

wartime citizenship education, discourses of global norms and the contingency of rights in Sri Lanka

Denise Bentrovato

This short article aims to add to ongoing debates on the nature of citizenship education in wartime and its aftermath, against the backdrop of the worldwide ascendancy of a donor-driven, rights-based “global” model, considered in various circles as a panacea for local and global peace. Drawing on the case of Sri Lanka, the article casts light upon the discursive tensions, visible in externally-funded wartime citizenship textbooks, that may accompany the local adoption and adaptation of “global” norms in societies torn by protracted civil war and its legacies. The findings explore a case of the political harnessing of a global type of citizenship education, intertwined with and undermined by a more traditional approach, with liberal concepts of peacebuilding discursively championed, yet effectively rejected. The study thus raises questions around the implications for national reconciliation in a broader context of imposed “negative peace”.

Keywords: citizenship education, norm diffusion, peacebuilding, school textbooks, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Recent times have seen the worldwide diffusion of a donor-driven model of global citizenship education which champions a rights-based discourse aimed at supporting a global culture of peace and contrasts with a patriotic civics model with the traditional purpose of undergirding nation-building projects. At the core of this ascendant concept are discourses around peace, human rights, democracy, social justice, diversity, multiculturalism, and sustainable development, built on learner-centred and multi-perspective pedagogies (Banks, 2004; Brown & Morgan, 2008; Davies, 2006; Davies, Evans & Reid, 2005; Kennedy, 2012; Meyer, Bromley & Ramirez, 2010; Ramírez, Bromley & Russell, 2009; Russell & Tiplic, 2014; UNESCO, 2014). I intend in this short piece to add to emerging empirical research on these “global” norms, on local variations in their worldwide adoption and adaptation, and on the practical translation of this educational agenda into conflict-laden contexts (e.g. Lerch, 2016; Quaynor, 2012; Skåras & Bentrovato, 2022). Specifically, I will highlight school textbooks as loci of conflicting global and local demands in this arena.

For this purpose, I will draw on the case of Sri Lanka, a multicultural, deeply divided society in the Global South which in 2009 emerged from a nearly three-decade, complex and brutal civil war fought between the (mainly Buddhist) Sinhalese-dominated government and (mainly Hindu) Tamil separatists, notably the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (Goodhand, Korf & Spencer, 2011; Keethaponcalan, 2017; Spencer, 1990). In what proved to be the war’s closing stages, the Sri Lankan authorities moved from engagement in internationally-brokered peace negotiations proceeding between 2000 and 2006 – which had notably considered federalism, as a compromise between a two- and a centralised one-state solution – to the renunciation of a political arrangement

in favour of the pursuit of “peace” by belligerent means. Military victory for the government came in 2009 via an offensive in Tamil-dominated territory first launched in 2007 for the preservation of a Sinhalese majority state; in 2009 alone, this campaign claimed 40,000 of the estimated total of 100,000 lives lost in the 26-year conflict (UN, 2011), alongside high numbers of missing and displaced people, with a preponderance of Tamils among the civilian victims. Present-day Sri Lanka remains a segregated society, with its Tamil inhabitants living in underdeveloped, increasingly “Sinhalese” and heavily militarised areas in conditions of continued disadvantage, widespread displacement, systematic expropriation of land, and, since 2019, increased surveillance, intimidation, and repression. Tamils seeking to commemorate the violence inflicted on their community during the civil war have experienced disruption of annual events and attacks on related memorials, while activists seeking truth and justice around the violence, such as “The Mothers of the Disappeared”, have faced systematic harassment (Human Rights Watch, 2022). There are reports of arbitrary detention and torture, legalised through the notorious 1979 Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), to whose provisions the Muslim minority has been increasingly subject since the Easter 2019 bombings as well, alongside its more general application to journalists critical of the government and civil rights activists. Earlier this year (2022), the increasingly undemocratic actions of the government since the end of the civil war culminated in unprecedented public anti-government protests, with fatalities and the declaration of a state of emergency, while the country endured its worst economic crisis since independence. Popular anger against the fierce Sinhalese nationalist Rajapaskas’ political dynasty has seen recent protests bring down those hailed as heroes by many for ending the civil war and for liberating the country from terrorism while accused of war crimes by the Tamil minority and of human rights violations against government critics (Ethirajan, 2022).

