

Sri Lanka - School textbooks, Ethno-religious conflict and Education for Peacebuilding

Successive governments deny children, particularly those of ethno-religious minorities the right to a peaceful life by refusing to remove harmful parts from school textbooks:

All children have a right to survive, thrive and fulfil their potential – to the benefit of a better world.- UNICEF

Textbooks convey not only knowledge but also social values and political identities, and an understanding of history and the world.- UNESCO

A.Sri Lanka has been one of a number of countries that have been using school textbooks for several decades to propagate intolerance of pluralism thus creating ethno-religious conflict: <https://www.scribd.com/document/333264605/UNESCO-Must-Urgently-Revise-School-Textbooks-in-Sri-Lanka-to-Stop-Hate-mongering-and-to-Start-Peace-building>

For decades UNESCO and UNICEF have been working with countries afflicted with conflicts to transform their textbooks to achieve peace-building. Sri Lanka has been reluctant to embrace that path:

When UNICEF and the govt of Netherlands undertook *Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy Programme* (PBEA) in 2012-2016 with 14 countries (Burundi, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Dem. Rep. of Congo, Ethiopia, Liberia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, State of Palestine, Uganda and Yemen), Sri Lanka did not join them. Reports on the programme are very encouraging: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED573879.pdf>

B. Global Education Monitoring Report team's mandate to monitor global education under the Education For All(EFA) and Millennium Development Goals frameworks has now been renewed to do the same under the SDG Framework - <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/about>

i.Policy Paper 28: Textbooks pave the way to sustainable development, December 2016

The Paper has Sri Lanka under the sub-title "Progress towards promoting peace": *"In Sri Lanka, textbooks long fostered enmity between ethnic groups. Sinhalese textbooks portrayed Sinhala kings as heroes defeating the Tamils, who were depicted as invaders. Sinhalese Buddhists were presented as the only true Sri Lankans (Cardozo, 2008). Six history textbooks spanning grades 7 to 11 published in 2007-2008 no longer include strong explicit stereotypes of Tamils but largely brush over Tamils' story, culture and religion by providing a Sinhalese-centric history of the country. The textbooks present role models that are almost exclusively Sinhalese, such as the kings Vijabahu I and Parakramabahu or prominent Sinhalese politicians. The absence of Tamil or Muslim role models offers pupils from minority communities few figures with whom to identify. Textbooks also fail to recognize alternative interpretations of historical events and to encourage students to engage critically with the past (Gaul, 2014). Sri Lanka has made some encouraging progress in textbooks, however. After decades of conflict and civil war between its two largest ethnic communities, Sri Lanka has initiated several reforms to include conflict*

resolution and reconciliation mechanisms in its textbooks (Figure 13) (Vanner et al., 2016)" – Textbooks pave the way to sustainable development, December 2016, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002467/246777E.pdf>

ii. We sent GEM Report team a letter on why the last bit of their conclusion about Figure 13/Vanner et al is wrong and hence the "promotion" to the new sub-title "Progress towards promoting peace" from the preceding sub-title "Breeding intolerance and prejudice through textbooks" under which Afghanistan is cited, is wrong.

iii. So their next report has Sri Lanka under the sub-title "Textbooks can stoke or perpetuate conflicts":

"In Sri Lanka, textbooks have long promulgated ethnic enmity.

Sinhalese textbooks portrayed Sinhala kings as heroes defeating the Tamils, who were depicted as invaders. Sinhalese Buddhists were presented as the only true Sri Lankans (Cardozo, 2008). Six history textbooks spanning grades 7 to 11 published in 2007/8 no longer included overt Tamil stereotypes but largely brushed over Tamil history, culture and religion and presented almost exclusively Sinhalese role models. The absence of Tamil or Muslim role models offered minority students few figures with whom to identify. Textbooks also failed to recognize alternative interpretations of historical events or encourage students to engage critically with the past (Gaul, 2014)." - Accountability in Education: meeting our commitments, UNESCO, 24 Oct 2017, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0025/002593/259338e.pdf>

What UNESCO GEMReport team failed to understand about textbooks in Sri Lanka: Fig 13 is a general flowchart applicable to any country. It is on the last page of Chapter 5 titled **Conflict Resolution in a Democratic Society** in the **textbook** on **Civic Education** for Grade 10, <http://www.edupub.gov.lk/Administrator/English/10/Civic%20Education-G10-E/PDF%205.pdf>

Chapter 5 looks at various levels (individuals, families, communities, countries and world) of conflicts and various reasons for conflicts. When it looks at national conflicts it looks at four root causes (ethnic, political, economic and religious), that lead to conflicts and examples of countries (Rwanda, South Africa, Israel/Palestine, Russia, Somalia, Ethiopia, Middle East) are given. Sri Lanka which has been experiencing a complex conflict because of all the four given reasons is NOT mentioned at all. The word Sri Lanka is NOT mentioned even once in the 16 pages of Chapter 5 in which fig13 is found.

