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Understanding Sierra Leonean and Liberian teachers' views on discussing past wars in their classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Various curricular and textbook initiatives exist to aid in the national processes of coming to terms with past violence, often serving the political goals of the victors, sometimes supported by international transitional justice institutions. Sierra Leone and Liberia each experienced a devastating civil war during the 1990s and into the 2000s, and each is struggling to rebuild shattered education systems. In addition, each country has experienced a set of post-conflict transitional justice initiatives: Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in each, and a Special Court for Sierra Leone. Although their respective ministries of education have attempted to address peace education through UNICEF-sponsored curriculum revision processes, those efforts have not yet reached the majority of serving teachers, so a discussion of teachers' actual practices is vital. This article uses interviews with teachers in rural and urban Sierra Leone and Liberia to discuss whether and how teachers talk about past war in their classrooms; whether they think it is important to discuss past conflicts, and if so, why; and what kind of curricular support would help them better teach about the wars. The article discusses how and why teachers embrace or subvert official efforts through their classroom practices, and compares the Sierra Leone and Liberia contexts and results. This research will help us to understand teachers' own perspectives on addressing past conflict in their classrooms, and perhaps help policy-makers better implement their peace education initiatives.

The importance of the need for secondary school students and other youths to know about the findings and recommendations in the [Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Report] cannot be over emphasised. This generation of Sierra Leoneans will sooner rather than later be in responsible positions that will provide them with numerous opportunities to partake in the implementation of these recommendations, which – if put in place – would impact positively on the development of the country. (John Caulker, Chairman, Truth and Reconciliation Working Group. Foreword to *TRC Report: A Senior Secondary School Version*)

Introduction

Samuel[1] teaches social studies in a secondary school in Monrovia, Liberia. A friend of his, a fellow teacher, has introduced us and he has agreed to an interview with me (Shepler), a

white American researcher about whom he knows nothing. We are sitting on a bench in front of his house. I try to put him at ease. We joke about something or other and I give him my standard informed consent speech and turn on the voice recorder. My first question is: 'do you teach about the war in your classroom?' He looks at me, puzzled and uncomprehending. 'Which war?' he asks.

Liberia experienced a bloody civil war from 1989 to 1996. At the time of the interview, less than 10 years had passed. Some of the bloodiest fighting happened not a mile from where we were sitting. Surely Samuel remembers those awful events. The fact that I have to clarify by saying 'the war that happened here in your country, the Liberian civil war' reveals a great deal about the presumed role of formal education in coming to terms with the recent past in this context. In Liberia and in neighbouring Sierra Leone, national and international actors have positioned education as part of peacebuilding activities, including through a UNICEF-sponsored curriculum revision.

This article examines the contradictions between official intentions for schools and the perspectives of teachers, who are charged with putting national policies for the classroom into practice, or not. Based on interviews with teachers in Liberia and neighbouring Sierra Leone, we find that while a number of the teachers we spoke with wanted to teach about the wars in their respective countries, a series of constraints effectively prevented them from doing so. At the same time, the success of an out-of-school non-formal initiative run by a local NGO suggests the possibility of education serving as a vehicle for transitional justice, enabling opportunities for communities to acknowledge past violence. While not questioning the importance of schools in developing informed citizens, these findings question easy assumptions about the role that formal education will actually play in promoting peace and justice in some post-conflict environments. Instead, we call for a deeper, more contextualised and *sustained* consideration of the conditions facing teachers and the less visible constraints on those charged with implementing school-based efforts at reconciliation and justice-seeking.

We compare and contrast the post-conflict environments in the two West African cases of Sierra Leone and Liberia. Their conflicts share many similarities but many important distinctions as well, especially in their transitional justice trajectories. We focus on secondary school teachers to ask whether they teach about the past conflicts in their classrooms, whether they are aware of or use any of the curricula or materials created for that purpose, and whether they think the war *should* be taught about and why? Do they think they have a role to play in post-war peacebuilding or reconciliation? If so, what is that role? And, what conditions affect their ability or desire to play that role? Existing research has noted that top-down educational peacebuilding and transitional justice initiatives are not trickling down to the classroom level (e.g. Ramírez-Barat and Duthie 2015). Our project seeks to better understand why, by asking teachers about their classrooms and their own perspectives about whether, how, and why transitional justice should be taught in their schools in their particular social contexts.

In what follows, we offer a brief outline of literature on education and transitional justice. Then we describe methods for interviewing secondary school teachers in urban and semi-urban Sierra Leone and Liberia and for gathering information about education and curriculum change in the post-conflict periods. Next, we provide background to the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone and to their respective transitional justice portfolios and related educational initiatives. Finally, we analyse the results of the comparative

case study. The goal of the research is to provide a view from the teachers' perspective of the actual state of education's role in transitional justice, broadly defined; and their perspective on the desirable state. We reflect on why state schools – often suggested as a venue for reconciliation – may in some contexts be uniquely ill-suited to play that role in actuality.

Education and transitional justice

Education has been widely theorised as a tool of peacebuilding (Davies 2004, 2005; Sinclair et al. 2008; Novelli and Smith 2011; Quaynor 2012, 2014, 2015). Education often plays an important role in post-conflict reconstruction and activities include rebuilding schools and education systems, opening up access, increasing economic opportunities for young people, offering potentially reconciliatory contact among groups formerly in conflict, and employing 'peacebuilding' curriculum and pedagogy (Williams 2011).

