Embedding Truth and Reconciliation in Post-Regime Education: A Framework for Iran's Future

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Part I: Introduction and Theoretical Foundations

1. Introduction

The collapse of authoritarian regimes creates critical crises in national development, presenting both menace and promise (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Garoupa, N., & Spruk, R. 2025; O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Wright, 2012; WZB Berlin Social Science Center, n.d.). Transitional justice (TJ)—a field that encompasses truth commissions, reparations, institutional reform, and legal accountability—offers a pathway toward helping post-conflict or post-authoritarian societies reckon with their past. However, while TJ mechanisms are often rooted in legal and political institutions, the integration of truth and reconciliation (T&R) into education systems is both under-theorized and under-implemented. This gap is particularly significant in countries such as Iran, where decades of state-sponsored violence, ideological indoctrination, and suppression of historical truth have deeply influenced educational content and pedagogy.

In Iran, the Islamic Republic's educational system has long served as a tool of ideological control, erasing alternative narratives, silencing dissent, and valorizing a singular revolutionary worldview (GIGA, 2024; IFMAT, 2023; Iran International, 2023; IranWire, 2025; Mehran, 2022; Radio Farda, 2010; The Washington Post, 2010; WZB Berlin Social Science Center, n.d.). From

primary schooling to university-level instruction, curricula have been shaped to glorify martyrdom, vilify dissenters, and rewrite modern Iranian history through a religious and authoritarian lens. As the nation anticipates a post-Islamic Republic transition, education must be reimagined as a space for truth-telling, healing, and democratic socialization.

This paper argues for the intentional integration of truth and reconciliation principles within the post-regime Iranian education system as a critical pillar of national reconstruction. Drawing upon scholarly literature, international examples, educational theory, and the specific challenges facing Iran, the paper presents a theoretical and practical framework for implementing T&R education. The objective is to support long-term peace, civic cohesion, and psychological recovery in a deeply fractured society.

2. Why Include Truth and Reconciliation in Education?

Education is never merely about facts and skills. It is a powerful vehicle for transmitting values, shaping memory, and influencing intergenerational identities. In post-conflict or post-authoritarian contexts, education can either propagate accusations or foster reconciliation. Below are three key reasons why truth and reconciliation should be embedded within Iran's reimagined education system.

2.1. Preventing Recurrence of Abuse through Critical Historical Awareness

One of the central aims of transitional justice is to prevent the recurrence of mass atrocities and human rights violations (Davidović, 2021; ICTJ, n.d.; Simon Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, n.d.). Scholars emphasize that teaching history in a multiperspectival and critical manner helps students identify early signs of dehumanization, exclusion, and authoritarian manipulation (Destin, M., 2022; Freire, P., 1970; Giroux, H. A., 2022; Paulson, 2015; Facing History and Ourselves, n.d.). When students understand how history was distorted or

erased under previous regimes, they develop tools to question and resist future manipulation.

History education, in this context, becomes an act of civic empowerment. For example, Bickmore (2017) argues that peacebuilding education must include both content and pedagogy that support analytical engagement with social injustice. Similarly, research by Korostelina (2012) shows that inclusive historical narratives in post-communist Eastern Europe contributed to decreased intergroup prejudice and increased civic trust.

Iran's current educational model actively suppresses pluralistic memory. The 1988 prison massacres, the suppression of the Green Movement, and systemic discrimination against women, ethnic, and religious minorities are virtually absent in textbooks. A future curriculum must explicitly confront this "organized forgetting" (Huyssen, 2003) and equip learners with the tools to process and resist historical denialism.

2.2. Supporting Psychological Recovery and Collective Healing

Education plays a pivotal psychosocial role after periods of trauma, repression, and violence. Betancourt et al. (2013) argue that social and emotional learning (SEL) programs in school settings are effective in helping youth recover from the psychological impacts of political violence. These interventions help students develop the skills to manage emotions, build relationships, and understand others' perspectives.