This article draws on data collected for a study by Benvato and Nissanka (2018) and complements critical assessments conducted by, among others, Gaul (2014), Nissanka (2016), Refslund Sørensen (2008) and Sanchez Meertens (2013). Its analysis unpacks the discourse around peace education in standardised citizenship textbooks produced by the Sri Lankan state in 2007, during the conflict’s final, bloodiest phase. This process uncovers a local conceptualisation of “good citizenship” which both rhetorically espouses and, often subtly, contradicts and undermines global discourses on peace and their underlying (Western) liberal values. In what follows, I will draw on examples from these textbooks to contend that, particularly in their silence on abuses committed in the war’s course, they make obscuring use of these discourses, effectively presenting civil rights as contingent in character while ostensibly championing them. In so doing, I argue, the position taken by the state, as manifest in these textbooks, risks compromising attempts at national reconciliation. Significantly, the textbooks’ design had taken place amid civil conflict alongside broader donor-supported peacebuilding initiatives that aimed at promoting social cohesion and extended to the education sector (Colenso, 2005; Davies, 2013; Little, 2011; Perera, Wijetunge & Balasooriya, 2004). Their publication and use, by contrast, occurred during the fundamental shift outlined above in the government’s position towards the war. Noticeably, the textbook revision that eventually, in 2014, followed this change to a more uncompromising political direction was of a relatively insubstantial character. Alongside heightened sensitivity to matters relating to multiculturalism, a striking difference between the textbooks issued in 2014 and their predecessor editions, as I will indicate by way of example, is a notable decrease, in the former, of explicit reference to the domestic conflict.

Peace and Quiet: How the Discourse of Peace Covers Omissions, Manufactures Unity, and Individualises Civic Responsibility

The 2007 textbooks that are at the centre of this analysis teach “Citizenship” alongside “Life Education” at junior secondary level (grades 6-9) and “Governance” to senior secondary students (grades 10-11). The 2014 revision saw the subject re-titled “Civic Education”. Read at face value, the textbooks appear as effective vectors of a culture of peace, raising and foregrounding issues that include conflict resolution, human rights, and democracy, and showing appreciation for diversity. A notable emphasis on the importance of peace, at intra- and interpersonal and intergroup levels, evidently aims towards the promotion of social cohesion. This discourse individualises responsibility for preserving peace, calling on readers to develop attitudes including kindness, empathy, respect for different views and opinions, “inner peace” and emotional self-control (Government of Sri Lanka [GoSL], *Life education and citizenship, grade 8, 2007*, p. 34), with the objective of overcoming what the books term an “instinctive” proneness to conflict (GoSL, *Citizenship education and governance, grade 10, 2007*, p. 89). Teachings and practices common in the past had taken an ethnocentric and overtly divisive stance, perpetuated stereotypes, and engaged in othering that, for instance, depicted the Tamils as invaders. Contrastingly, these textbooks speak in an appreciative tone of cultural particularities and commonalities within the Sri Lankan nation and stress the value of harmonious intercultural relations and cooperation. For instance, they affirm that “[c]o-existence amongst the ethnic and religious groups within the country is the basis for peace and development” (GoSL, *Life education and citizenship, grade 9, 2007*, p. 22) – a vision that may betray political bias in its apparent prizing of a single-state as opposed to a two-state solution to Sri Lanka’s conflicts. Reinforcing this message of intergroup unity, the textbooks draw on a historical account that contends, in perhaps romanticised terms, that “[t]o gain independence for Sri Lanka, leaders of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities worked in unison” (GoSL, *Life education and citizenship, grade 7, 2007*, p. 146). This centring of a narrative that foregrounds united cooperation embodies an approach not unusual in deeply divided nations (Bentrovato, 2017; Quaynor, 2012); in this instance, as I will illustrate, this narrative works to preclude a critical understanding of the violent conflict, its structural or systemic roots, and its contemporary legacies while also obscuring a critical view of potential ways forward out of the divisions. The textbooks thus fail to support the need for schools to address “more controversial issues surrounding national unity and national conflict”, as deemed fundamental to sustainable peace, alongside respect for diversity, in curriculum policies issued by the country’s Ministry of Education’s Social Cohesion and Peace Unit (GoSL, 2008, p. ii). The policy acknowledges that “[p]eace cannot be built as long as violent social structures exist in society”, as “[n]aturally such structures will lead people to act violently” (GoSL, 2008, p. ii). The textbooks, however, effectively appear to obscure these structures, or rather their persistence, and thus undermine their own premise.

