid were good actually’ (Interview 22 February 2011). The context of this remark was ambiguous, because it was unclear whether it described the better functioning of many aspects of South African life for white people under apartheid or whether it was nostalgia for a lost past. But the rest of the group responded negatively, and Kagiso intervened to mediate the conflict, and helped to ‘unpack’ the interview. This incident offered a valuable opening point for a discussion about apartheid – as to who holds these views, why they are held, and the contested nature of these personal ‘truths’. It showed how a reconciliation pedagogy allows for the entry of multiple narratives about the past into the classroom, and for conflict to be used as a way to develop an understanding, which not only clarifies a learner’s background, but also develops an understanding that ‘humanises’ (Novelli and Sayed 2016:19).

However, not every conflict can be resolved in the classroom. While a conflict of ideas (both intellectual and emotional) is a necessary part of a cooperative strategy, some conflicts can only be resolved in the broader society and not the classroom, as is reflected by the inclusion of ‘redistribution’ in the 4R framework (Novelli and Sayed 2016). For example, the issue of land redistribution in South Africa is a contentious one (Cousins 2016), but while possible solutions may be discussed in the classroom, the issue of land distribution requires a political solution by the state.

### **Effects on teachers’ practice: the potential for peacebuilding?**

In the interviews after the lessons, many of the teachers identified positive aspects concerning the inclusion of oral history tasks in their classrooms. Kagiso and Zahiera found that it made the classroom more inclusive, as different learners contributed during the lesson, instead of the ones who usually spoke. This process gave the teachers greater insight into their learners’ backgrounds, and the teachers felt that it had the advantage of

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encouraging interaction between the different generations in the learners' families outside the classroom. Zahiera said that many of her learners were 'so lost', because they 'don't know where they come from', whereas her oral history task had helped the learners to start finding out about their own backgrounds. David was also in favour of using an oral history task for the following reasons: it 'will help people open up and deal with issues of the past' because 'you're not going to get it out of a textbook .... Discussion is the only way you can open people up to how they really feel'. His views emphasised how the effects of the past continue in the present, how important dialogue is when dealing with the emotions and, by implication, how the doing of an oral history task provides an important route to peacebuilding.

However, there were a few challenges during the process of doing an oral history task, as Joyce and Eva noted that some of the parents did not give the learners much information or did not cooperate during the interviews, and resorted to monosyllabic answers. This meant that these learners were unable to do the oral history tasks effectively, and it also indicated the extent to which the effects of apartheid continue to affect intergenerational relationships in the present. Clare mentioned that she found that some of her learners became aggressive when the topic of apartheid was raised: 'I think that's the most important, ... getting the parents involved, because they are the ones that are teaching their children [about apartheid]' and 'a lot of the children have been affected by their parents and their families .... so they take that anger from home'. It appears that there is a need for peacebuilding initiatives in the classroom and the broader community too, in order to deal with these legacies of the past, and an oral history task is a way of addressing this issue. None of the teachers took this next step to encourage their classes to report back the results of their oral histories to their communities, as a way of acknowledging the interviewees' time and effort. A report back is important for another reason: if the findings of the oral history tasks are presented to the school community, then there is the potential for peacebuilding beyond the confines of the classroom, as it

could provide an opportunity to open up a much needed discussion about apartheid in the broader community.

Yet it is debatable to what extent the use of oral history could lead to ‘healing’, as suggested in Novelli and Sayed’s (2016) framework of the relationship between reconciliation and education. Some oral historians have raised questions about whether telling one’s story leads to healing (Field 2006:34; Thomson 2015:23). This relationship between telling one’s own story and healing is complicated as was shown during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings, where ‘[t]he victims and survivors responded differently to the TRC hearings. Some found solace and catharsis. Others felt their wounds were reopened and left unattended’ (Villa-Vicencio [2006] cited in Clark 2012:194). This ambivalence was reflected by the teachers, as David’s statement about a reconciliation pedagogy that it ‘will help to heal the wounds of the past’ contrasted with Clare’s acknowledgement of the justifiable anger that some of the learners were bringing into the classroom from their homes. At best, using oral history tasks in the classroom could start a process of reweaving relationships that may lead to the long term goal of healing relationships in the broader society.

All of the teachers supported the need for a reconciliation pedagogy as a peacebuilding tool in general, but not all of them supported its practice in their own classroom. For example, Nancy challenged the need for reconciliation in her context, because her entire class consisted of black learners. She argued that ‘their [oral] stories were from a similar experience. But even ... where people were treated better ... the children weren’t offended.’ Nancy was indirectly referring to the different experiences for those who were labelled African, Coloured or Indian under apartheid. The members of all of these groups were discriminated against, as apartheid forced the different groups to live in separate geographical areas, but African people alone had the additional burden of carrying passes, as ordered by the Natives (Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents) Act of 1952 (SAHO 2017).

