

# **‘History and hysteria’: Peru’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission and conflict in the national curriculum**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Does the existence of a truth commission report assist in creating national curriculum about recent violent conflict? If a truth commission report does become educational material, what version of its version is presented to educators and students? Do truth commissions, by virtue of being state sanctioned, offer a less contested and politicized route towards a curriculum about recent conflict? This essay draws upon a recent ‘textbook controversy’ in Peru to explore these questions. The textbook used Peru’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission as the source for several pages that present the country’s recent violent conflict to students. These pages generated serious political controversy that was widely covered in national media. The essay argues that the ‘version of the truth commission’s version’ that was filtered into the textbook relied heavily upon stereotype, racist trope and tautological logic. The structural causes of conflict that the truth commission highlighted do not come through in the national curriculum version. Furthermore, the essay argues that rather than ease contestation, the use of the truth commission version as source contributed to a recasting of politicized efforts to both undermine the truth commission and avoid teaching about the recent conflict.

## **Introduction**

The difficulty and importance of making decisions about teaching history cannot be overemphasized.

(Freedman et. al., 2004, p.248)

Freedman and colleagues, involved in developing history curriculum in Rwanda post-genocide, found that in the post-conflict context the creation of such a curriculum “reflects in microcosm the forces that drove the country’s conflict” (2008, p.684). They go on to argue that political manipulation, ethnic stereotyping, economic competition and the power of collective memory are all powerful factors that influence the development of post-conflict history curriculum (ibid).

Indeed, the post-conflict context notwithstanding, the development of history curriculum – the story a nation decides to tell its young people about their (and its) past – is hardly free from these and other forces (see for example Hobsbawm, 1997; Apple 2004). Education, after all, is “a site of conflict about the kind of knowledge that is and should be taught, about whose knowledge is ‘official’ and about who has the right to decide both what is to be taught and how teaching and learning are to be evaluated” (Apple, 2004, p. xii). As emerging research demonstrates, the development of curriculum about a recent conflict adds further complexity and challenge to what is already a contested and political process. Cole and Barsalou (2006, p. 9) point out, “[t]he revision of history textbook content is inextricably linked to larger political debates about which narratives of history are *true* (emphasis added).”

What then is the role of a *truth* commission within post-conflict curriculum development and reform? For Hayner “the most straightforward objective of a truth commission is sanctioned fact-finding: to establish an accurate record of a country’s past, clarify uncertain events, and lift the lid of silence and denial for a contentious and painful period of history” (2002, p.24). Does a truth commission, therefore, with its goal to provide an ‘official version’ enter into another realm of ‘official’ version, the national curriculum? Indeed, if a truth commission report does become educational material, what version of its version is presented to educators and students? Do truth commissions, by virtue of being state sanctioned, offer a less contested and politicized route towards a curriculum about recent conflict? If so, does the development of truth commission inspired history curriculum offer a ‘best practice’ for educational policymakers seeking to review curriculum post-conflict?

This essay explores an episode of truth commission entry into national curriculum in Peru. The story detailed here - aptly described by one Peruvian journalist as one of ‘history and hysteria’ (*Libros: Historia e histeria*, 2008) - demonstrates that the presence of an ‘official version’ of conflict does not necessarily offer an easy way out of the contested terrain of narrating the recent past for a nation’s young people. Indeed, the version of Peru’s CVR (*Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación* / Truth and Reconciliation Commission) that was repeated in the national secondary textbook discussed herein relies more on stereotype, racist trope and tautological logic than it does on an exploration of the structural causes of Peru’s recent conflict. Furthermore, CVR based curriculum does not appear to evade the politics of curriculum reform but instead offers a forum for the reiteration and reformulation of interests that aim to limit, oversee or prevent teaching about the violent past. In order to make these arguments, the essay draws upon qualitative research conducted in Peru by the author over a six-month period in 2008.

### *‘Apology for terrorism in our secondary schools’?*

From August to October 2008, the topic of the CVR in curriculum became the focus of an intense and controversial media debate. According one interview respondent the controversy was by far the most covered educational issue in the last several decades. Media attention sparked when a Congresswoman from Peru’s ruling APRA party, Mercedes Cabanillas<sup>1</sup>, – herself an ex-Minister of Education from current President Alan Garcia’s earlier (1985-1990) administration - publicly denounced a Ministry of Education approved Social Sciences textbook. Speaking on national television, Cabanillas alleged that the textbook contained an ‘apology for terrorism’ and ‘ideological contraband’ (*Textos escolares con supuesta apologia al terrorismo causan malestar en Peru*, 2008).

