The role of pedagogy in peace building: A case from Sri Lanka's non-formal secondary education sector

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Abstract

Sri Lanka is a country in transition. The civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ended in 2009, with total defeat of the LTTE and many thousands of civilian casualties. The country is now engaged in a peace-building process through education. Key elements of the secondary school non-formal curriculum–truth-seeking, social cohesion and active citizenship–may contribute to this. Six state secondary schools serving different ethnic and religious groups were selected for qualitative research into how far this is the case. Data was collected on the application of knowledge, skills and values in lessons, extra-curricular programmers and whole school culture. The analysis suggests that truth-seeking is weak, with no teaching about the historical roots of the conflict or contemporary issues. There are efforts to build leadership skills and impart democratic values, but the critical thinking and discussion skills necessary for social cohesion and active citizenship are largely absent. However, there was encouraging evidence of non-formal pedagogical programs such as the school exchange and student parliament along with sport and arts programs providing a foundation to help foster peace.

Keywords

Sustainable peace-building; social cohesion; active citizenship; truth-seeking school curriculum; Sri Lanka; democratic values

Purpose of the Study

Achievement of high levels of quality education is seriously impeded by war and civil conflict. Educational inequality (especially along ethnic lines) and/or poor quality education can also help cause conflict (Bush and Saltarelli 2000, Ostby and Strand 2010). When the fighting stops, the prevention of renewed outbreaks of violence requires a range of measures, including transitional justice, and social, political and economic reform. This process has been variously termed 'positive peace', (Galtung 1969) 'long-term peace-building', (Brahimi 2000) and 'conflict transformation' (Lederach 2003, Miall 2004). The contribution of education to peace-building is a growing field. (Dupuy 2008, Johnson 2014, Davies 2014). Novelli, Lopes Cardozo and Smith (2017) propose a transformational approach in their framework for UNICEF. Successful peace-building education should promote Redistribution, Recognition, Representation and Reconciliation. This holistic approach to education systems in their institutional and social context is being explored in a range of post-conflict settings, largely in terms of institutions and political structures.

This analysis of the Sri Lanka experience has been designed to deepen the evidence base by exploring the curriculum itself especially the role of the non-formal curriculum. This builds on work by Cunningham (2014) that proposes a framework for how the curriculum can contribute to peace-building and then explores how schools are performing. Sri Lanka is recovering from a serious and lengthy civil conflict. The wide range of different cultures and identities presents a significant challenge for a curriculum geared towards sustainable peace. A large Buddhist majority, it has been suggested, may feel no need to be sensitive to the values or needs of minority groups. Conversely, these groups may feel threatened by ill-thought curricular policies on language, history, religious instruction and preparation for a pluralist society (De Silva, 1986).

Sri Lanka – Background

Sri Lanka is ethnically diverse comprising of four major groups: firstly, Sinhalese (74.9%), secondly, Sri Lankan Tamil (11.2%); thirdly, Indian Tamils of Sri Lanka, known as Hill Country Tamils or Up-Country Tamils (4.2%); and finally, Sri Lankan Moors, frequently referred to as Muslims (9.2%) (Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka, 2012. Mistrust between different ethnic and religious identity groups has deep roots– '(Sri Lanka) is haunted by a history that is agonizing to recall but hazardous to forget' (De Silva, 1986, 362). The historical theme of 'protecting Buddhism' has been exploited by some Sinhalese leaders to create disrespect for minority communities (Bandarage 2009). After independence, the introduction of a Sinhala-only language policy in 1956 was divisive. Tamils demanded devolution and many agitated for a new nation state to be called Tamil Eelam (Wickramasinghe 2006) Anti-Tamil riots in 1983 sparked off a violent campaign led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This developed into a civil war that ended in 2009 when government forces pushed the LTTE and many thousands of civilians into a small pocket in the north-east of the island. In the final assault, most of the LTTE leadership and many civilians were killed (Weiss 2011). Between 2012 and 2018 there has been violence directed at the Muslim minority with the loss of life, property and livelihood (Arnold, 2018).

The Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) and the Ministry of Education aim to mainstream national unity and reconciliation into the education structure (Rutnam 2017). Scholarship on education for peace-building in Sri Lanka has suggested that there is a viable framework but a lack of commitment and political will (Lopes Cardo-

zo 2008, Lopes Cardozo and Hoeks 2014). The change of government and national mood since these studies justifies an up-to-date examination of the school curriculum today.

Research Context

An exploratory visit was made in 2016 to listen to the views of Sri Lankan educationalists and officials on the relevance of research into the non-formal school curriculum. Sharply differing interpretations of the causes and ending of the conflict make truth-seeking a challenge for schools, and although experience of other post conflict societies suggested that it was unlikely that young Sri Lankans would be given any opportunity to learn about it in school. Nevertheless, it seemed worth investigating whether this was in fact the case. Many advised that it was still too soon for schools to be addressing the idea of 'reconciliation', as the process had barely started at national level. Yet there was interest in how the school curriculum, especially the non-formal curriculum, could play its part in uniting a bitterly divided country and reducing the likelihood of future separatist conflict. The concept that many educationalists were using for this process was 'social cohesion' or 'social harmony'. We chose the latter term as it resonates with Buddhist philosophy and is a more approachable term than 'cohesion'. The Sri Lankan curriculum has some space for Civic Education. Inclusive citizenship includes the idea of agency–teaching young people how to be active, to participate in their political system at local and national level.

The main question is: *How does the Sri Lankan school non-formal curriculum contribute to peacebuilding?*

This question was investigated using mixed qualitative methods, as quantitative methods cannot capture the subtleties and nuances of these concepts. We decided to use a modified version of the framework explained in Cunningham (2014) to help develop and code detailed research questions. The framework should be an organizing tool rather than a map, and as a template to be adapted and developed according to context rather than an inflexible system. The knowledge, values and skills for social harmony and inclusive citizenship are closely related to each other and could be combined or inter-changed. A more serious objection is that some skills or values are completely missing. For example, in such a rapidly changing world, perhaps social media skills are essential for modern citizenship. This may be incorporated in future iterations of the framework.

Figure 1 - A conceptual framework for a school curriculum for truth-seeking, social cohesion and inclusive citizenship

	Knowledge and understanding	Skills	Values
Truth Seeking	Recent history and contemporary events	Logical analysis Critical thinking	Tolerance of different historical and sociological interpretations
Social Harmony	Social structures, networks, and links	Leadership Cooperation, teamwork and problem-solving	Equal dignity and respect Sympathy, religious tolerance, and community trust
Inclusive Citizenship	Local, national, and international political/ legal systems and human rights	Deliberative discussion and debate Creative communication	Democracy and procedural fairness

A distinction can be made between the planned curriculum, the taught curriculum, and the received curriculum, but young people learn much from the intentional and unintentional process of school life. This is the 'hidden curriculum.' There may be a disjuncture between what a school is ostensibly teaching, and what is being learned by the students; for example, while order and fairness may be preached in lessons and assemblies, the social relationships between staff and students may be based on fear and violence (Harber 2004). We are using a definition of the curriculum as 'the totality of the experiences the pupil has because of the provision made' (Kelly 2009:13), which includes the 'hidden' element.

Research Plan

A. Non-formal curriculum (Music, Arts, Sport and other Social and Religious, Exchange programs societies activities) and
B. Whole school culture.

The data collection methods were:
i. Participant observation of school life- including teaching lessons, cultural and sporting events attending ceremonies and assemblies, sitting in staffrooms, observing the beginning and end of the school day.
ii. Documentary study of texts, school policies, syllabuses, and notices.
iii. Interviews with principals, teachers, students, and education officials.

Using the framework above, a series of research questions was developed to increase understanding of how the non-formal curriculum can support truth seeking, social harmony and inclusive citizenship. It is hoped that this will of use to the educationalists of Sri Lanka who are facing huge challenges in the aftermath of a destructive war, as well as scholars of post-conflict education more generally. For other recent similar studies see Novelli, Lopes Cardozo and Smith, 2015.

