
Examining The Value Of Teaching Sensitive Matters In History: The Case Of Post-War Sri Lanka

Mihiri Warnasuriya, Centre of Development Studies, University of Cambridge,
Cambridge, United Kingdom

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Abstract:

Driven by the overarching objective of promoting reconciliation through education, this paper explores the impact of history teaching on youth identity and ethnic relations in Sri Lanka. Building on the arguments of scholars the likes of Cole and Barsalou (2006) who hold that the failure to deal with the causes of conflict could have adverse future consequences, the study attempts to answer the following question: Should the controversial issues that are believed to have led to the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, be discussed in the secondary school history curriculum?

The investigation is largely based on the findings of 71 semi-structured interviews with youth and history teachers in Sri Lanka, and supplemented by an analysis of history textbooks and existing literature. The analysis of textbooks reveals that thus far such issues are either glossed over or completely ignored in the history lesson. The primary data generally supports the inclusion of contentious matters by uncovering the glaring lack of knowledge among Sri Lankan youth regarding the origins of the conflict, highlighting the need to curtail the spread of misinformation, and indicating how the avoidance of controversy goes against the goals of the discipline.

However, problems related to the willingness and capacity of teachers in dealing with sensitive subject matter and the prevalence of pedagogies that suppress critical thinking, present a compelling counter argument. This points towards the conclusion that controversial issues should be discussed in the history curriculum, provided that certain conditions which would support teachers and students in dealing with them are fulfilled.

Key words:

History teaching, Controversial issues, Identity, Sensitive issues, Reconciliation, Sri Lanka, Ethnic relations, History curriculum, History textbooks, Post-conflict education, Pedagogy, Reconciliation through education, Secondary school curriculum, Tamils, Sinhalese

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Driven by the overarching objective of promoting reconciliation through education, this paper explores the impact of history teaching on youth identity and ethnic relations in Sri Lanka. Building on the arguments of scholars the likes of Cole and Barsalou (2006) who hold that the failure to deal with the causes of conflict could have adverse future consequences, the study attempts to answer the following question: Should the controversial issues that are believed to have led to the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, be discussed in the secondary school history curriculum?

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Introduction

Amidst the chaos and the calm that Sri Lankan society has been navigating through since 2009 when the war drew to a close, the concept of reconciliation has become a central topic of conversation. Despite the cessation of armed violence, lingering communal tensions have been resurfacing sporadically in the form of riots and attacks among the general public. These recurring displays of ethnic and religious discord have finally placed reconciliation in a prominent position within the post-war development agenda of Sri Lanka.

Among the many avenues through which reconciliation can be promoted, education is one which often receives less recognition than it deserves. Within education, the teaching of history at the school level warrants particular attention due to its ability to influence mindsets and values. Yet, it is also generally an underused component of the social recovery process in countries emerging from conflict (Cole & Barsalou, 2006). This is likely due to the fact that history education in most

nations tends to largely focus on the ancient past which is so far removed from contemporary society, that it can be safely handled in the classroom. In the words of Levstik and Barton (2011, p. 1), 'Too often history instruction is simply a march through time that never quite connects to the present.' However, for history teaching to pursue its true potential as a conciliatory tool it needs to engage more with modern history (McCully, 2012).

Dealing with the recent past through the discipline of history is particularly important when it comes to post-conflict societies, since the roots of conflict usually lie within that period. Chapman (2007, p. 321) discusses the gravity of this task, which may involve altering the understanding of contested histories and unearthing difficult and uncomfortable recollections. As she writes, 'There are very few societies that lack at least some events that the government or specific groups would prefer to relegate to the trash heap of national amnesia.' According to Chapman the discrimination of minorities is one of the key issues that most countries have trouble discussing in the history books. The Sri Lankan scenario presents an interesting case study in this respect. Starting from civil unrest and riots in the early 1980s, the Sri Lankan civil war which progressed into a full-fledged armed conflict between the Sinhalese majority government and a Tamil separatist group called the 'Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam' (LTTE), was generally known as a war between Sinhalese and Tamils. To borrow from Jayawardane (2006, p. 217), 'The ethnic conflict has created not only a renewed interest in learning about the country's past but also a tendency to view the past in ethnic terms.' The extensive body of literature on the conflict and its causes contains much discussion on several controversial events and ethnically sensitive factors relevant to the 20th century. However, these events are either glossed over or completely ignored within the secondary school history textbooks, which also fail to capture the religious and ethnic diversity of the country by portraying it as a Sinhala-Buddhist nation and underplaying the other cultures (Jayawardene, 2006).