Scholars have begun theorising about connections between education and transitional justice, and how education can further (or fail to advance) the aims of reconciliation (see, for example, Davies 2004, 2017; Paulson 2006; Cole and Murphy 2010; Ramírez-Barat and Duthie 2015). Education can undertake repair for past wrongs (changing biased textbooks and curricula, addressing barriers to equal access, etc.) and can spread the reach of findings of truth commissions and other transitional justice institutions to youth, ensuring that the impact of transitional justice initiatives is cast into a country's future. But education can also play a more transformative social and political role in society, for example, through 'justice-sensitive education' (see Davies 2017); through the '4 Rs' of redistribution, recognition, representation, and reconciliation (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith 2015); and schools' 'positioning of youth as civic actors with the agency to shape the postwar through their participation in the civic life of a transitioning democracy' (Bellino 2016, 76). The literature on the relationship between education and conflict commonly acknowledges that education can both mitigate and cause conflict (see, for example, Bush and Saltarelli 2000; Hart 2011; Harber 2013; Tebbe 2015). Also in education and transitional justice it is important to remember that the connection goes in both directions; one must be concerned with how education may have contributed to the conflict (even into the present) *and* how transitional justice can repair past educational injustices and build peace in the future. The nuances of these relationships are just beginning to be explored (see Bellino and Williams 2017; Davies 2017; Paulson and Bellino 2017), and are often felt intensely in communities and schools. But the advocacy and education literatures and many practitioners sometimes treat education as an unqualified good, often employing

> a highly reductionist view of education's role in peacebuilding, which is limited to 'peace education', changing minds and behaviour, rather than focusing on more structural issues of governance, access quality and provision, or paradoxically a broad conceptualization which essentially equates all educational activities with peacebuilding. (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith 2015, 6)

In the area of education and transitional justice, researchers, policy-makers, and policy advocates have tended to focus on top down initiatives. For researchers, it is much easier to collect centrally-available data and documents than to investigate what is going on in classrooms. There is a substantial literature, for example, on textbooks and curriculum

reform (especially in relation to history education) in post-conflict contexts, and how the intended curriculum in textbooks may contribute (or not) to reconciliation and other transitional justice goals, or conversely how they may promote conflict (see, for example, Cole 2007; King 2014; Williams 2014; Bentrovato, Korostelina, and Schulze 2016; Williams and Bokhorst-Heng 2016; Bellino and Williams 2017). This literature by and large suggests that, if done well, teaching about recent conflict is an important component of a peacebuilding education (e.g. Paulson 2015).

A growing body of recent scholarship has focused on teachers' work and classroom practice in post-conflict settings (see, for example, Freedman et al. 2008; Weldon 2010; Naylor and Sayed 2014; Worden 2014; Bellino 2016). This literature has highlighted the central and complex role of teachers in mediating the policies and curricular intentions of the state, balancing its demands (i.e. examinations, inspections), and utilising available resources and pedagogy to enact the implemented curriculum in context of the local school, its students and community. Horner, Kadiwal, Sayed, Barrett, Durrani and Novelli's review of the role of teachers in peacebuilding:

> … reveals a complex relationship between teacher agency and peacebuilding which is both multi-levelled (school, community, district, national, international) and cuts across a variety of areas (classroom practice, governance, infrastructure, policy etc.). When considered against the framework of sustainable peacebuilding, a mixed picture emerges where teachers' agency can be both facilitated or restricted and used to build peace or obstruct peace. (2015, 63)

Existing research draws on numerous examples of pilot projects illustrating what can be done to promote transitional justice in schools, but it does not (indeed its purpose is not) to describe ways transitional justice can be implemented to scale in a school system. Like many documents theorising connections and advocating possibilities, such proposals tend to fall implicitly into the pilot project fallacy, the implication being that an initiative successfully piloted will work in the larger context (Uvin, Jain, and Brown 2000; Brown and Osborne 2012). Pilot projects are able to draw on resources and sustained commitment by implementers engaged in the innovation, precisely the conditions that are so rare in poorly-resourced school systems recovering from conflict.

Indeed, research has highlighted many of the changes necessary for schools to become instruments of transitional justice (Davies 2004; Ramírez-Barat and Duthie 2015). These changes involve thoroughgoing reform, with the attendant requirements of policy focus, resources and sustained support at all levels of the system. For example, Ramírez-Barat and Duthie include as recommendations for educational practitioners, policy-makers:

> Prioritize training teachers and developing pedagogies to address the past in classrooms. … Consider how to manage the psychosocial implications related to addressing potentially sensitive histories and narratives in the classroom, such as anger, distress, embarrassment, humiliation, and resentment. Overall, mental health and protection measures should be included when dealing with the past in the classroom, opening as well opportunities for the development of new relationships within and between groups. (2015, 36)

These are excellent recommendations, but in contexts where many teachers still lack formal pedagogical training, managing the psychosocial implications of sensitive histories in the classroom likely requires more commitment than evidenced in many post-conflict

contexts to date. Organisationally and politically, refitting schools for transitional justice is a major undertaking, as documented in Davies' case study of Sri Lanka (2017).

The ethnography of transitional justice has focused on bottom up approaches, arguing that certain concepts central to the transitional justice project are culture bound. This research has also problematised notions of 'tradition', and focused on memory and justice practices. Western concepts and norms of 'transitional justice' are understood quite differently in Sierra Leone than in France, for example. Ethnographic insights have broadened our very definitions of transitional justice, complicating even the central concept of truth-telling and locating reconciliation in everyday practices instead of spectacular institutions (Sawyer and Kelsall 2007; Shaw 2007; Ibrahim and Shepler 2011; Millar 2011). Similarly, ethnographic work on education in West Africa has revealed that school itself is understood differently than in the West, often seen as continuous with pre-colonial forms of secret knowledge transmission and primarily about memorising alien and obscure facts in order to gain access to 'modern' (as opposed to 'traditional') power (Murphy 1980; Shepler 1998, 2014). To achieve desired goals, education for transitional justice may need to be understood in terms of its meanings to students, teachers and parents. This requires attention to the specifics of history, context and relationships among groups in conflict; the ways in which groups have organised relationships in the post conflict space; and the narratives that link them. These literatures highlight several insights useful in understanding teachers' perspectives on teaching about conflict in schools: the top-down nature of transitional justice initiatives, the frequent ignoring of teachers as primary agents of schooling, the cultural embeddedness of transitional justice and of formal schooling itself, and the complexity of the relationships between schooling and conflict. Interviews focused on a much narrower set of questions: whether teachers teach about the past conflict in their classrooms, and why or why not. This point was a kind of proxy for a range of other issues, and was done in order to ask a question that would be easier for teachers to answer. However, it served as the opening for broader discussions.