It appears to be the case that the discourse of peace and of inclusive civic nationalism that is evident in the textbooks obfuscates conspicuous contradictions between the principles of human rights and social justice and their practice, contradictions manifest in those principles’ historical and ongoing infringement through the persistence of ethnic nationalism in Sri Lanka. The textbooks combine rare direct or indirect references to Sri Lanka’s civil war with a primarily abstract, principle-led and decontextualised engagement with the pervading themes of social justice, human rights, and democracy, which serves to undergird their largely evasive and skewed account of the conflict. In discussing human rights, the textbooks reference non-domestic historical cases of their infringement and recognise the fundamental significance of “historical revolutions” in ushering in their codification (GoSL, *Citizenship education and governance, grade 10, 2007*, p. 9); they stop notably short of drawing parallels with local struggles for the rights of marginalised groups. Indeed, discussions of the backdrop to the civil war discursively legitimise the Sri Lankan government’s rejection of Tamil proposals for self-governance and equal citizenship and language rights by

utilising the “democratic” argument of majority rule, asserting that “since the majority of the population of the country protested against these proposals they had to be abandoned” (GoSL, *Citizenship education and governance, grade 10*, 2007, p. 39). Referring to “[a]ttempts to devolve power in Sri Lanka”, the 2014 edition vaguely notes that “the enforcement of [related] pacts [in the 1950s and 1960s] was not possible in the expected manner”, before concluding that successive governments favoured decentralisation over devolution of power (GoSL, *Civic education, grade 10*, 2014, p. 41). This account fails to have regard to the contextual power asymmetries that gave rise to the Tamils’ demands, the impact of their dismissal on the Tamils and the country as a whole, and the suffering endured by both Tamils and Muslims in the war; additionally, and notably, it uses the discourse of democracy as a tool for keeping these aspects out of the argument.

In a similar manner, a generic, non-Sri Lanka-specific statement to the effect that the aspirations of “terrorists” to a separate state constituted a cause of intra-state conflict (GoSL, *Citizenship education and governance, grade 10*, 2007, p. 86) serves to indirectly delegitimise Tamil struggles for self-determination. The epithet of “terrorism” is not inaccurate in reference to various tactics employed by the armed Tamil group LTTE during the war; both parties to the conflict committed atrocities and strove for power. What the textbooks omit is much of the context to these actions on the Tamil side. They put forth a narrative that figures these struggles as the expression of apparently obscure demands, left largely unexplained; the 2014 edition of the textbook in question specifies only slightly further, speaking of “[r]ebellion and terrorist activities caused by policies and political opinions” (GoSL, *Civic education, grade 10*, 2014, p. 92). In so doing, they block a clear view of grievances issuing from historical minority experiences of systematic discrimination and inequality, which scholarship in this area has identified as having precipitated separatist aspirations (Balasingham, 2004; Goodhand, Korf & Spencer, 2011; Spencer, 1990). During the colonial era, the British authorities had generally favoured the Tamils. In the period after independence, a lack of constitutional protection for minority rights and interests had facilitated injustices towards this group that had included the establishment of a majority electoral system that marginalised minorities, discriminatory policies and laws which, among other things, created barriers to equal employment and educational opportunities, and instances of targeted violence. This backdrop to the transition from two decades of non-violent protest to armed struggle by Tamil militant groups is missing entirely from the textbooks. The textbooks’ categorisation of Sri Lanka’s protracted conflict as an “ethnic problem” likewise oversimplifies, and thus obscures, to a striking degree. The treatment given to the conflict’s causes reappears analogously in relation to its impacts: alongside generic references to the costs of war, the sole specific allusion to the personal toll of the conflict presents a fictitious account of the death and funeral “with full military honours” of a Sinhalese army officer killed in a blast (GoSL, *Life education and citizenship, grade 6*, 2007, p. 6). The story, told under the human-interest heading “Unforgettable events in one’s life”, no longer appears in the 2014 edition (GoSL, *Civic education, grade 6*, 2014). Another failure of the 2007 textbooks to acknowledge power imbalances in the Sri Lankan context, adding to the contradictions between rhetoric and reality underlying the books’ discourse, occurs within discussions of approaches to conflict resolution. Here, the textbooks highlight the obstacles to peaceful resolution posed by uncompromising stances, held, they assert, by “the Sinhalese community in the south cling[ing] to the concept of unitary government and the LTTE in the north cling[ing] to the idea of a separate state” (GoSL, *Citizenship education and governance, grade 10*, 2007, p. 92). In so doing, they create an asymmetrical opposition between an entire (Sinhalese) community and a specific (Tamil) organisation, the LTTE; there is also no consideration of a potential, perhaps federal, compromise. It is noteworthy here that this overt discursive advocacy of non-violence and a negotiated peace considerate of basic human needs (GoSL, *Citizenship education and governance, grade 10*, 2007, p.