Given that eight years after the end of the civil war the roots of conflict are yet to make a meaningful appearance in the national history syllabi, this paper aims to answer the following question: Should the controversial issues that are believed to have led to the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, be discussed in the secondary school history curriculum? The reasons behind the specificity of this question are twofold. First, focusing on the discussion of the causes of the conflict alone without going into the conflict itself, can be considered a pragmatic way of tackling an otherwise overwhelming task. Second, the Sri Lankan war which lasted for 26 years, is blotted with painful memories of violence and injustice. Dealing with such grave matters relatively soon after the end of a conflict is possibly too much to ask of secondary schools (Cole, 2007). Therefore, the magnitude and time considerations of the task necessitates the avoidance of doing too much too soon.

Beginning with an overview of the research methodology, the paper will move on to an analysis of the aforementioned controversial issues and their place within the Sri Lankan History curriculum. Finally, the merits and demerits of the arguments surrounding the discussion of sensitive matters within history lessons will be explored and applied to the Sri Lankan case. Apart from raising criticisms regarding the evasion of difficult subject matter, studies that investigate the impact that history education of this manner has on Sri Lankan youth, are hard to find. This project intends to fill that gap.

Methodology

This article is based on a tripartite analysis of literature, secondary school history textbooks and primary data; with the latter two components being used to prove the research problem and answer the research question respectively. Apart from providing an account of contentious pre-

war incidents in Sri Lankan history, literature relevant to the topic is utilised to lay out the main arguments regarding the handling of sensitive matters in the school history curriculum and to supplement the findings of field data.

The identification of the sensitive issues is followed by an analysis of how such matters are dealt with in secondary school history textbooks. The reason why the project is limited to secondary school is because it is during this stage of education (i.e. grade 6 to 11) that history is introduced as a compulsory subject for all students. The only textbooks used for history education in all government schools are those produced by the Educational Publications Department, under the purview of the Ministry of Education. Within secondary school, recent history, particularly the British colonial and post-independence periods to which the sensitive issues belong, are covered in the history syllabi of grade 9 and 11. As such, for this article the analysis is limited to the textbooks of those two grades. These books were first published in 2007 when history became a standalone subject (it was previously combined with social studies). While a revision of the grade 11 book came out in 2015, the grade 9 book is still in the process of being revised. Thus, one grade 9 book and two grade 11 books make up the sample of textbooks examined in this study.

The primary data presented in this paper is taken from a larger research project which looks at education and ethnic relations in Sri Lanka by exploring the role of history teaching in rebuilding national identity. While the project is still ongoing, some of the findings of the fieldwork conducted thus far are perfectly placed to contribute towards the current research. The fieldwork consisted of 71 semi-structured interviews with youth and history teachers in three districts in the country, namely Matara, Mullaitivu and Ampara. With the districts being chosen based on their ethnic composition¹, the youth sample was made up of 20 Sinhalese from Matara, 16 Tamils and 3 Muslims from Mullaitivu and 18 Muslims and 2 Tamils from Ampara. They were accessed through a youth organisation which offers diploma courses. As such the respondents were school leavers between the ages of 18 to 25, who had finished learning the local history syllabus in secondary school and were mature enough to discuss its impact.² The group of history teachers involved in the study were from five government schools in the fieldwork locations. The sample comprised of five Sinhalese teachers from Matara, four Muslim teachers from Ampara and three Tamil teachers from Mullaitivu. Discussions with the youth were largely designed to uncover their perceptions of ethnicity identity and ethnic conflict in relation to their understanding of history. While the teacher interviews broadly covered several aspects of history as a discipline, specific focus was placed on the challenges associated with teaching history in an ethnically and religiously heterogeneous post-war nation.