Method

The main body of data presented in this article consists of 40 interviews with secondary school teachers, 20 in each country. In each country, we conducted 10 interviews in the capital city (Freetown and Monrovia) and 10 in a provincial town (Bo and Gbarnga). We found the teachers through pre-existing connections, snowball sampling techniques, and by cold visits to secondary schools. Because we were interested in teachers who might have reason to discuss the past conflict in their lessons, we focused mostly on teachers of social studies, civics, and history, but we included teachers of other subjects as well if they agreed that they sometimes had reason to discuss the war in their classroom. All of the teachers in the sample were male, but that is not unusual for secondary school teachers in these two countries (see Stromquist et al. 2013). Though it was not the aim to create a truly representative sample, the teachers interviewed ranged widely in age, years working as teachers, and qualification level.

In addition to the interviews, we also collected textbooks and related materials when possible, primarily by purchasing them in various roadside markets. We also collected official curricula from Ministry of Education staff in each country. We conducted Key Informant Interviews with Ministry of Education officials, UNICEF representatives, staff at education

related NGOs in both countries, a Liberian textbook author, and former staff from the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) and both the Sierra Leone and Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs).

Two civil wars

The neighbouring West African countries of Sierra Leone and Liberia experienced civil war for much of the 1990s. Hundreds of thousands were killed and millions displaced across the region. In Liberia, the war came in two parts, from 1989 to 1997 and then again from 2000 to 2003. In Sierra Leone, the war 'spilled over' from Liberia in 1991 and was officially declared over in 2002. Sierra Leone is a former British colony and Liberia was never colonised, but has had a colonial-like relationship with the United States since it was settled by the American Colonization Society in 1822. Before the wars, each country was very poor, and the causes of their intertwined conflicts are similar: corrupt 'fragile' states and extractive economies, worsened by the strictures of structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s (Bøås 2001; Gershoni 2004). The wars are known for horrible violence and rights abuses like the use of child soldiers and widespread sexual violence. Neither conflict was primarily ethnic or religious in character, though violence sometimes played out along pre-existing social fissures. Many have argued that these wars can be best understood as 'crises of youth', a response to the lack of education and occupational opportunities for a majority youth population shunted aside by the failure of neo-patrimonial government (Richards 1996). Indeed, it has been argued that inequity of educational provision and the mismatch between curricula and economic opportunities are key factors in understanding how the 'youth bulges' in these two countries were conducive to the eruption of armed conflict (Østby and Urdal 2011). Matsumoto (2011, 2015) is critical of pre-war schooling for contributing indirectly towards the war because of its divisive and elitist nature and because of the gap between the expectations created and the realities of the labour market.

These two conflicts were certainly intertwined, from the participation of Charles Taylor, former Liberian President, to the flows of fighters, arms, diamonds, and displaced people across their borders. The important distinctions between them are these: in Liberia, the rebel leader Charles Taylor was able to win an election and assume office, whereas Sierra Leone's rebels and 'sobels'[2] never fully succeeded in capturing the state (Mitton 2015). In each case, fighters were not well-disciplined and became involved in looting of mineral and other resources, creating a self-sustaining war economy with very little motivation to end the conflict (Bøås 2001; Gershoni 2004). Both wars were ended with the assistance of the regional force the economic community of West African states monitoring group, British and American troops, and then UN Peacekeepers (United Nations Mission in Liberia and United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone [UNAMSIL]).

Two transitional justice projects

Although these two conflicts are intertwined in many ways, as distinct nation-states they had two distinct, internationally-sponsored transitional justice projects. Sierra Leone's transitional justice project includes a wide range of interventions and has been well documented and studied (Sawyer and Kelsall 2007; Shaw 2007; Kelsall 2009; Cook and Heykoop

2010; Graybill 2010; Park 2010; Millar 2011; Mieth 2013, 2015; Ainley, Friedman, and Mahony 2015; Hollis 2015; Mitton 2015; Dugal 2016). The Sierra Leone TRC (SL-TRC) was established as a condition of the 1999 Lomé Peace Accord, and operated from November 2002 to October 2004. The work of the SL-TRC included statement taking around the country as well as a series of public hearings. The commission authored a report designed to 'create an impartial historical record of violations and abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law related to the armed conflict in Sierra Leone' (Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2004a, 24). Sierra Leone was also home to the SCSL, a hybrid court set up by the Government of Sierra Leone and the United Nations to 'prosecute persons who bear the greatest responsibility for serious violations of international humanitarian law and Sierra Leonean law' (Statute of the Special Court for Sierra Leone 2002). The agreement to establish the court was signed in January 2002 and the final verdicts were read in April 2012. Especially in international law circles these interventions are viewed as quite successful (see, for example, Hollis 2015), while for others the SL-TRC is critiqued for being culturally inappropriate and not delivering on promised reparations for victims and the SCSL is critiqued for its expense, for taking too long to reach verdicts,[3] and for being guided by the desires of the international community more than the needs of post-war Sierra Leone (Sawyer and Kelsall 2007; Shaw 2007; Kelsall 2009; Mieth 2013, 2015; Ainley, Friedman, and Mahony 2015). In response to the general feeling that the SL-TRC and the SCSL were distant from the lives of people, some grassroots transitional justice initiatives were also put into place, including, for example, 'Fambul Tok', a programme of community level bonfires modelled in some ways on Rwanda's gacaca courts (Graybill 2010; Fambul Tok International 2011).

In Liberia, by contrast, there has been relatively little transitional justice activity. A Liberian TRC (L-TRC) was created in 2005. Its mandate was to 'promote national peace, security, unity and reconciliation' by investigating more than 20 years of civil conflict in the country and to report on gross human rights violations that occurred in Liberia between January 1979 and 14 October 2003 (Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia 2005). The commission's work came to an end in 2010, yet perhaps in part because sitting president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was placed on a list of persons that should be barred from public office because of her part in the events of the war, the report was never accepted by the government. Another issue was that warlord and past-president Charles Taylor was never held accountable for his wartime crimes within Liberia, and was instead tried and convicted by the SCSL in hearings held in The Hague for crimes committed in Sierra Leone. Liberia hosted reintegration programmes for former soldiers, but the fact that former warlords were able to win elected office in the post-war years points to the reality that many lines of conflict from the war are still quite salient (Bøås and Utas 2014; Pul 2016). The Liberian government published its own plan for the future in 2012, entitled 'Towards a Reconciled, Peaceful, and Prosperous Liberia: A Strategic Roadmap for National Healing, Peacebuilding, and Reconciliation'. It includes language about creating a 'conflict-sensitive education system' (17) but is very light on specifics.