It is worth elaborating on the notion of social-emotional programs, as they are less known in traditional views of education and pedagogy. Social-emotional skills are those that children develop as part of their developmental process. These are the skills, attitudes, and behaviours that enable students to effectively and positively manage their responsibilities and challenges.

Social-emotional skills are the outcomes of three interrelated developmental processes that each evolve dynamically. These processes are:

·Emotional Processes

·Emotional and Interpersonal Processes

·Cognitive Processes

The positive effect of developed social-emotional skills on children's learning behaviour and academic performance has been discussed by James et al. (2015).

In Iran, decades of surveillance, political executions, and family trauma have deeply impacted children and youth. A truth-informed education system should go beyond academic knowledge to include trauma-sensitive pedagogy. This means integrating safe classroom discussions about grief, memory, loss, and justice, as well as offering structured expressive practices such as art, drama, and storytelling. The goal is not only to inform but also to heal.

Studies in post-genocide Rwanda, for example, show that including reconciliation-focused SEL in schools helped rebuild intergroup trust and reduce stigma among children from Hutu and Tutsi backgrounds (Staub et al., 2005). A similar approach can support Iranian students in making sense of family traumas, reconciling multiple truths, and cultivating emotional resilience.

2.3. Legitimizing Transitional Justice Through Civic Education

Transitional justice initiatives, including truth commissions and reparations programs, often struggle to gain public acknowledgment. Therefore, integrating TJ principles into the education system helps normalize them as foundational civic processes rather than exceptional events. When students learn about TRCs (Truth and Reconciliation Commissions), reparations, and justice mechanisms, they begin to see themselves as participants in a society that values truth and dignity.

Colombia offers a valuable example in this regard. After decades of armed conflict, the Colombian Truth Commission worked closely with educational institutions to incorporate its findings into national curriculum guidelines and teacher training (Ramírez-Barat & Duthie, 2015). Early evaluations show that students exposed to this content demonstrated higher levels of empathy, critical thinking, and civic responsibility (Colombian Government Advocates for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in Education to Promote Wellbeing and Social Justice, n.d.).

In the Iranian context, embedding truth commissions' findings and survivor testimonies into school curricula can counter regime propaganda, amplify marginalized voices, and encourage democratic participation. Classroom discussions and projects on transitional justice processes can help rebuild trust in public institutions—particularly among youth who have grown up disillusioned with the Islamic Republic's ideologically weaponized education.

Part II: Global Case Studies
3. Lessons from Global Case Studies

To develop a feasible model for integrating truth and reconciliation (T&R) into Iran's post-regime education system, it is crucial to examine global precedents. Since there is no universal model, countries that have experienced systemic violence or authoritarian rule offer valuable insights. Accordingly, this section analyzes the cases of Rwanda, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, and briefly Peru, Guatemala, and South Africa to investigate the approaches taken by these countries and their outcomes. The goal is to extract lessons

about curriculum development, teacher training, civic engagement, and implementation obstacles relevant to Iran.

3.1. Rwanda: National Curriculum as a Reconciliation Strategy

After the 1994 genocide, Rwanda faced the challenging task of rebuilding its society, which had been torn apart along ethnic lines. The post-genocide government initiated widespread reforms, including the revision of the national curriculum and the creation of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC). The objective of the educational reforms was to eliminate divisive colonial-era narratives and promote national unity.

The revised curriculum removed explicit ethnic categories and focused on values such as unity, tolerance, and empathy. Peace education was introduced into civic and moral education classes, accompanied by structured dialogues, storytelling, and genocide remembrance activities. Teacher training also became an integral part of this reform, although it was initially limited in scope and depth.

However, the long-term impact of these efforts has been mixed. On one hand, many students and teachers report increased awareness of the genocide and its moral lessons. On the other hand, some scholars caution that the top-down, government-controlled nature of curriculum design may restrict open discussion and limit critical engagement with history (Freedman et al., 2008; King, 2010). Moreover, the absence of ethnic discourse, while promoting surface-level unity, may hinder deeper reconciliation.

Lessons for Iran:

Civic education can serve as an accessible starting point for teaching about atrocities and human rights abuses.