A Colombian publishing house, Editorial Norma, who had won a 2007 tender from the Peruvian Ministry of Education, published the textbook at the centre of the controversy. The tender was based upon the syllabus for secondary level social sciences included in

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing (June, 2009) Mercedes Cabanillas is Peruvian Minister of the Interior.

the 2006 National Curriculum Design (*Diseño Curricular Nacional* (DCN)) which included limited bullet points related to Peru's recent conflict.

Despite their inclusion in the DCN, the few bullet points that do mention Peru's recent conflict were hardly referred to by the various actors from the Ministry of Education who responded to Cabanillas' denouncement. Rather than defending or justifying the textbook content, Ministry officials tended to either assure the public that the Ministry would review the textbook or to deny personal responsibility for textbook content. At no point during the controversy did the Ministry of Education issue a statement supporting the idea of teaching about Peru's recent conflict within the national curriculum. Indeed, as the media controversy burgeoned, it was actors outside the Ministry who defended the textbook and they did so by insisting that its content was based upon the final report of the CVR. Debate then shifted to be as much about CVR legitimacy as it was about educational content and policymaking.

Indeed, undermining the CVR may have been part of the Congresswoman's intentions. Her initial cry of 'apology for terrorism' was conveniently delivered in the same week as CVR actors were publicly celebrating the CVR's fifth anniversary. As Theidon (forthcoming) notes, certain political actors, including APRA members, have often used the phrase 'apology for terrorism' to describe the work of CVR. The five-year anniversary of the CVR was perhaps an apt moment for APRA to again attempt to delegitimize the CVR. Since the CVR does attribute responsibility for particular human rights violations to Garcia's earlier administration, it is unsurprising that the current government is not keen to respond to CVR recommendations or to draw attention to its findings. On this occasion, therefore, national curriculum became the avenue for a broader anti-CVR agenda. Cabanillas used what Theidon (forthcoming) argues is a common APRA strategy to undermine 'legitimate political claims' by linking them with terrorism. In this case, the denouncement intends not only to discredit the CVR, but also to derail the entry of the CVR's version of conflict – and, in fact, of any discussion of Peru's recent conflict – into the national narrative.

Keeping in mind the political agenda behind the denouncement, it is important to explore the actual content of the textbook that so offended Mercedes Cabanillas. Called into question were about a dozen pages within the 262-page textbook. According to the Congresswoman, these pages presented the conflict from a pro-*Sendero Luminoso*<sup>2</sup> lens, disrespected the armed forces and presented factual error. The textbook includes mention of Garcia's first government, briefly outlining the economic crisis it stimulated as well as military repression under Garcia, including the 1986 Fronton prison massacre. As one commentator noted, "...the text can be taken as unfriendly towards APRA, but the information provided does not lie" (ibid.).

What, then, does the information provided in the text do? What 'version of the CVR's version' has been translated into the textbooks distributed to Peru's senior secondary students? The explanation of conflict that emerges from the textbook is akin to the

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<sup>2</sup> *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path) was the principal armed group that confronted state forces during Peru's conflict of the 1980s and 1990s.

'narrowing of possibilities' that Oglesby observes in education resources dealing with conflict in Guatemala (2007, p. 91). Oglesby notes that rather than engage in the specific and complex stories that characterised most Guatemalans' experiences of that country's armed conflict, materials tended to present conflict as either "limited to two opposing armed groups or as so broad to be meaningless" (ibid.) For Oglesby, in explaining conflict as either a discrete struggle between two distinct and bounded entities or as a generalized 'culture of violence,' such materials obscured the politics, agency and decision-making processes that characterized the conflict and that members of armed groups, sympathisers and civilians alike negotiated. As in Guatemala, the Peruvian textbook presents a conflict in which "[s]tate violence is recognized but ultimately reified, as its targets are drained of their identities as historical protagonists" (ibid, p. 91-2).