Research Sample and Data Collection method

It was decided to investigate six ordinary state schools, catering for the main different ethno-religious groups but not to the elites within those groups, and in different provinces. Two were recommended by an experienced Sri Lankan educationalist supervising teachers' graduate studies. Three were by recommendation of the Ministry of Education, probably as examples of good practice in international and school links. The rural school was recommended by a Peace Education expert involved in establishing school links because it is small and remote.

Mixed qualitative methods were used. A week was spent in each school. 78 interviews were conducted: Principals: 6, Teachers: 41, Student groups: 17, Officials: 8. Members of the public: 6. Contemporaneous notes were taken from an interview schedule, amplified with post-interview observations in a research diary. The background noise level in Sri Lankan schools precluded recording. Most interviews were in English, with a substantial minority in either Sinhala or Tamil, with the assistance of a teacher-translator. Four interviews were purely in Sinhala.

A total of 21 lessons were observed–in History, Civics, Religion and ICT. A brief survey was made of each school library with informal discussion with librarians. Participant observation in the schools included prize giving, morning assemblies, mock examinations, student union meeting, exchange launch, Buddhist association meeting, preparations and conduct of Teachers Day ceremony, Science day preparations, preparations for Buddhist

'Pirit' ceremony, interval behavior, teachers' rooms, canteens, drama, sports and music practice, traffic safety coordinators, Student Exchange Programs. All these aspects of school life were recorded contemporaneously in the research diary.

The Sri Lankan national curriculum is in the process of revision, starting with grade and new textbooks and teacher guides have been prepared by the National Institute of Education. Examples of History, Civic Education, Physical Education, Buddhist religion, English were examined for evidence that would contribute to answering the research questions. These materials are produced in Sinhala, Tamil and English.

Non-formal Curriculum and Peacebuilding

There was encouraging evidence that emerged from the research visit carried out. A few of the program's findings are presented below.

School Exchange Program

The Ministry of Education has implemented a School Exchange Program as part of their goals to foster peacebuilding in Sri Lanka. Since the end of the war there have been several efforts to bring Sinhalese young people of different identities into direct contact with each other. The Denuwara Mithuro (Pals of Two Cities) program that twins different schools together has been widely encouraged. The scheme is EU funded and implemented by Plan International and UNICEF. The experience of working together on a sporting or a creative challenge is known to be a powerful lever for reconciliation, mutual understanding and social cohesion. For exchange programs to be successful, the sustained support of principals, teachers, and students is essential. It may be that ICT can play a part in maintaining inter-cultural links.

The main goal of the program is to build relationships between the various schools that take part from various parts of the island. During these programs students are exposed to different cultural, religious and language programs and activities. For example, students are taken through an exercise of introducing each other using English as a link language. The students are exposed to many cultural and religious traditions of each community and perform their individual musical and theatrical pieces at the end of the programs. Many of the teachers, administrators and students themselves spoke of the benefit of meeting people from other parts of the island for the first time. The cultural exchange is a positive benefit generally to all participants. Breaking down some of the barriers is a constructive first step in the peacebuilding process. Some of the challenges of the program are sustainability due to competing goals of the schools, lack of funding and other barriers such as language and resources.

Student Parliament Program

The 'Student Parliament Handbook' produced by the Ministry of Education (2016) and the National Institute of Education, is evidence of an ambitious plan to be carried out at school, zonal, provincial and national levels, 'opening out opportunities of practical experiences to students on democracy, its responsibility and accountability, on supremacy of the law, on the significance of the vote…developing attitudes and skills like engaging in dialogue, reaching agreement, listening to and respecting the opinions of others and accepting the concept of agreement by majority… envisaged the building up of a broad social cohesion.'