Government-led reforms must include consultation with civil society and educators to ensure trust and pluralism.

3.2. Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Challenge of Fragmented Education

Bosnia and Herzegovina's post-war education landscape is deeply divided along ethnic lines. In some areas, particularly under the "two schools under one roof" model, students of different ethnic groups (Bosniak, Croat, Serb) attend the same school building but are taught entirely different curricula, based on nationalist histories and languages.

Numerous NGOs and international bodies have intervened to promote integrated education and peace education programs. The NGO "Center for Peacebuilding" and other community initiatives have attempted to build trust among youth through intercultural dialogue, joint projects, and workshops on empathy, conflict resolution, and shared history.

Despite these efforts, ethnically segregated schooling persists, and peace education remains largely marginalized from official curricula. The lack of political will and entrenched ethnonationalist narratives continue to limit systemic educational reform (Torsti, 2009; Magill, 2010).

Lessons for Iran:

Parallel or ideologically exclusive schooling systems (e.g., religious vs. secular or state-run vs. community-based) can entrench division

Civic and historical education reforms must be coordinated nationally but allow regional flexibility to accommodate ethnic and cultural diversity.

Community-level peace education initiatives can be effective but need systemic support to balance.

3.3. Colombia: Youth-Centered Transitional Justice in Education

After Colombia's decades-long internal conflict left hundreds of thousands dead and displaced, in 2016, the peace agreement between the government and FARC included strong provisions for truth-telling, reintegration, and civic education. The Truth Commission of Colombia (CEV) was specifically mandated to collaborate with educators and curriculum developers.

The outcome was the development of "Escuelas de Perdón y Reconciliación" (Schools of Forgiveness and Reconciliation) and other local initiatives that used dialogue, restorative circles, and youth storytelling to personalize former combatants and

victims. These programs aimed to promote reconciliation not through top-down indoctrination, but through student-led exploration of conflict history, justice, and healing (UNESCO, 2022).

Consequently, exposure to reconciliation-focused education increased youth civic engagement, empathy, and critical consciousness to some high extent. However, implementation varied by region as some conservative groups pushed back against curriculum changes they perceived as politically biased (Quiceno Toro & Gómez Arboleda, 2018).

Lessons for Iran:

Truth-telling and reconciliation efforts in education are most effective when youth are co-creators, not passive recipients.

Combining official TRC findings with local cultural storytelling practices can increase legitimacy and engagement.

Partnerships between ministries, civil society, and teacher unions can foster balanced reforms.

3.4. Peru and Guatemala: The Problem of Non-Implementation

In Peru and Guatemala, truth commissions were established to investigate past abuses committed by authoritarian regimes and insurgent groups. Both TRCs issued recommendations for education reform and textbook revision, especially to address the marginalization of Indigenous voices. However, despite these recommendations, textbook revision and curricular implementation were weak or non-existent due to political resistance and underfunding (Oglesby, 2007; Paulson, 2011).

This disconnection between truth-telling and educational transformation reveals a common challenge: unless TRC mandates are linked with concrete legal frameworks and funding for curriculum integration, recommendations are likely to remain symbolic.

Lessons for Iran:

Strong curriculum change requires not only political will but legal mandates, curriculum experts, and funding with budgetary planning.

Civil society pressure (journalists, media, experts, and city councils) is often necessary to hold governments accountable to TRC education recommendations.

3.5. South Africa: The Ambiguity of "Never Again"

South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is one of the most studied in the world. While it emphasized moral acknowledgment and forgiveness, its recommendations on educational reform were modest. Despite symbolic gestures (e.g., Human Rights Day, some TRC material in schools), there was no systemic overhaul of apartheid-era education structures.

Some scholars argue that the South African model overemphasized forgiveness without addressing structural injustice, particularly in education. As Jansen (2009) notes, South African schools continued to reflect deep racial inequality, and many teachers were underequipped or unwilling to teach controversial history.

Lessons for Iran:

Symbolic inclusion of truth-telling in schools is insufficient without systemic educational system reform.