The ‘sensitive matters’ and their place within the history curriculum

The final years of British colonialism and the early years of independence in Sri Lanka were peppered with sensitive issues and controversial events, several of which came to have a bearing on the breakout of the ethnic war. As such, the roots of the conflict are believed to have been sown in this period; as elucidated by Tambiah (1986, p. 7) who stated that, ‘Sinhalese-Tamil tensions and conflicts in the form to us today are of relatively recent manufacture – a truly twentieth century phenomenon.’ While the level of agreement on this time frame is quite high (others who support

1 Over 94.5 percent of the population in the Matara district for instance are Sinhalese, while 90 percent of the population in the Mullaitivu district are Tamil and 41.5 percent of the population in the Ampara district are Muslim (Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka, 2015)

2 The gender ratio of the group was 52.5 percent male to 47.4 percent female. However, gender was not considered to have a significant influence on the findings of this study.

it include Little, 1994; Nayak, 2001; Ghosh, 2003; Clearance, 2007), the discourse regarding the root causes themselves or the contentious matters in question contains more varied opinions and interpretations. However, although they do not form an exhaustive list of causes, there are several matters belonging to these eras which feature prominently in most accounts of the ethnic conflict. Brief discussions of each of them are presented below, followed by analyses of their presence within secondary school history textbooks of Sri Lanka.

- The Tamil minority held a more favourable position than the Sinhalese majority during British colonial times. This is because the significantly higher concentration of missionary schools in the North gave Tamils much better access to education (Ghosh, 2003; Clearance, 2007; Herath, 2007; Perera, 2009). Another contributory factor was that the infertility of the Northern areas led Tamils to place greater importance on education, both as a source of livelihood and as a vehicle of social mobility (Manogaran, 1987; Wijesinha, 2007). Thus, having received better schooling, particularly in the English language, Tamils occupied a disproportionate number of places in the higher education and employment sectors. Many believe that growing resentment towards these imbalances and calls to bridge them were manifested fully when ruling power was passed from the British to a Sinhalese- majority government.

The history textbooks which cover the British colonial period mention that a knowledge of English was a requirement for government positions; but do not note the inequalities that existed among Sinhalese and Tamils in terms of access to English education and the favourable position that Tamils gained as a result. Instead of discussing these ethnic imbalances, the textbooks focus on elite versus rural inequalities in education and employment that fragmented Sri Lankan society at that time.

- The transition from communal representation towards territorial representation as the mechanism for local participation in the colonial government, as well as the granting of universal franchise, were highly contested issues. While Sinhalese favoured these moves based on the numerical strength of their ethnic group, Tamils opposed them for fear that they would not be adequately represented in national politics and would be subjected to Sinhalese domination (Manogaran, 1987; Nissan & Stirrat, 2002; Clearance, 2007). The latter's concerns were disregarded in the Donoughmore constitution of 1931 which abolished communal representation and adopted universal suffrage (Nissan & Stirrat, 2002). According to Nissan and Stirrat (2002) and Gracie (2009) alternative means of protecting minority rights were ineffectual against majority powers.

Communal representation, which is mentioned several times in the textbooks, is introduced in the Grade 9 book as the origin of contemporary communal problems (Educational Publications Department, 2007a). It is also referred to as a measure that was going to 'bring about detrimental results for the future of the country' (Educational Publications Department, 2007b, p. 23). Although this is clearly a majoritarian perspective, it is the only viewpoint offered to the students. Later on it is noted that Tamil leaders were against discontinuing communal representation and granting universal franchise. However, the abolishment of the former and the adoption of the latter are referred to as purely positive advancements of the parliamentary system, ignoring minority concerns regarding their potential implications.

- Approximately one million Indian Tamils were stripped of their citizenship and voting rights by the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 and the Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act of 1949, passed by the first post-independent government of Sri Lanka (Nayak, 2001). The officially communicated reasoning for the measures was that Indian Tamils who were

brought down by the British as indentured workers and settled in Sinhalese dominated areas of the hill country, were temporary residents and thereby India's responsibility (Manogaran, 1987; Nayak, 2001; Nissan & Stirrat, 2002; Perera, 2009). While many scholars believe that the political motivation of these enactments was to limit the Tamil vote (Manogaran, 1987; Nayak, 2001; Nissan & Stirrat, 2002; Clearance, 2007; Gracie, 2009; Perera, 2009), some add that it was also intended to limit the left-wing vote (Vittachi, 1995; Nayak, 2001; Nissan & Stirrat, 2002; Perera, 2009). The second group further note that many Ceylon Tamils supported this legislation at the time.