Vanner et al 2016 (= Vanner, C., Akseer, S. and Kivinthan, T. 2016. Learning Peace (and Conflict): The Role of Primary Learning Materials in Peacebuilding in Post-War Afghanistan, South Sudan and Sri Lanka) has in its Conclusion:

"For learning materials to contribute to peaceful social transformation, they will have to make space for acknowledging the conflict and the factors that contributed to it, the multiplicity of identities and realities and critical thinking. None of the countries (Afghanistan, South Sudan and Sri Lanka) in our study have achieved this to date"

b. Vanner et al 2016 gives the following on p21 (pages 17-21 on Sri Lanka):

*"In a review of 90 Grade 1-11 textbooks related to language, history, citizenship and life competencies, *Perera(2009) found that 48 contained no references to history, ethnicity and conflict. Conflict is addressed in textbooks but with reference to other contexts such as East Timor, Ireland, Rwanda and Kashmir(ibid). The omission of the historical roots of the war is described by Davies(2006) and Cardozo(2008) as passive war education."*

(*Perera2009, "Creating "Selves"and Expelling "Others": Politics of Citizenship in the context of Sri Lankan School Textbooks", Paper presented at International Conference on Citizenship and Civic Education: Perspectives, Policy and Practice, University of Delhi, India)

So Sri Lanka does not want its students to learn about the causes of the protracted ethnic conflict that has been afflicting and agonising their country for nearly 6/7 decades. Ever since the armed rebellion started 35/40yrs ago, Sinhala leaders have been telling the Sinhala masses and the international community about "terrorist problem" and nothing about the causes of the ethnic conflict that led to the terrorist problem.

C. Sri Lanka has succeeded in tricking GEM Report team into saying:

"Sri Lanka has made some encouraging progress in textbooks, however. After decades of conflict and civil war between its two largest ethnic communities, Sri Lanka has initiated several reforms to include conflict resolution and reconciliation mechanisms in its textbooks."

It is good to know about other countries. But Sri Lankan children are denied the opportunity to learn about the root causes of the conflict afflicting their own country which is essential for peacebuilding. Another study with the same finding: "A revision of curricula, and consequently of the books, effected in 2016 did not substantially change their central message. Alongside increased sensitivity around issues of multiculturalism and gender, the most significant change characterising these new editions concerns the *omission of most direct references to the domestic conflict and civil war." - Teaching peace in the midst of civil war: tensions between global and local discourses in Sri Lankan civics textbooks, Denise Benvato and Marie Nissanka, July 2018, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14781158.2018.1505716>

D. After writing several letters to Office of National Unity and Reconciliation(ONUR), I went up to their office on 01 December 2016. I met an Asst Director who told me that the Ministry of Education was not willing to discuss the issue of textbooks. At that time I did not know that ONUR had already started to get UN Peacebuilding Fund for various projects in "peacebuilding" while i.the school textbooks are blocks to peace and create enmity among different ethnicities and ii.the North has been literally ruled by the Military (while the South is ruled by elected representatives) from the "end" of the war - only the military assaults ceased and the war took a different and much more pernicious form in 2009.

E. Chapter 1: Democratic Governance (

<http://www.edupub.gov.lk/Administrator/English/10/Civic%20Education-G10-E/PDF%201.pdf>)

Introduction to Democratic Governance:

“various countries have practised different methods of governance to rule them. Monarchism, (federal) aristocratic system, and democratic governance can be cited as examples. At present, most countries including Sri Lanka have implemented democratic governance.”

What does the following exactly mean:

“... (federal) aristocratic system...” as given in this chapter in this book please?

This is a secondary school textbook which is probably the only book most Sri Lankan school children would be reading on this subject.

F. “Using mobile phones of their parents, some school children have been involved in spreading hate speech against ethnic groups and religions, the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) has found.

A senior CID officer said that detectives had found that a number of school children had formed social media groups and were spreading hatred or promoting violence against other communities and religious groups. In addition to five cases where children were directly involved in promoting hatred, a number of others were involved in similar activities, he said.

The CID officer said that under existing laws, action could be taken against persons above the age of eight if they were involved in spreading hatred against other ethnic groups and religions. Those found guilty could be sentenced to seven years in jail.(emphasis added).” - CID finds

children promoting ethnic and religious hatred, 25 March 2018,

<http://www.sundaytimes.lk/180325/news/cid-finds-children-promoting-ethnic-and-religious-hatred-287652.html>

Thus Sri Lankan government which produces the hate-mongering school textbooks is not only unwilling to transform them but also is ready to punish the children for misbehaving. Nothing can be more calamitous for the future of the society.

G. Asking for, and getting, UN Peace Building Fund (<https://lk.one.un.org/our-work/peacebuilding/peacebuilding-priority-plan/>) at the same time as denying children Education4Peace is tripping up the UN in addition to denying the children/citizens their fundamental rights and particularly SDG16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.