Teacher preparation and continuous professional development (in-service training and workshops) are essential to meaningful implementation.

4. Core Principles for Iran's Educational Reform

Building on global lessons, the following principles should guide the integration of Truth and Reconciliation (T&R) into Iran's education system.

Summary Table: Comparative Lessons

Country	Strengths	Weaknesses	Key Takeaway for Iran
Rwanda	National strategy, civic values focus	Suppression of ethnic discourse	Allow pluralism in history narratives
Bosnia	Grassroots peace initiatives	Segregated systems persist	Avoid parallel curricula; unify civic learning
Colombia	Youth-led storytelling, regional input	Uneven implementation	Empower youth and localize T&R practices
Peru/Guatemala	Clear TRC recommendations	Lack of follow-through	Tie T&R to policy and budget
South Africa	Symbolic education reforms	Structural inequality remains	Go beyond symbolism to substantive reform

Part III: Core Principles, Implementation Framework, Challenges & Conclusion

4.1. Multiperspectivism and Critical Historical Awareness

Iran must design curricula that reflect multiple viewpoints: victims, former insiders, ethnic groups, religious and

gender minorities, journalists, and political activists. It should avoid mono-narratives or the exclusion of marginalized communities, as seen in Rwanda. Instead, it should adopt critical pedagogy frameworks where students evaluate differing accounts and legal facts (e.g., tribunal findings). This aligns with peace education literature emphasizing historical agency and critical questioning (Freedman et al., 2008).

4.2. Intergroup Dialogue and Safe Learning Spaces

The future Iran should work toward creating structured environments where students from diverse identities can engage with contested history through moderated discussion, storytelling, and peer-led restorative circles. Bosnia's integrated schools (e.g., Mostar's UWC model) show that even in societies marked by deep divisions, when students from different communities to interact and learn together, intergroup trust can grow.

4.3. Teacher Education and Psychological Support

Teachers are the backbone of a just and democratic society. Therefore, they must receive training in trauma-informed pedagogy, multiperspective history teaching, conflict-sensitive facilitation, and self-care. Rwanda initially struggled with superficial teacher training, while South Africa faced widespread reluctance among educators to engage with contested narratives (Jansen, 2009). Iran needs robust pre-service and in-service modules embedded in teacher education institutions.

4.4. Local Engagement and Youth Leadership

Iran's education system has long suffered from top-down and prescriptive curricula that treats students purely as recipients of state-approved information. If Iran hopes to build and protect democratic values, education programs should be developed together with students, civil societies, and local communities, and not solely handed down by national ministries.

Colombia's youth-led truth and reconciliation programs (e.g., Educapaz's "Schools Embrace the Truth") show how participatory learning and local storytelling connected to national truth commission findings can be powerful tools.

4.5. Institutional Anchoring and Legal Mandates

It is important to recognize that recommendations from truth commissions and formal curriculum standards often come from different spheres, and don't automatically align. For them to meaningfully converge within the education system, focused planning and collaboration are needed. Additionally, dedicated funding and expert teams from both fields should work together to build this bridge. In Guatemala and Peru, failing to translate truth commission findings into law and policy led to little or no curriculum change. As a result, Iran must avoid this outcome by ensuring legal backing and sufficient resources.

5. Practical and Feasible Approaches for Iran

5.1. Transitional Justice Education Directing Body

Transitioning from an indoctrination-based system to one that supports democracy and tolerance requires the creation of a council made up of transitional justice experts, education officials and educators, curriculum experts, civil society actors, and youth representatives. The main goal of this council should be to make sure that truth commission findings are fully integrated into school curricula, textbooks, teacher training, and extracurricular programs.

5.2. Curriculum and Textbook Reform

The new curriculum aimed at teaching history and civic education should:
·Reference verified TRC reports, survivor testimonies, and legal facts.
·Include lesson modules that promote multiperspective inquiry.

Combine historical content with hands-on learning, reflective writing, and arts activities.