With respect to children and transitional justice, we again see differences between the two national contexts. Sierra Leone was one of the first settings to think seriously about how to address children's concerns and involve them in transitional justice activities (Cook and Heykoop 2010) though there were some, less successful, considerations for children in the Liberia case as well (Sowa 2010). As for connections between transitional

justice and education, Sierra Leone was again a relatively early model. Educational issues such as inequity of educational access were included in the SL-TRC report as drivers of conflict (Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2004a). The SL-TRC also included recommendations for reforming the education system (Paulson 2006). A Child Friendly version of the TRC report was created for primary schools (Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2004b) and another for secondary schools (Sheriff and Bobson-Kamara 2005). Cook and Heykoop (2010, 177) report that in Sierra Leone the child-friendly version of the TRC report was disseminated in two phases. In 2004, 600 copies were provided to children's groups, NGOs, government agencies and the media, and in 2005 an additional 4000 copies were distributed through UNAMSIL to child advocacy groups, educators and civil society. They further report that despite these efforts, only 5 of the 47 children they interviewed in 2007 were aware of the child friendly version (2010, 178). In the case of the senior secondary school version of the TRC report, funded by Germany, Cook and Heykoop report that the number distributed was even smaller. They report that only 200 books were disseminated to secondary schools throughout the country (2010, 178). Obviously, as Cole and Murphy noted, 'materials are not important if they sit on a shelf, if people do not know they exist, if they do not have access to them' (2010, 366).

Although we could not find evidence that Sierra Leone's Ministry of Education has updated the national curricula to include in-depth discussion of the conflict, as recommended in the SL-TRC; we did find that UNICEF in Sierra Leone has assessed how peace education may be introduced into schools (UNICEF 2012) and supported creation of a 'global issues' curriculum that discusses topics such as international humanitarian law (interviews with UNICEF staff, 20 December 2013). That curriculum is focused on international issues such as human rights and highlights the contributions of the UN (including UNAMSIL, UNICEF, and UNHCR) to supporting transitional justice and the contributions of International NGOs (including the Red Cross, Médecins sans Frontières, and World Vision). However, as our findings will show, this curriculum has not been widely implemented, not an unusual fate for such efforts. Beyond the governments' curricula and materials, we were also interested in whether outreach materials created by the transitional justice institutions made it to teachers and schools (Ramírez-Barat 2012; Dugal 2016). The SCSL printed two short booklets: *The Special Court Made Simple* (2011a) and *International Humanitarian Law Made Simple* (2011b). They were primarily used to hand out to students who came to observe the proceedings at the special court in the visitors' gallery (interview with Peter Anderson, former Press Officer for the SCSL, 17 December 2013). Finally, before the outbreak of Ebola in 2014, a portion of the SCSL complex had been dedicated to the creation of a Peace Museum (see Gellman (2015) for a description of her visit to the museum).

The relationship between education and transitional justice in Liberia is less well-developed than in Sierra Leone. Because the L-TRC was not officially accepted, none of its educational recommendations have been implemented. The events of the war are covered in the national curriculum but the coverage is not very deep. The first explicit mention of the conflict is in Grade 6 (Unit 5, Period 5) under the topic 'Current Events and Historical Commemorations'. This section has specific objectives including, 'Pupils will be able to explain the causes and effects of the Liberia civil war and identify means of ending conflict' with activities focused on student discussion around the causes and effects of the Liberian Civil war. Materials cited for this are pupils' textbooks, teachers'

manual, and research materials. No page numbers or specific titles are offered for reference. There is no mention of the conflict in Grade 7 through 11 Social Studies Curriculum. In the Grade 12 curriculum the entire second semester is nominally dedicated to the civil war(s) and post-conflict issues. However, given the high attrition rate in Liberia as well as teachers reporting struggling to keep pace with the requirements of the curriculum, it is quite likely that these topics were rarely reached by the end of the school year. In the history curriculum, the first explicit mention of the First Civil War is in Grade 12 History under the topic 'Liberian History/The First Liberian Civil War (1989–1997)' and 'Liberian History/The Elections Of 1997 and the Taylor Years, 1997–2003'. Materials used for this topic include: *History of West Africa from A.D 1000* (Longman publishers), with secondary texts *Liberian Civics* and *Liberian History Since 1980* (Guannu 2010a, 2010b) and other 'Handouts'. Indeed, all of the mandated textbooks for Liberian civics and history were authored by one man – Joseph Saye Guannu – rather than through a more standard competitive commissioning process, expert committee or textbook market. The lesson objectives are to understand the root causes of the war and factions or groups including their leaders. Curricular guidance suggests that these outcomes are to be achieved through 'critical discussions' and teachers are encouraged to hold discussions with students on their personal experiences during the second civil war. This guidance seems to direct teachers, at least in Grade 12, to discuss the past conflict with their students.

General situation of education in Sierra Leone and Liberia

The education systems of the two countries have broad and deep-rooted problems, more fundamental than whether they are teaching about the recent past or about human rights or citizenship. Schools struggle with over-crowded classrooms, lack of materials, poorly trained teachers, and lack of government support. Important to this discussion of education and TJ, in Sierra Leone and Liberia educational support from the government is so poor that what gets determined at the centre rarely makes it to classrooms. This is true even in Sierra Leone where the transitional justice package has been praised.

There have been numerous efforts to rebuild the educational systems of the two postwar nations. Although, 'rebuild' is probably the wrong word since both countries' education systems were quite poor even before the war. Each country has instituted programmes to encourage universal primary education, and have received funding from the World Bank, the African Development Bank, UNICEF, and other bilateral and multilateral donors for educational reform and strengthening. Each has written plans to improve the education sector in the future (Government of Liberia 2012; Government of Sierra Leone 2013). Development partners have also weighed in with recommendations (Wang 2007; UNICEF 2012; Williams 2014; Talbot and Taylor 2015), including recent support for the introduction of large scale public private partnerships to deliver schooling in Liberia. Despite all this, Matsumoto, assessing education in post-conflict Sierra Leone, concludes that 'the role of education in Sierra Leone has not been reformed fundamentally in society since the conflict' (2011; 119).