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A counter argument to Nancy's view is that she was generalising on the basis of race: some people were accused of being informers (sometimes mistakenly) in black communities as was shown at the TRC in the case of Ms Maki Skosana (TRC Vol 5 1998:364). Furthermore, there were political conflicts within black communities (supported by the apartheid government), such as the violence between '[c]omrades' and "'vigilantes'" in KwaZulu-Natal and on the East Rand in the mid-1980s and towards the end of apartheid (TRC Vol 2 1998:299, 584–585). This suggests the need for peacebuilding is not only a matter between black and white people in South Africa, but it is something that is needed by most South African communities.

In addition, there was also a lack of acknowledgement of Nancy's position as a white teacher who taught black learners in her classroom. Unless teachers develop an awareness of how their own position affects relationships in their classrooms, they too can be a hindrance to the peacebuilding process. This shows the importance of 'understanding one's own positionality when teaching the past, present and future' (Novelli and Sayed 2016:19), which is an important contribution their link between reconciliation and education makes towards peacebuilding.

Overall, the majority of the teachers saw the value of doing oral history tasks using cooperative learning for their practice, as well as the benefits that applied beyond the classroom. It fostered a learner-centred approach in the classroom, and enabled learners to engage both with an older generation and their peers about a contested past. It made for a worthwhile learning opportunity from sources that are not always found in the classroom, and despite some of the constraints identified above, it has the potential to contribute to peacebuilding both within and beyond the classroom.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

This research showed some of the possibilities and constraints of applying a reconciliation pedagogy, and the ideas that informed Novelli and Sayed's (2016) conception of reconciliation, to actual practice in the classroom for

the purpose of peacebuilding. The emphasis on ‘teaching multiple narratives and histories’ (Novelli and Sayed 2016:19) allows for the subject of history to play a crucial role in this framework, and a reconciliation pedagogy’s use of oral history tasks ensures that multiple narratives are present in the history classroom. But it was not always easy for the teachers to implement an oral history task successfully in a primary school classroom, which leads to the following recommendations:

- Teachers need to be aware of their own positionality;
- They have to choose a topic that has depth, with the intention of encouraging learners to examine and discuss issues of social justice, such as, apartheid;
- The oral history task needs to be carefully introduced, so that the learners have sufficient background knowledge to do the oral history task effectively;
- The learners need to devise their own questions for the oral history interview (even if the teachers vet their questions), so that the learners care about the process and can ask their own follow-up questions;
- The teachers need to be pro-active by identifying knowledge-rich interviewees on behalf of learners, as many learners may experience difficulties in finding interviewees;
- Finally, the teachers also need to ensure that the process of doing an oral history for the purpose of peacebuilding is given sufficient time, despite the constraints of a crowded curriculum.

The use of cooperative learning as a means of preparing and presenting the findings of the oral history tasks also showed how challenging this pedagogy is to implement in practice in the classroom. There are constraints of space, such as, small classrooms that were not built to accommodate a large number of learners, although some teachers solved this problem in innovative ways. However, though not all the cooperative activities necessarily led to peacebuilding, dramatisations of the oral histories encouraged greater depth of discussion among the learners both in preparation for and debriefing of the activity. This leads to a further recommendation:

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- Dramatisation can be used with good effect, as this particular form of cooperative activity showed the greatest potential for peacebuilding. When cooperative learning is used appropriately by the teachers, then it provides the opportunity for relationships to develop in the classroom either through cooperation or conflict. This process has the potential to contribute towards social justice, as it helps the learners to develop an ‘understanding that humanises’ (Novelli and Sayed 2016:19) and possibly to trust one another, but whether this process will necessarily lead to ‘healing’ (Novelli and Sayed 2016:19) is debatable.

Two final recommendations are:

- A school may use an oral history task as a way of engaging with parents and the broader community: it provides a way of building reconciliation from the bottom up, as it interweaves the history classroom with the broader community, so that multiple narratives about the past emerge.
- This process needs to be done sensitively, however, as there is the danger that oral history interviews may re-traumatise some members of the community, for whom the school may have to provide counselling services.

Nevertheless, the advantage for peacebuilding is that oral history interviews encourage a meaningful interaction between the different generations about the past: this helps the learners to find out where they come from, and allows an older generation to share their memories (which may be contested) with another generation. It is also important for the learners to present their dramatisations to the community, as a means of reporting back what they have learnt, because this could open up a space for discussion among the older generation too.

The most important result of this research is that all the teachers acknowledged the need for a reconciliation pedagogy in the classroom and beyond, as Joyce stated, ‘I’m living in [a] post-apartheid [society], ... [but] we are still struggling to unite as one’. Whether it is possible for South Africans to ‘unite as one’ is questionable, but a reconciliation pedagogy, which uses oral history and cooperative learning tasks, encourages the

learners to engage with one another and an older generation, so that there is a possibility for understanding and trust to develop. But teachers' roles are crucial during this process, as their awareness, intentions and how they implement the process will affect whether or not this process leads to sustainable peacebuilding in the South African context.

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