In addition, these reforms should be piloted regionally – especially in trauma-affected areas – before being scaled nationally. This allows education experts to observe and refine implementation based on real classroom data.

5.3. Teacher Training Programs (National and Regional)

Teacher training is critical because educators bring varied experiences, and many have spent years working under the previous regime. To ensure a homogenized and objective participation of teachers, the Ministry of Education should develop phased training modules for both new and current teachers. These can be delivered through professional development, workshops, or digital platforms (e.g., MOOCs) inspired by UNESCO and IRC models. Topics could include but not limited to:

·Trauma-informed SEL practices
·Facilitation of intergroup dialogue
·Critical history methodology
·Self-care and peer-support strategies

5.4. School-Based Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL and peace education elements including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, conflict resolution, empathy and forgiveness, critical thinking, and mindfulness, can be embedded across subjects. Inspired by Bosnia's Learning to Live Together (LTLT) and Education for Peace programs, learning activities can include value-based classrooms, resilience circles, and creative arts. Evidence suggests that such integrated SEL programming reduces stigma and fosters empathy.

5.5. Inter-School Youth Councils and Co-Curricular Projects

Student-led councils can be formed at local and national levels to lead reconciliation-themed projects such as history exhibits, public art installations,

digital storytelling, film festivals, and dialogues between communities. These efforts help students take ownership of reconciliation efforts and foster a sense of responsibility and unity.

5.6. Community-School Partnerships and Oral History Projects

Students document their learning in many ways throughout their schooling. This process not only makes their growth visible, but also promotes reflection and social engagement (Paris et al., 2022). Schools can work with local NGOs and civil society organizations to collect survivor testimonies, build local archives, and create memory projects. These experiences deepen students' understanding of past injustices and help connect historical truth to the challenges of the present.

5.7. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Research

A common issue in education is the disconnect between theory and practice. It's essential to rebuild strong ties between

schools and academic institutions such as universities and research center to design effective evaluation tools. The following areas could be evaluated through collaboration:

·Historical understanding

·Empathy and intergroup attitudes

·Civic participation and open-mindedness

These indicators can be drawn from global peace education efforts in places like Rwanda, Colombia, Bosnia, and Sierra Leone.

6. Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

6.1. Political Resistance and Curriculum Backlash

The social fractures engineered by the regime in Iran to conquer by division may resurface through opposition from loyalists to the regime or religious hardliners as well as those who may have interpreted the democratic changes in the country as a loss to their benefits tied to the existence of the tyranny. These groups may therefore reject curriculum content that highlights past atrocities or gives voice to victims.

To address this, legal backing, cross-party or independent oversight, and involvement from civil society and international education bodies can provide legitimacy and reduce resistance.

6.2. Unequal Capacity and Resource Constraints

Some rural or marginalized areas may not have trained staff or infrastructure needed. Therefore, a blended approach that uses digital tools, mobile teaching teams, and partnerships with NGOs can help ensure that reforms reach all students fairly

6.3. Teacher Burnout and Resistance

Many teachers may carry trauma themselves or worry about community backlash. For this reason, ongoing mental health support, peer mentorship, manageable workloads, and public recognition should all be prioritized.

6.4. Fragmentation and Parallel Education Systems

Without careful planning, some groups may set up separate schools – religious or ethnic – similar to the divided system in Bosnia.

To prevent this, Iran should adopt a unified core curriculum, while also allowing local flexibility that reflects cultural diversity without fostering division.

7. Conclusion

Integrating truth and reconciliation into Iran's education system after regime change is not just a policy reform; it is a foundation for national recovery. This approach situates education at the heart of transitional justice and social healing. Drawing on international experiences and adapting them to Iran's context, the country can foster pluralistic history education, emotional healing, civic renewal, and youth empowerment.

For lasting impact, curriculum reforms must go hand in hand with strong teacher training. Youth and community involvement should be central, and legal frameworks must guarantee long-term support. By connecting truth commissions to the classroom, and linking memory with educational practice, Iran can nurture an informed and resilient generation committed to building a just future.

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