

Transitional justice: Developing the ability of secondary school students in Poland to resolve moral dilemmas concerning intergroup conflict and harms

Injustice, conflict and harm are inherent in human relationships. They usually affect individuals but sometimes involve entire social groups. The atrocities of World War II, including the horrors of the concentration camps and the bombarding of defenceless people in Japan with the atom bomb, marked the history of the 20th century, besides the genocide in Rwanda, racial segregation in the Republic of South Africa and the bloody resolution of political and religious disputes in Northern Ireland. These are just a few examples of the only too numerous such happenings during the history of all societies.

Overcoming the effects of such a traumatic experience seems impossible. On the one hand, the perpetrators of evil should take responsibility for the harm they have caused and, on the other, the victims must choose to cooperate with the perpetrators in building a just and peaceful social life. Paradoxically, the pursuit of this goal cannot be abandoned for the sake of future generations. In the history of societies marked by injustice and harm, efforts have been made to overcome suffering and division. This is described by the concept of transitional justice, developed during the Nuremberg trials. These efforts were successful, but numerous mistakes were also made that deepened the existing divisions and caused suffering – this time, for those close to the perpetrators, who were not at all responsible for the evil that the perpetrators had committed.

Our research relates to the possibility of using the concept of transitional justice and examples of its implementation (with their successes and failures) in contemporary school education, to develop in students the ability to resolve moral dilemmas involving conflicts and group harms, irrespective of whether such phenomena are currently occurring on a large scale in a given society. In essence, it is a question of how to develop in young minds the ability to make prudent decisions in highly complex situations, in which solutions that are just from the viewpoint of the victims and perpetrators (retributive justice) become a source of suffering for others who suffer the consequences of the solutions (and come into conflict with restorative and transitional justice). It is also a question of how to make mature individuals see all aspects of the decisions made in a context of conflict and harm involving entire social groups and take responsibility for shaping cooperative and peaceful social relations. Furthermore, how to develop the ability to potentially forgive, so that this decision does not become an expression of leniency towards the perpetrators and acquiescence to evil but simultaneously to make such a decision as lack of it would be perceived as disguised revenge, deepening conflicts and divisions.

The project consists of three parts. In the first part, we intend to examine the content of core curricula and selected school programmes and textbooks to ascertain whether they contain issues relevant to the concept of transitional justice and how they are presented. This concept itself is not directly referred to in these materials, but examples of large-scale conflict and injustice are discussed, as well as issues of human rights, justice, punishment, forgiveness and accountability. In the second part of the project, we will first undertake a study of secondary school students' understanding of these issues, followed by a students' participation, through workshops, to construct an educational programme that develops an understanding of large-scale situations of conflict and injustice and the ability to seek actions and solutions to moral dilemmas that fit the concept of transitional justice. In the third part of the project, our proposed educational programme will be implemented to several classes in secondary schools in Poland. Before and after the start of the project, through individual interviews with students, we will explore their resolution of moral dilemmas concerning decisions made in the context of conflict and harm, involving the whole social group. In this way, we intend to test how, due to the influence of the programme we construct, students' thinking about decisions made in a complex situation changes and how the solution to a practical dilemma will shape social relations in the future.

The specificity of the project is the use of the concept of transitional justice in education implemented in a context free of large-scale injustice and harm. We would first like to identify how recourse to this concept can shape the cognitive foundation of moral reasoning. Concurrently, however, we are aware that the conclusions of this research can be used to build educational programmes both in countries experiencing conflicts and facing their consequences and those free of such experiences at a given moment; they can also be used to evaluate programmes and textbooks for history, moral, civic or religious education. They can also be used to work with students whose moral conflicts hinder their building of a social identity.