The objectives of the Student Parliament system are summarised as:

• Understanding democratic concepts and practices
• To bring about peace and reconciliation
• To develop social cohesion and conflict resolution, mutual understanding among multi-ethnic and multi-religious groups
• To involve young people in nation building
• To develop leadership skills
• To develop theoretical and practical civic education skills

The Student Parliament is to be headed by the teacher in charge of citizenship education, and another teacher under the supervision of the principal. This teacher is to be 'guardian' of social cohesion and peace education program, (to build) reconciliation and co-existence. The parliament is meant to be established in first term and held at least once a term. There is a very elaborate structure of 'Cabinet Ministers', Executive Committee headed by the Principal. There are ten committees including 'interschool goodwill building and development, 'social reconciliation and student security affairs' 'behaviour development and student welfare'. There are detailed instructions for nominations and elections. Through a representative to the parliament any student in the school can forward a written proposal which can be implemented after discussion in parliament

There was no opportunity to observe a Student Parliament or a ministry in operation. Where they are in operation there is no evidence for the impact of student ideas for the number of students' written proposals, or evidence of the response of the senior management of the school. Only one school out of the six had held regular Student Parliament meetings, and a second school 'had agreed to hold one', but it had not yet happened. One school has a regular meeting of the 'Student Union'–which consists of the whole school. This is managed by the students, and has a Chair, Secretary and Treasurer. All the staff attend. Each class brings items to the meeting, which included small-scale performances and contributions, such as poems, short quizzes or prayers. It did not seem to be used for raising school issues or suggestions for improvements. Since it does not involve elections it is only a partial example of democracy in action.

The Student Parliament is an ambitious program, but it must be questioned how feasible it is to fit it into the busy life of every school. There is no budget indicated, nor any reference to the time taken from other school activities. However, it provides an understanding of the way the parliament system works and provides an opportunity for students to explore their responsibilities as citizens.

School Sport Programs and Peacebuilding

One such marquee event was organized in 2012 which is the Murali Harmony Cup. The event is championed by legends of Sri Lankan cricket Muttiah Muralitharan (Murali), Kumar Sangakkara and Mahela Jayewardene. The Murali Harmony Cup organisers state that the main objective of the tournament is 'to bring together children of different backgrounds, ethnicities and religions throughout the island to play cricket together and in the process, both develop the game as well as promote community-building and reconciliation in post-conflict Sri Lanka' (2012). The organiser's selected top-performing schools from across the length and breadth of Sri Lanka and were invited to the North East to take part in a T20 tournament over the course of 5 days. The matches were played concurrently at five venues in the Northern part of the island.

Evidence collected from various stakeholders suggests that the tournament has displayed the four capacities of sport to help in peace building efforts listed above. For example, it has helped in building relationships where the tournament worked principally in bridging relationships across social, economic and cultural divides within society, and by building a sense of shared identity and fellowship among the various ethnicities that participated. Mahela Jayewardene former cricket captain explained to cricinfo.com reporter Andrew Fidel Fernando (2013) that the tournament is all about the kids coming together and having fun. Jayewardene further explained 'Last year, the team from St. Peters (winners of the tournament) stayed with the boys from Kilinochchi, instead of staying in the separate accommodation that they had been assigned. They made friendships and exchanged Facebook and (phone) numbers.' Jayewardene finally added that 'when St. Peters got into the final against Jaffna, the boys from Kilinochchi got into a bus and went to watch that game, specially. That's the kind of thing that needs to happen' (2013). These unscripted gestures of goodwill by students augur well for peace building efforts.

The Murali Cup tournament report (2012) states that 'The St. Peter's boys all learned 5 words of Tamil and taught 5 words of Sinhalese with their counterparts from Kilinochchi each day'. The tournament has shown signs of helping connect individuals to communities by providing a shared experience between people that has the potential to 're-humanize' opposite groups. Through sharing sport experiences, sport participants from conflicting groups progressively grow to feel that they are similar, rather than different.

The Murali Cup tournament report also claims that the event gained immensely from the participation and support of a number of 'Sri Lanka's international cricketers, such as Muttiah Muralitharan, Kumar Sangakkara, Mahela Jayawardene, Angelo Mathews, Lasith Malinga, Nuwan Kulasekara and Dinesh Chandimal. These players flew to the north to meet the teams and run various interactions and master classes during the tournament' (2012). Cricket has an ardent following in every nook and cranny of the island, the support from current players was used as a platform to communicate a message of inclusion and cohesion as the international cricketers are influential as role models and spokespeople for peace.

