

Book Review: *Becoming Rwandan: Education, Reconciliation, and the Making of a Post-Genocide Citizen* by S. Garnett Russell

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Source: *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (December 2023), pp. 257-260

Published by: Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2451/69905>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33682/gjdz-swae>

REFERENCES:

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Jonathan, Orelia. 2023. "Book Review: *Becoming Rwandan: Education, Reconciliation, and the Making of a Post-Genocide Citizen* by S. Garnett Russell." *Journal on Education in Emergencies* 9 (1): 257-60. <https://doi.org/10.33682/gjdz-swae>.

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BOOK REVIEW

***BECOMING RWANDAN: EDUCATION, RECONCILIATION, AND
THE MAKING OF A POST-GENOCIDE CITIZEN***

BY S. GARNETT RUSSELL

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2019. 272 PAGES

\$32.95 (PAPERBACK), \$125.00 (HARDCOVER), \$32.95 (E-BOOK)

ISBN 978-1-978-80286-5

In *Becoming Rwandan: Education, Reconciliation, and the Making of a Post-Genocide Citizen* by S. Garnett Russell, we learn how the Rwandan government, in the wake of the 1994 genocide, utilized education as a catalyst to foster peace and reconciliation. Within the pages of this thought-provoking work, Russell reveals a paradox: despite the Rwandan government's incorporation of global discourse into national policy documents, the manner in which global discourse models are interpreted and used by students and teachers deviates from the government's intended goals. This has given rise to unforeseen consequences, including the exacerbation of tensions among Rwanda's main social groups, the Hutus, Tutsi, and Twa. The ramifications of these unintended outcomes raise a portentous question: Could they undermine the sustainability of peace in Rwanda over the long term? Russell's work urges us to explore this critical link between education and postconflict reconciliation.

Russell's research methods are comprehensive. She skillfully uses both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a glimpse into Rwandan classrooms, of teachers' perspectives on the curriculum, and of students' interpretations of how they have learned about the Rwandan genocide and national identity. Her research begins with a thorough examination of national-level data that delves into education policy documents as well as history, civics, and social studies textbooks. The heart of her data, however, is survey data collected from 15 schools and 536 students in three geographically and ethnically distinct provinces across Rwanda, and from the interviews and observations that accompany this data from 7 of the 15 schools. What makes this work exceptional is Russell's ability to seamlessly weave the voices of students and teachers into a backdrop of government policies, official documents, and Rwandan textbooks.

It is common for researchers and development practitioners conducting fieldwork in sub-Saharan Africa to become entangled with value-laden judgments and deficit-centered thinking. Russell's work stands out because of the exceptional care she takes in elevating the voices and experiences of those involved in her study. She

refrains from imposing overpowering analysis and allows the participants' voices to speak for them. The true strength of this book, however, lies in the resounding power of the participants' voices. These are individuals who either directly bore witness to or escaped the Rwandan genocide, or students who learned the history from their family members.

The book is organized into six chapters that offer complex insights into the Rwandan government's strategic use of education as a peacebuilding instrument. The government's aim was to foster a cohesive narrative of *Banyarwanda* (74), a unified Rwandan people without distinction between the Hutus, Tutsi, or Twa. Russell uses a wide array of literature and frameworks to underpin her arguments, which renders each chapter invaluable to both researchers and practitioners who are studying or seeking to understand education in emergencies. The treasure of this text are chapters three, four, and five, which draw most significantly from Russell's data.