Laura Quaynor's 2015 study of citizenship education in post-conflict Liberia included interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations. She describes very poorly resourced schools and pedagogy of 'call and response' (291). She found that 'teachers specifically discussed the fear that a lack of either knowledge or patriotism could be responsible for

conflict' (289) and concluded 'the multi-site study highlights that messages conveyed in schools about citizenship can vary widely, although teachers are nominally using the same curriculum' (294).

There is constant concern in both countries about the lack of qualified teachers. Banya reports that in Sierra Leone:

> Many graduates of teacher training institutions do not end up in schools and a significant number of those who do end up in the classroom stay in the teaching profession for less than four years. Due to the poor conditions of service and working conditions in schools for teachers, young qualified and trained teachers are always leaving the profession … . Additionally, many teachers who graduate from institutions in the capital and district head-quarter towns do not return to their home areas to take up employment. The consequence of this migration is that rural areas are deprived of trained and qualified teachers. (2015, 441)

Furthermore, there is low capacity to monitor what is actually going on in schools and classrooms across the country. The best schools are concentrated in the capital cities, and yet in each case the conflicts started in rural settings. According to the Education Policy and Data Center (EPDC 2014a), based on 2010 data, in Sierra Leone 29% of secondary school-aged children (12–17) were out of school (EPDC 2014b). Based on 2007 data, in Liberia 25% of secondary school-aged children were out of school (EPDC 2014a). In each country, only 5% of young people, ages 15–24, had completed secondary school (EPDC 2014b).

Availability of materials

Both countries' education systems operate with a relative lack of textbooks. Although certain books are approved by government and distributed to schools nationwide, often the books end up locked away in a cupboard or find their way to the open market rather than staying in schools. Figure 1 illustrates the informal distribution of textbooks in Liberia.

Many teachers do not have access to the approved textbooks, let alone do their students. During fieldwork, we were able to purchase secondary school civics and history texts for Sierra Leone (Alie 2012) and Liberia (Guannu 2010a, 2010b), sometimes stamped 'Property of the Government. Not for resale'. In the absence of official textbooks or other curricular materials, children learn about the past from other media, including sensationalist films highlighting the brutal violence of war as entertainment. Figure 2 shows a poster advertising a Sierra Leone-made film about the 6 January 1999 rebel attack of Freetown.

Findings from interviews with secondary school teachers

In response to the question of whether the teachers we interviewed teach about the war in their classrooms, the most common response was that they teach what is on the syllabus, and the war is not adequately covered in the syllabus. As in many places, students are focused on passing high stakes tests – in Sierra Leone, the West African Examinations Council's (WAEC's) Basic Education Certificate Examination at the end of Junior Secondary School and the West African Senior School Certificate Examination at the end of Senior Secondary School, and in Liberia WAEC's Liberia Junior High School Certificate Examination and Senior High School Certificate Examination – that will determine whether

Figure 1. Schoolbooks for sale in the 'Red Light' district of Monrovia.

they will proceed to the next level of education. If a topic is not likely to be on the test, teachers do not spend time on it. Furthermore, often there is not time in the term to get all the way to the present, and since the war is recent history it may not get included, a common instructional challenge beyond West Africa (see Worden and Smith 2017). A teacher from Ahmadiyya Secondary School in Freetown said,

> You know we are dealing with examination classes and our goal really is to get results. If we teach them, we want them to pass. Therefore, the things that are highlighted or we have on the syllabus are what we teach. We don't go outside that one because we don't want to teach them something that is not in the syllabus.

A Sierra Leonean teacher based in Bo explained,

> I do not teach conflict in Sierra Leone specifically. But there are some topics in government and history that are conflict related. For instance, topics such as colonialism, trade wars in the 19th century, intertribal wars, constitutional development, the Mane invasion in Sierra Leone, military intervention in politics, problems of nation building in Africa, etc. In presenting content materials in such areas, reference could definitely be made to the rebel war for comparative analysis. There is no area where provision has been made in the syllabus to teach that specifically.

However, teachers sometimes bring up the events of the war when teaching other subjects. Another secondary school teacher in Freetown said,

> I only talk about the war in Sierra Leone in related subjects. For example, when teaching issues that perhaps cover something like migration, you want to talk about migration and you want to discuss some reasons why people migrate those are the instances I mention the war.

Figure 2. Posters in Freetown advertising a film about key events in the war.

The same teacher continued, 'But actually discussing war as a subject is very difficult – except in tertiary institutions, they deal with peace and conflict studies. These are areas they are trained for but for [secondary] schools it is not common.'

According to the teachers interviewed, the two national curricula do mention the war briefly, yet where it is mentioned it is presented simply as a timeline of coups and events. A Liberian teacher told me,

> The national curriculum addresses the war. It tells you the topics you should teach about. But the curriculum is limited. For example, the curriculum says to talk about the presidents and what they did. But the students should do more.

Interestingly, several of the teachers say that they bring in examples from their own lives when appropriate. One said

… plenty of us went out of this country and lived as refugees in other countries, alright? And then what we experienced and all the rest … because our syllabus calls for the problems of refugees, solutions and causes … we do act on those things. Or maybe I have experience of the Sierra Leone war, you understand? I was here until the end of the war so I have experience … so I teach from my experience.

These experiences are sometimes useful in teaching other subjects beyond civics or history. An agriculture teacher said, 'Well sometimes when I am teaching and if I come across, you know, a certain subject area, I will make mention of the war, you know, how the war affected people on the food,' meaning that he will discuss food security issues, or how local foodways were affected by conflict (Shepler 2011).

Another teacher in Freetown talked about how he brings the war into his business classroom:

Well if I am teaching a particular topic like sole proprietorship, which is called one-man business, I bring up ideas like during the war people were saving money and were not able to do business because of the war. For example, the 'Fullah man'[4] is an example of a one-man business, who had opened a shop, well established with everything going on well, taking care of his family from the proceeds of the shop. The war broke out and ravaged everything. So because he did not save or did not have access to any banking basically the business closes.