Figure 2: Field Research Images (Courtesy Dr Jeremy Cunningham)

The Murali Cup brought diverse stakeholders and communities together albeit briefly, creating a space for the exchange of ideas, with examples such as one school from the southern part of the island, 'Dharmasoka College deliberately rallied around the weakest team in the tournament–Mullaitivu Combined Schools' from the north–sharing advice and coaching tips' (2012).

Conclusions

Truth seeking

Young people in Sri Lanka want to know why there was a war and wish to discuss contemporary issues. Victims from both sides are determined not to be forgotten and wish their stories to be told. However, recent history and events are absent from the curriculum and are left up to the guarded remarks of individual teachers. Several said it is important for students to know, but they are constrained by the curriculum. Others think that recent history should be suppressed for fear of inciting new waves of resentment. History teaching consists of the transmission of 'accepted' facts; there is little or no critical thinking or study of different historical interpretations. Some teachers make efforts to correct the bias in the previous curriculum models. Nevertheless, there is little evidence of any requirement for Sinhalese Buddhist students to investigate the Tamil Hindu history of the island. And there is almost no space given for discussion of contemporary issues.

Social Cohesion

Sri Lankans wish to reach out to other communities; more so the Sinhalese and the Muslims than the northern Tamils, many of whom who feel wounded and defeated. Much is resting on the impact of school link programs on whole school culture. These are in their early stages, but there is considerable enthusiasm among teachers and children who have participated. The challenge is to spread the impact through the school and community, as only a small proportion can take part. Many links pair schools that are far apart, while some closely neighbouring schools of a different culture have little contact with each other. In the example of Northern Ireland, where educational segregation validates group difference and mutual suspicion, schools are encouraged but not compelled to engage in contact activities and programs appear to have touched relatively small numbers (20 per cent of primary students and 10 per cent of post primary students) and have often failed to address issues of division and conflict (Gallagher 2004).

In Sri Lankan schools, social cohesion values are being encouraged, but the knowledge of the lives of others is very limited. Few books or films treat the ordinary life of other children in such a way as to emphasise their common interests and values. The curriculum concentrates almost exclusively on teaching young people about their own religion. Although there is some mention of places of worship and festivals, there is nothing about the common values in the different religions.

In Sri Lanka, there is a major emphasis on leadership, problem solving, teamwork and cooperation skills. It is thorough and well thought through and consistent in all areas of the country and conveyed through the prefect system, sports teams, Scouts, cadets, religious associations, history and literary clubs, interact and debating societies. The teaching of three national languages exemplifies toleration and equal respect.

Active Citizenship

The Sri Lankan civics curriculum is consistent, providing some knowledge of the basic ideas of democracy and human rights. After age 14, only a very small minority develops

their understanding of the modern nation state, or international law. There is some group work in civics and in several schools young people contribute school improvement ideas. Debate and rhetorical skills are developed, but deliberative discussion is very rare. Young people are receiving a basic grounding in democracy through fair procedures: meeting structures, discipline committees, and the training of prefects. The Student Parliament is an ambitious program, but with no time budget, it may struggle to compete against relentless examination pressure, and the many other extra-curricular activities. Curriculum development in Sri Lanka, as to some extent in all these countries, is constrained by a crowded exam-influenced curriculum, where increasing numbers of adolescents are showing signs of extreme stress (Rodrigo, Welgama and Gurusinghe 2010). A starting point for a truly peace-building curriculum would to give teachers and students time and space to think.

It must be noted that there are limits to developing reconciliation and social cohesion through these non-formal pedagogies. These spaces alone cannot bring about permanent social changes that are outside the boundaries of the respective event. School students will move on to tertiary education and the workplace. These spaces will provide the ultimate challenge for diverse communities interacting daily. Effective communication, listening skills, respecting others' views and cooperative team work are some of the tools they will have to draw from their secondary school experience to live in harmony and build long-term peace.

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