In the third chapter, Russell provides an overview of civic identity and nationalism before and after the Rwandan genocide. She establishes that the government today is promoting unity through a civic version of national identity that emphasizes a "unified Rwandan citizenry through an emphasis on unity and reconciliation, a common culture and language" (60). What sets this chapter apart is how Russell highlights that, despite the absence of explicit ethnic distinctions, the unified narrative has given rise to new divisions among students. She argues that students' identities remain deeply intertwined with their familial experiences during the civil war and genocide, and that they manifest in subtle yet consequential ways within the school environment. She illustrates how labels like "survivor" or "returnee" from specific countries like Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or Burundi subtly encode ethnic connotations, with "Tutsi" implicitly linked to survivors and "Hutu" inferred for those who are not. Furthermore, the abrupt transition from French to English as the country's official language has left its mark on education, giving rise to disparities in students' capacity to comprehend and engage with the content, thereby limiting the potential for open discussion. These unintended consequences cast a shadow over the Rwandan government's aspiration to foster a patriotic and nonethnic identity.

In chapter four, Russell demonstrates how the Rwandan government strategically and selectively employs human rights discourse as a means to secure international credibility. She demonstrates that discussions concerning human rights and violations of these rights are often approached indirectly. She argues that teachers are more inclined to discuss "sensitive topics related to human rights

in abstract terms or in relation to other countries” (130). Russell observes that this tendency is further exacerbated by a reliance on rote teaching methods. This didactic approach, she argues, significantly constrains the space available for open discussion, critical thinking, and active engagement—all elements central to fostering a student-centered learning environment. This chapter provides instances where the government promotes gender equality and children’s rights and yet concurrently “silences” (100) any discussion of violations of political and civil rights in Rwanda.

In chapter five, Russell compares the intended curriculum as envisioned in the textbooks to what actually occurs in class, drawing heavily from the survey and interview data with students and teachers. Her argument hinges on the examination of the role the official curriculum plays in crafting a singular narrative of the Rwandan genocide, which frequently clashes with individual and familial recollections of the recent past. Insights she gathered from both educators and students demonstrate that this narrative excludes counternarratives, and also instills fear in teachers and students and deters them from engaging in candid discussion of the genocide for fear of being accused of disseminating a “genocide ideology” (180). This juxtaposition highlights a critical tension that arises from the government’s desire to foster a unifying narrative while simultaneously sidelining the dialogue and reconciliation efforts needed to process the past. As a researcher interested in history education and teacher identity in postconflict settings, I couldn’t help but contemplate the concept of teacher agency in this chapter. One particular instance that struck me was the perspective of Emmanuel, a Tutsi genocide survivor who candidly states that teachers “must be neutral, even if it’s difficult” (157). Russell also provides a platform to illuminate the challenges teachers confront when tasked with educating about the genocide.

However, in the book’s concluding chapter, Russell argues that the book “highlights the crucial but often overlooked role of teachers, who may carry their own memories of the conflict but who are responsible for conveying the government interpretation of the past to a future generation of citizens” (190). The portrayal of teachers as “conveyors” of the government’s interpretation gave me pause. This depiction seemed to reduce teacher agency to that of passive facilitators of government directives. I found myself wondering whether there were instances when teachers actively resisted the prescribed way of teaching history or civics, a perspective that could offer a more nuanced understanding of the role educators play in shaping the narratives of the past.

This book is a must read for all audiences, including researchers, practitioners, educators, and anyone interested in the field of education in emergencies, as it sheds light on the complex role of education in postconflict settings. Russell paints a vivid picture of how a government, in the aftermath of a traumatic event like the Rwandan genocide, can use education as a tool for peacebuilding and reconciliation. However, she also highlights the challenges and unintended consequences that can arise when implementing a global education discourse within a national context. *Becoming Rwandan* provides valuable insights into how education reform and policy can impact social cohesion, identity formation, and the reconciliation process. Russell's work serves as a poignant reminder that, in the realm of postconflict education, the path to genuine reconciliation is neither straightforward nor guaranteed. And yet, education can have real power in creating a new national identity and promoting human rights and reconciliation. This text compels us to challenge our assumptions and to recognize that, within "politically restrictive environments," the transformative power of education may not always be realized fully. Russell urges us to consider the complex relationship between education and peacebuilding with a more nuanced understanding and reminds us that the pursuit of lasting and durable peace may require a multifaceted approach, including new policy and renegotiation of educational priorities.

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