A teacher from Liberia said,

I don't make [the war] a topic, but I inject it into the lessons. For example, when talking about population, government, human rights, especially about women's and children's rights. In population, I tell the students the population would have grown more if not for the war. That's why the population is what it is today.

We also found one example of a grade seven reader used in an English language course in Sierra Leone that relates the story of a war-affected girl whose experience as a refugee makes her want to grow up to be a doctor, a meagre indication that some educational materials with reference to conflict are in use in classrooms (see Figure 3).

After asking whether they ever taught about or mentioned the war in their classrooms, the next question was whether they thought the war *should* be taught in schools. Most thought it should be taught, to keep war from happening again.

So they will know war is not good. I don't want someone to fool them to go back to war. If you go to war, your life will be damaged. (Liberian teacher)

It is better to teach it and then teach the children about the lessons learned about the conflict to avoid future reoccurrence of the conflict … Through that they will avoid future conflict … if you tell a child about the war, the causes of war or maybe its effects, or teach him or her, his or her responsibility to his or her country they will not do the mistakes that bring war like the one we have experienced. (Sierra Leonean teacher)

It is necessary because it helps them to know the effect of those conflicts. Whether they are good or bad. And when they know – and see the way in which this conflict went, the destruction it caused on the country, socially, politically or even economically – it will help them to learn and maybe to avoid this kind of conflict in future, especially conflicts that are disastrous to the country. So therefore they need to know about it. (Sierra Leonean teacher)
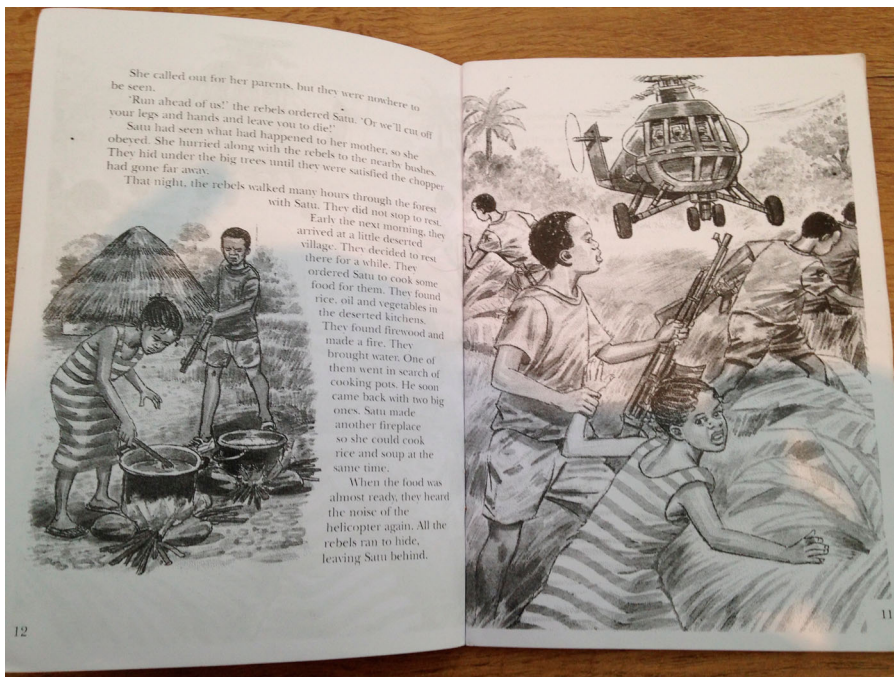
Figure 3. A page from 'Satu's Journey' – a Grade Seven reader used in Sierra Leone (Momoh 2003).

> I am looking more at two aspects they should really teach about conflict. One, we are talking about [good] governance. Then two, in relation to governance, we are talking about the resources of the country, because these two things can create war. (Sierra Leonean teacher)

These teacher responses suggested different ways of think about the question of why to teach about the war. Some teachers thought it would be important for students to be ready, in case of another outbreak of war. One Liberian teacher thought that teaching about the war would 'detraumatise people'. Interestingly, a handful of respondents thought that instead of being included in social studies or history, the topic should be covered in religious education. A Sierra Leonean teacher said,

> Well under Religious and Moral Education, we have 'Evils of War' … reasons for war in a country. We put it in such a way like why wars are fought. When there is war, what are its effects, effects of war. We teach these things.

In contrast to much of the larger transitional justice discourse, these teachers saw transitional justice as a spiritual rather than political issue.

A final question we posed asked whether there was anything they thought should *not* be taught about the wars. Several suggested that they should omit the details of suffering. A Sierra Leonean teacher said that was ' … to prevent the psychological effect on the children, because some of them actually, if they hear about some bad things that happened during the war, it will really affect them and their thoughts'. Another said, 'if you teach exactly the bitterness of the war, then that will spoil the children's mind'. Another common suggestion was to not give specifics of who killed whom, or it would lead to revenge. One Sierra Leonean teacher said, 'Some of [the students] come from the areas

where the torture happened, they might want to revenge. We should take the hard parts out.'

Of course, it is not unusual to want to shield children from the worst atrocities of war, but a few of the responses were surprising, suggesting that children would want to copy any bad behaviours they were told about in class, such as taking drugs or even sexual assault. One Sierra Leonean teacher said, 'But you have to be careful in talking about drugs because some may want … children are very curious. They may want to really know how these drugs they are taught of have effect on them.' A Liberian teacher said, 'Don't teach little children about sexual assault. Some will want to try rape.' Along the same lines, one Sierra Leonean teacher advised against teaching about the Demobilisation, Disarmament, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes, in which ex-combatants were offered reintegration allowances for turning in their guns and leaving the fighting. He said,

> don't teach about DDR … when that individual is paid for the weapon. I think perhaps the lesson will make the children develop a bad habit in future, and imagine that if I need money I will take a gun and get paid.