90) contrasts strongly with the military path chosen by Sri Lanka's government between 2007 and 2009, which proved fatal to the peace process.

Further incongruous discursive engagement with ascendant “global” values occurs in the textbooks’ celebratory discussion of Sri Lanka’s prevailing system of democracy, supposedly characterised by its people’s enjoyment of “freedom, rights, and equality [...] without any discrimination” (GoSL, *Citizenship education and governance, grade 9*, 2007, p. 131). This narrative obscures both undemocratic practices occurring historically and their continued persistence. While noting the occurrence of “denigration of equality and equity” in present-day Sri Lanka, the textbooks attribute it to unintentional and incidental instances of legal inefficiency (GoSL, *Citizenship education and governance, grade 9*, 2007, p. 35) – an evident example of the use of discursive strategies to help veil systemic contraventions of liberal democratic values. Alongside the trivialisation of rights infringements as effectively incidental, the textbooks destabilise the primacy of civil rights through their legitimisation of emergency legislation that potentially restricts such activities as “holding meetings, expressing ideas, and engaging in picketing” during periods of “instability” (GoSL, *Citizenship education and governance, grade 11*, 2007, p. 85). Such widespread and often violent suppression of government-critical voices, including those of human rights activists, presents itself in this discourse as protective of national peace, simultaneously revealing a concept of “peace” that does not accord with its connotations in the context of global values. The argumentation here reflects the discussion, in the textbooks’ more recent edition, of the civil war in terms of “national security”, which the books assert as having been maintained through “a great effort [...] challenged when weapons are supplied unofficially to terrorist groups” (GoSL, *Civic education, grade 11*, 2014, p. 132). The government response to recent efforts by the United Nations to increase pressure to credibly investigate alleged war crimes and other abuses (Farge & Jayasinghe, 2022) has been in a similar vein, citing the need to “strike a just balance between human rights and national security when dealing with terrorism” (Ellis-Peterson, 2022). This use of the profoundly democratic concept of balancing opposing interests in the service of silencing past abuses reprises a pattern evident in the textbooks. The proneness of discourses of “national security” to tip over into the authoritarian is evident in the political campaigning of the current (and now toppled) president who, announcing his intent to run for election a week after the Easter 2019 bombings, called for “national security” to return to centre stage and displace “talking about ethnic reconciliation [...] human rights issues [...] and individual freedoms” (Sri Lanka’s president: Civil war victor brought down by protests, 2022).

The textbooks’ approach embodies the contradiction between the rhetoric of democratic values and the reality of their purported implementation by verbally championing freedom of speech and respect for differences in point of view while largely excluding opportunities for exercising critical thinking and for calling state policies and practices into question. Essentially, the textbooks postulate the contingency of civil rights – those same rights which the principles upon which they are founded, and upon which the textbooks discursively draw, profess to be inalienable. They do this by framing such rights as privileges earned through, and conditional upon, the “worthy” conduct of citizens, the observance of civic “responsibilities” and compliance with state policies and laws: “your rights are protected”, affirms one book, “if you perform your duties and responsibilities well” (GoSL, *Citizenship education and governance, grade 11*, 2007, p. 86). A transactional relationship between rights and duties finds direct expression in the textbooks’ admonition that, “[w]hen receiving education as your right, it is your duty to [...] try to serve the family, society and country by becoming a good citizen” (GoSL, *Life education and citizenship, grade 7*, 2007, p. 108). Indeed, the textbooks figure the state as quite literally buying the service and good citizenship of its subjects: “the state spends a colossal amount of money to provide free education, and it is our duty