Oglesby argues further that workbooks produced based on the Guatemalan truth commission perpetrated a "powerful trope persisting to this day in Guatemala" namely that "Mayan Indians were passive victims of violence, caught between two armies or manipulated by outsiders" (ibid, p. 91). A similar sense of 'innocent victimhood' (Theidon, forthcoming) among rural communities and indigenous populations most affected by violence during Peru's conflict does come through in the CVR final report and certainly in the version of it that filter into the textbook. Thus the common popular discourse that often emerges from truth commissions "two distinct homogenous groups, imagined as mutually exclusive: victims and perpetrators," (ibid.) represented in Latin America as *entre dos fuegos* (between two fires), is certainly present in the explanation of conflict presented to Peru's young people in the *Editorial Norma* textbook. Seductive in its simplicity, the *dos fuegos* discourse that does appear within the CVR becomes central to the version of the CVR filtered into the textbook. Furthermore, in the textbook, one of the *fuegos* presented – the Peruvian military and police forces – becomes an understandable, and indeed necessary, one, guilty only of some 'bad results' in the pursuit of its 'objectives' to 'resolve the situation.' The CVR's insistence that all Peruvians bear a share of responsibility for the conflict of the 1980s and 1990s is not found within the pages of the *Editorial Norma* textbook.

Response to the very narrow version of the CVR's version presented within the textbooks, however, was never an aspect of the 'the textbook controversy'. The Peruvian historian who had been contracted to produce parts of the textbook ensured the public that, where the textbook referred to Peru's recent conflict, the content was based entirely upon the work of the CVR. He explained that:

The parts of the book that deal with the theme of violence are based on the Final Report of the CVR, an official document. There are sections that mention human rights abuses because this happened.  
(*'Libros: Historia e histeria'*, 2008)

The former CVR President also joined the debate, stating that:

Our work was official, supported by the government of then-President Alejandro Toledo, therefore the CVR is a state source.  
(*'Consultan si hay apologia al terror en texto escolar'*, 2008)

Here the issues of truth commission legitimacy and longevity as government changes is illustrated in educational terms, which of course have educational consequences. In this case the consequences of a reliance on the CVR (albeit on a much narrowed version of it) as the only source for educational content about the recent conflict, along with the lack of articulated conviction within the Ministry of Education to teach about the conflict, enable not just a political opportunity to undermine the CVR but to undermine the entire educational project of teaching about the recent conflict.

### **The ‘official version’ and national curriculum post-conflict**

The textbook controversy related herein offers an important glimpse into the complexities of post-conflict educational reform in Peru and of the murky and politicized terrain that must contextualize any attempt to understand the degree to which Peru’s conflict is (or is not), acknowledged, narrated and learned about. The *Editorial Norma* controversy enables a familiar Garcia government approach to dealing with the CVR, namely to attempt to delegitimize it. It further enabled APRA to make a political connection between educational content about the recent conflict and a ‘rekindling of terrorism’ in order to try to put a halt to, or at least reign in, re-write and control, learning about the recent past. The Commission that eventually evaluated the *Editorial Norma* textbooks found them to be free from ‘apology for terrorism’ and ‘ideological terrorism’ and did not recommend their recall from Peruvian public schools. While this limited the impact of Cabanillas’ denouncement, it likely did little to quell the political intentions behind it.

Indeed, the textbook controversy seems offer a demonstration of the observation by Freedman and colleagues that:

The development of a history curriculum in a postconflict country reflects in microcosm the forces that drove the country’s conflict. Political manipulation, ethnic stereotyping and rivalries, economic competition for scarce resources, and the power of collective memory influence how a history curriculum develops in the aftermath of conflict. (Freedman et. al, 2008, p.684)

The idea of teaching about recent conflict within the national curriculum has not been appealing to, or prioritised by, post-conflict administrations in Peru. The discomfort with how to present or narrate conflict (and its actors) in national curriculum extends well beyond educational policymakers within the Ministry of Education, deep into other sectors of the state who have objected strongly not just to CVR content in the curriculum but more generally to the idea of teaching about the recent violent past.

The controversy explored here illuminates several subtleties and complications of the seemingly straightforward ‘best practice’ logic of including truth commission versions in national curriculum. Firstly the entry of the CVR version into educational arenas has been neither straightforward nor apolitical. Indeed, many of the pervasive and divisive stereotypes that the CVR identified as feeding into conflict in Peru are repeated in the narrowed ‘two fires’ version of the CVR that is presented in the textbook. Secondly, even this particular and narrowed version of the ‘official version’ met with substantial political objections from sectors *within* the state that attempted to influence, if not

overrule Ministry of Education authority over national curriculum. Indeed the hysteria generated by textbook controversy explored herein appears to suggest that, truth commission version or not, the development of curriculum about recent conflict remains itself “a site of conflict” (Apple, 2004, p.xii).

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