In summary, as we see among teachers in a number of post-conflict contexts, most teachers did not have time to teach about the complexity of the past conflicts because they were too busy teaching what was on the government syllabi in order to prepare students for their high stakes tests. However, they thought it was a good idea for students to learn about the past wars so as to prevent future armed conflicts, also a dominant transitional justice trope. Nevertheless, they felt there were certain things that should not be included, mainly specific details of atrocities committed or things that students were likely to be curious about and want to try themselves. These views were expressed as personal and professional opinions, and did not reflect national policies or directives, which it appeared from conversations with teachers, were most concerned with testing, the official curriculum, and formal dimensions of authority within the school system. Policies to promote the peacebuilding potential of education were not widely mentioned and did not seem to be a reference for teachers.

We also asked about whether the teachers had access to any of the materials created by the various transitional justice institutions. In both countries, teachers had generally heard of their TRC, but not seen the report or the associated curricular materials. When asked if he knew about the TRC, one Sierra Leonean teacher said, 'Yes, but I haven't read their report. I haven't seen the secondary school version; it wasn't made available to the schools. Nor the child friendly version for primary schools.'

Most schools have to carry on with very little state support for books (let alone the even greater problem of unpaid teacher salaries). It is common for teachers to write their own 'pamphlets' for sale to students, often taking the place of textbooks. A Liberian teacher told us, 'I do my research through the pamphlets and so on [written by lecturers and teachers]. We created it on our own. I wrote about destruction, displacement, etc. Rape. I used my own experiences. I share it with colleagues.' A Sierra Leonean teacher reported, 'Well, I have written a small pamphlet which I use to teach about Social Studies. The very integral part deals with the conflict in Sierra Leone from 1991 up to 2002.' We were not able to collect any of these teacher-created pamphlets about the wars, but pamphlets like these are often of poor quality, copied and recopied perhaps from a teacher's handwritten notes during a college lecture. In addition to access to the government prescribed

textbooks, teachers asked for more books, maps, as well as pictures or posters they could use in the classroom. Most schools have no reliable electricity and no computer or internet service, so videos or websites would not be easy to use in the classroom; though one teacher requested video clips, dramas, documentaries, and so on.

Comparing teaching about the war in Sierra Leone and Liberia

The two wars are similar in many ways, and the two school systems are similarly poorly resourced. Although the two transitional justice projects are quite different – with Sierra Leone home to a full range of initiatives and Liberian home to almost none – as we have seen, the impact of transitional justice on the education systems is not that pronounced in either case. But there were some differences in the way teachers said they taught about the war, differences that we believe have more to do with the general level of peace in the two countries than the effect of any curricular programming.

Surprisingly, it is rare for scholars to comment on the differences between the two post-conflict contexts (though see von Dyck 2016 and Mitton 2015 for exceptions). Having spent a number of years in Sierra Leone and West Africa, Shepler's sense of the two countries is that Sierra Leone is more reconciled than Liberia. Sierra Leoneans have seen the horrors of war and feel that they achieved nothing from it. Yes, many of the same issues exist now that existed before the war (corruption, poverty, and ethnically dominated politics), yet they generally agree that war will not successfully address those issues. Perhaps it is because the rebellious parties were so soundly defeated at the end of the war, and the political landscape after the war was almost unchanged from the time before the war, with the same ethnic cleavages and associated political parties. Furthermore, even before the various transitional justice initiatives, there was, for the most part, one shared narrative about the war and its outcome and this was not disrupted by the TRC. There are partisan quibbles about, for example, how the civil defence forces were treated by the SCSL, but no one is publicly lobbying for a return to violence.

In Liberia, on the other hand, the conflict drivers appear to be in place still, as well as some of the conflict actors. A 2016 report by Catholic Relief Services on the state of peace, reconciliation, and conflict in Liberia (Pul 2016) finds 'the peace is fragile and volatile'. Although Charles Taylor is in prison for his war crimes in Sierra Leone, some people still call for his return, especially in his former capital city, Gbarnga. By comparison, one never hears people calling for the return of the Revolutionary United Front, Sierra Leone's now defunct rebel faction. Interviews conducted in both Monrovia and Gbarnga highlighted the resistance to a unified national narrative about the conflict. As a result, teaching about the war in Gbarnga is more politicised. A Gbarnga teacher told me,

> In government [class], I say our country shouldn't be like this, but it's the type of government we've had since independence, not run by indigenous Liberians. That's the problem, the treatment by the freed slaves. They took all the resources, etc. This made the indigenous Liberians to feel bad. There was trouble even before the war.

Indeed, cleavages between the indigenous and the so-called Americo-Liberians[5] were at the heart of the war, still remain today, and were one of the reasons the L-TRC report was not accepted in Liberia.[6]

We know that in some contexts teachers undercut centralised post-war narratives, especially when conflict is still bubbling under the surface (Bellino 2014; Worden 2014). Perhaps the fact that Liberian teachers truthfully represent the unsettled politics of their country in their classrooms is a good thing, but it does mean that more than the Sierra Leonean teachers, they may need assistance in teaching their contentious history (and present) in ways that encourage peaceful rather than violent political action. There appears to be a general but not universal desire to teach about the war in the two countries. But teachers had strong and differing opinions about how best to do that. The lack of materials, the importance of hewing to the curriculum and preparing for examinations, the apparent lack of training in the teaching of conflict and sensitive topics, differences in individual approaches to teaching about the conflict, and differences in Liberia about the desirability of the end of the war make it difficult to see how a comprehensive transitional justice curriculum could be implemented under current conditions. Still, there is interest if not consensus.

An example from non-formal education

The belief that transitional justice effects can be achieved in classrooms requires a belief that classrooms are (or should be) spaces for discussion of difficult topics. And yet, we would argue, in Sierra Leone and Liberia, that is not the model of schooling on offer. Classrooms are places for rote learning, and for subjects determined originally by the needs of colonialism, and even now for subjects that seem far from lived reality. Interestingly, this does not mean that teachers cannot talk about difficult topics outside of school. Indeed, they are often respected in their communities for being among the most educated, and may be called on to explain topics from 'outside', or be involved in resolving conflicts in the community. But classrooms are still primarily understood as places for memorisation, and the sites of Western style education (Shepler 2014; Bolten 2015).

