

School curriculum, identity politics and post-war reconciliation in Sri Lanka

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Education has always been an area of contention in conflict-ridden societies as they strive towards social cohesion and reconciliation. Sri Lanka, a South Asian country with a colonial past and a recent 26-year civil war, has sought post-war reconciliation ever since that war concluded in 2009. Nevertheless, reconciliation between hostile ethnic groups remains elusive, as many of the roots of conflicts remain unaddressed. Those roots relate not least to the politics of Sri Lanka's ethnolinguistic divisions. Schooling is crucial to attempts to ameliorate (or exacerbate) the tensions between hostile ethnic groups. This study therefore explores the politics of schooling in post-war Sri Lanka, focusing especially on language education; medium of instruction policies; and curricular for history and civics. I analyse how these aspects of schooling reflect and reinforce currents in Sri Lankan identity politics, and how the identities of students and teachers are influenced by these aspects of curricula. I employed multiple forms of data and analytical tools, analysing past literature, policy documents and textbooks, as well as using data from interviews (with policymakers, academics, administrators, teachers and students) and fieldwork observations. The findings revealed stark disparities in resource distribution and enduring problems with the curricular treatment of identity-related issues. Moves to reintroduce greater use of English for instructional purposes, elevating its status as a 'link language', risk reinforcing urban-rural and class-based divisions without substantially ameliorating divisions between the country's Sinhala and Tamil ethnic groups. Meanwhile, the continued segregation of schooling along ethnolinguistic lines, as well as a prevalence of nationalistic tropes or assumptions in curricular content (especially relating to history and civics), risks maintaining and entrenching those divisions. This study therefore offers essential new insights into the relationship between schooling and identity politics, both at the institutional level (involving policymaking and curriculum development) and at the level of schools and classrooms.

The study reveals the ways in which education has been manipulated by successive governments to legitimate Sinhala dominance. It further demonstrates how education has evolved into a profitable business, predominantly benefiting the elites who maintain cultural and linguistic hegemony. Meanwhile, the majority of citizens from rural and disadvantaged communities continue to internalize blame for their failures and are compelled to compete for educational and employment opportunities within a system that systematically marginalizes them. This study critiques the official justifications for the bilingual and trilingual education policies introduced during the post-war period. It highlights the ways in which language-in-education policies that fail to take account of wider patterns of privilege and inequality can end up reinforcing or exacerbating existing social divisions. It questions the widely accepted notion of English as a neutral or unifying language among

different ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, offering insights relevant to the study of other post-colonial societies in South Asia and beyond.

The thesis consists of nine chapters. Chapter One begins by providing background information on the researcher, as well as the impetus for the study, and discussing the researcher's positionality. Thereafter, incorporating global and local literature, a detailed introduction to the study is given along with the research questions. This chapter also provides a detailed introduction to the Sri Lankan context and discusses the importance of the study and its contribution to the field. The chapter concludes by introducing the following chapters of the thesis. Chapter 2 presents concepts and theories related to the intersections of identity, as well as aspects of school curricula, including language education and language-in-education, and history and civics education. Chapter 3 is the methods chapter in which the research approaches, data collection, sample, and data analysis approaches are discussed. The chapter ends with a discussion of challenges and limitations. Chapter 4 is dedicated to a critical literature analysis of language education in Sri Lanka. In addition, the literature of history and civics education is also presented in this chapter. Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 are allocated to present the results of four aspects of the school curricula that were studied. Accordingly, Chapter 5 discusses the results regarding language-in-education policy and identity politics in Sri Lanka, namely bilingual education. Chapter 6 discusses another critical language policy initiative, namely the trilingual policy, along with its related results and discussion. Chapters 7 and 8 present results and discussion related to history and civic education, respectively. Each chapter also carries brief conclusions. Chapter 9 is the conclusion and recommendation chapter, in which I have synthesized all the results and discussions from Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. This chapter ends by giving directions for future research.