to give our services back to our country” (GoSL, *Citizenship education and governance, grade 11*, 2007, p. 88). It is at this point that the textbooks’ discourse openly undermines the Western sphere of reference it seeks to reflect; celebrating “Eastern” values that prize the collective and criticising individualistic “Western” attitudes, they deplore the devaluation of “dut[y]” in favour of entitlements and “rights”, a development whose roots they identify in the colonial era (GoSL, *Citizenship education and governance, grade 11*, 2007, p. 86). The focal, desirable product of the education they support, supposedly built on local values, is the dutiful, or obliging, patriotic citizen, “children of a single mother” (GoSL, *Civic education, grade 10*, 2014) – that is, the nation, “Mother Lanka” (GoSL, *Citizenship education and governance, grade 11*, 2007, p. 87); in the manner of well-raised children, they should be “virtuous” (GoSL, *Life education and citizenship, grade 6*, 2007, p. 41), upright, productive, respectful and compliant. “Single” in this context references the unitary, united character of the Sri Lankan state, implicitly validating a one-state solution to the conflict and side-lining any two-state or federal approach. The compliance of these citizens extends especially towards rights-granting authorities, particularly the state; their peaceful disposition, rather than being directed towards peace as a liberating removal of oppression and injustice as in “Western” discourse, flows into this compliance, into self-restraint and a willingness to serve the putative social and national good. Education, in this discourse, is likewise not the empowering journey towards knowledge as Enlightenment-based “Western” theorisation figures it, but instead the process of “becom[ing] a virtuous citizen [...] who would be a valuable asset to the country”, as the foreword to the 2014 edition of the series by the Commissioner General of Educational Publications expresses it (p. vi).

Conclusion

The analysis underlying this short piece on citizenship textbooks produced in wartime and post-war Sri Lanka has sought to highlight a case of interference, in contexts affected by conflict, between the diffusion of “global” norms and local interests in the maintenance of power relations. I hope to have shown how educational media can act, in such settings, as “sites of [...] the co-optation and renegotiation of a dominant liberal peacebuilding paradigm, central to externally sponsored peace interventions but challenged and undermined by local interests” (Bentrovato & Nissanka, 2018, p. 371). This observation draws our attention to issues of local and international agency in the face of the frequently conflicting purposes education may find itself required to fulfil in societies marked by conflict. The discursive thrust of the textbooks analysed here invokes democratic and liberal values of a “global” character, yet the books’ evasion of critical engagement with contestations around narratives and accounts of the conflict, and its reliance instead on a supposedly unified and unifying civic identity, contravene both the letter and the spirit of these values. Similarly, the books’ demand for individual students to take civic responsibility, alongside the omission of discussions around state accountability, harnesses the values of citizenship to the sole advantage of the state, uncovering an essentially anti-democratic disposition which may act to the detriment of durable peace by perpetuating or potentially aggravating existing imbalances of power. We thus observe, in ways analogous to other conflict-ridden national contexts, the prominence of a traditional civics discourse clothed in a semantics of peace and democracy, yet accentuating patriotic allegiance to the nation-state essentially at the expense of individual rights and minority perspectives.

If we accept Brounéus’ (2008, p. 294) definition of reconciliation as “a societal process that involves mutual acknowledgment of past suffering and the changing of destructive attitudes and behaviors into constructive relationships toward sustainable peace”, we may argue that the textbooks’ overt promotion of such constructivity is likely to be ineffective due to its less evident undercurrent,

comprising the denial of “mutual acknowledgement” through silencing and omission of difficult issues and experiences and an individualisation of “civic responsibility”. Such omissions may seek to contain conflict, but they risk having the opposite effect by allowing deep societal wounds to fester and inflame existing damage to the collective body. The result may be a fragile “negative peace”, to the detriment of a lasting “positive peace” (Galtung, 1990).

Researchers in the field of peace have repeatedly emphasised the need for post-conflict contexts to go beyond semantics and cosmetic solutions; the analysis presented here raises the justified concern that the discourse of peace and rights harnessed in the Sri Lankan context, as in many other conflict-ridden settings, and appearing in the country’s citizenship education textbooks may have such a cosmetic character, clothing and obscuring a continuity of approval of state power and the definition of citizenship rights as contingent upon compliance. The removal from textbooks of overtly biased content and the acknowledgment and apparent celebration of diversity cannot suffice in the face of structural violence and systemic marginalisation of particular population groups; if left unaddressed, these could perpetuate and reignite the violent conflict’s original drivers. The citation of democratic and liberal global norms, without appropriate reflection and action in the spirit of their equalising meaning, may simply add a further layer of legitimacy to a fundamentally power-based approach.

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