To illustrate the potential for education (if not schools) in promoting TJ, we briefly describe the Fambul Tok school programme, an alternate model of teaching young people about the past conflict in Sierra Leone. Fambul Tok is a community-based reconciliation organisation founded by Libby Hoffman and John Caulker, a human rights activist and member of the Sierra Leone TRC Working Group. It has sponsored reconciliation bonfires across five districts in Sierra Leone to help foster grassroots reconciliation (Fambul Tok 2011). Their work is now well-known and much discussed, especially as a model of bottom-up transitional justice (see Graybill 2010; Park 2010; Iliff 2012; Lahai and Ware 2013). They recently began a small programme, the School Oral History Bonfire. In this programme, they select two young teachers from a secondary school and provide them with conflict resolution training. The teachers start a 'Peace Club' in the school and organise a bonfire to be held after school hours on the school grounds. There is food, dancing, and music early in the evening. As the fire turns to embers, several elders from the community tell the assembled young people the history of the conflict in their town. They may point to particular locations where specific events occurred. They may mention people that the youth know. The idea of the programme is to allow for intergenerational learning about the events of the conflict in a place-specific way, all under the supervision of trained facilitators who try to assure that the resulting discussion promotes reconciliation. Although the bonfire takes place on the school grounds, it does not take place during

school hours, and is fully extra-curricular. Shepler was lucky[7] to interview two of the teachers who had been trained to lead a School Oral History Bonfire at their school and spoke to some of the students who had participated. We do not have enough data to assess adequately the model, and Fambul Tok has only begun to implement it. It is presented as a possible alternative to peace education in regular classrooms, an alternative that addresses some of the concerns about the mismatch between expectations of formal schooling and spaces where people – teachers and students – can discuss the difficult events of the past in an honest and constructive way.

Conclusions

The international community should not be too self-congratulatory about the impact of various TJ-related education programmes in Liberia and Sierra Leone since clearly the educational materials produced by the truth commissions and the SCSL are not making it into classrooms (e.g. Paulson 2006). This research goes a step further and asks what teachers think should or could be done in classrooms. It is probably not surprising that teachers across Sierra Leone and Liberia are teaching different things about the war. Laura Quaynor's (2015) findings about Liberian civic education teachers seem aligned with observations in both countries: that teachers were concerned about the younger generation becoming involved in conflict if not properly instructed, but also that despite their claims that they were teaching to the syllabus, the fact that they often did not have access to it, or to textbooks, meant that teachers seemed to be teaching whatever they thought best, sometimes not even aware of what was covered in the formal curriculum. A survey of teachers in Cote d'Ivoire yielded similar results, namely while most teachers have shied away from addressing their country's conflict history in class, it also appeared that many of the teachers were actually in favour of breaking this culture of silence (Kuppens and Langer 2016). This research suggests that teachers do think they should be teaching about the wars (with some particular caveats), but that they need help with what and how to teach these often-difficult topics, and they need materials and other resources to help them do so.

It makes sense to focus analytical energy on teachers. They have a lot of responsibility and very little oversight or assistance in the teaching of content. Though teachers indicate that examinations play an important guiding role in suggesting *what* to teach, they provide little guidance to teachers on *how*. Given teachers' responses to our questions, an important conclusion for those interested in using schools as instruments of transitional justice would be the necessity of working *with* teachers, and building on their existing knowledge and practices. With the scarcity of instructional materials we observed, we conclude that it does very little good to produce a textbook or curriculum that teachers will not have access to or know how to use. Although the electricity and internet infrastructure is weak, many large towns have internet cafes where teachers could download materials if they were made available on a government-sponsored website designed especially for poor internet capability.

We have made a case for supporting teachers to engage in bottom-up transitional justice, but we must be careful not to saddle them with too much extra work. Horner et al. (2015) note that teachers 'are required to promote understanding and engagement with differences, nurture the ideas of human rights, address collective/historical memories

and emphasise humanistic values in their lessons and actions' (65–66). The question of whether it is fair or appropriate to ask teachers to do all this, especially when working under very difficult conditions and when, culturally, school may not be the place for difficult discussions has been debated (Cole 2007; Murphy and Gallagher 2009; Cole and Murphy 2010; Weldon 2010). Given teachers' divergent views of their responsibilities to education authorities, to the communities they serve and the children they teach, those seeking to utilise schools for transitional justice need to understand the local meaning and actual functioning of schooling in these contexts. Teachers did not uniformly see schools as a place for transitional justice. We may need to look to other places where those discussions can happen, for example, informal education settings (like the Fambul Tok Oral History Bonfires described above) or other gatherings of youth.

In a situation where the Liberian government has admitted to the failures of its schools and is moving towards privatising their whole education system (Ghouri 2016; Hares and Sandefur 2016), 'peace education' can be seen as an unnecessary luxury. This taps into larger debates about reconciliation and the value of forgetting instead of remembering in these contexts (Gellman 2015; Mieth 2015). Where is the right place, what is the right time, for such memory projects? Why do we assume schools are the place for those difficult political ideas? Schools in Sierra Leone and Liberia have been places for the imposition of colonial rule, first, and imposition of a state now. In some small villages, the school may be the only state institution present. To make schools places for reconciliation, we would have to remake schools into different kinds of institutions. We too often think of them as machines for knowledge (and attitude and value) transfer, but we have to think about the broader social context (in this case, Sierra Leone is reconciled and Liberia is not) but also about the local meaning of school itself. Perhaps the dissonance between what schools represent and the need for reconciliation may be just too much without a revolution in the institution of education.

Notes

1. A pseudonym.
2. One of the signal phenomena of the Sierra Leone civil war were 'sobels': soldiers by day and rebels by night.
3. For example, Foday Sankoh, the head of the main rebel group the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), died in custody before he could be tried.
4. 'Fullah' is an ethnic group present in Sierra Leone and Liberia. They are known for operating small shops.
5. Descendants of the resettled slaves from America who held political power in Liberia from its founding until the coup of Samuel Doe in 1980.
6. The report named sitting president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and other prominent Americo-Liberians as early financial backers of Taylor's rebellion.
7. 'Lucky' because interviewing these teachers was not part of the research design. Rather, Shepler met and interviewed them while conducting contracted evaluation work for Fambul Tok.

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