This matter is mentioned twice in the grade 9 history textbook. In the first instance the two acts are simply referred to as 'important landmarks in the political sphere during the middle part of the 20th century,' which instated measures enabling Indians and Pakistanis residing in Sri Lanka to legally obtain citizenship (Educational Publications Department, 2007a, p. 99). The next mention notes that some Tamils leaders opposed the measure, citing that the government revoked the rights given by the British to the estate Tamils. The depiction of the issue in this manner not only lacks clarity, but it also creates space for confusion since the acts are first presented in a positive light and then shown to be contentious, without further elaboration.

- The 'Sinhala-Only' Act which made Sinhala 'the one official language of Ceylon' was passed by the House of Representatives in 1956 (Sahadevan & DeVotta, 2006). According to Perera (2009, p. 113) this was '... one of the first inter-ethnic agreements that was broken, for prior to independence, leaders from all communities had agreed that Sinhala and Tamil languages would replace English as the official language of the country.' With Sinhala alone becoming the language of administration Tamil speakers were severely affected, particularly in terms of public sector employment and education (Sahadevan & DeVotta, 2006; Wijesinha, 2007; Gracie, 2009; Perera, 2009). Upon the passing of this bill, a Tamil political party organised a satyagraha (non-violent protest) outside parliament, which led to the development of anti-Tami riots (Nissan & Stirrat, 2002; Sahadevan & DeVotta, 2006). While these were the first ethnic riots since independence, they erupted again in 1958 on an even larger scale (Vittachi, 1995).

The 'Sinhala-Only' Act is introduced in the textbook under the heading 'Implementation of policies respecting social and economic backgrounds, national language, religion and culture' (Educational Publications Department, 2007a, p. 103). It is thereby portrayed as a purely positive measure, ignoring its implications on Tamil speakers. The textbook mentions the decision to give Tamil a due place, without elaborating on what that entailed. The broken agreement regarding a dual language policy is also omitted from the discussion. Although reference to 'the tense situation caused by the language bill' is made at a later occasion (Educational Publications Department, 2007a, p. 117), the riots that erupted over this issue in 1956 and 1958 are left out. Overall, the textbooks give no indication that the Sinhala-Only issue is widely accepted as one of the main factors that deteriorated ethnic relations in the country.

- Starting from the Gal Oya River Valley Development Scheme in 1948, successive governments implemented policies to resettle people from over populated Sinhalese areas to Tamil speaking areas in the North and East. Commonly referred to as 'State-aided colonization schemes', these policies altered the demography of these provinces, as evident from the decline in the Tamil speaking population in the East from 88 percent in 1946 to 75 percent in 1981 (Gracie, 2009). Some scholars believe that issues over land access were part of the reasons behind the ethnic riots of the 1950s (Nissan & Stirrat, 2002), since as Perera (2009, p. 116) states, 'Making the Tamils a minority in areas

where they would otherwise have been a majority was an effective step in reducing their legitimacy and political power.'

The grade 11 textbook discusses the creation of agricultural settlements in the dry zone. However, the list of objectives in forming them does not include the government's alleged political motivations of increasing Sinhalese electorates, and the list of challenges in establishing them fails to mention the opposition raised by Tamil politicians against these so called 'colonization' schemes. In fact, the demographic details of the areas chosen for these settlements are kept out of the conversation, as are the ethnic implications of allocating property to thousands of Sinhalese in what the Tamils considered to be their homeland.

- In the early 1970's the government introduced standardisation policies and a district quota system for university education. These measures were viewed by many as discriminatory forms of affirmative action for the educationally disadvantaged (Clarance, 2007; Wijesinha, 2007; Perera, 2009). As explained by Gracie (2009) and Nayak (2001), the impact of the standardisation schemes was such that Tamil applicants needed to obtain higher marks than Sinhalese applicants to gain entry into the same courses. The quota system which was designed to favour those from rural backgrounds, also had a detrimental impact on Tamils (Nissan & Stirrat, 2002), particularly those from Jaffna (Gracie, 2009). All in all, as concluded by Nayak (2001, p. 165), 'This new scheme drastically reversed the ratio of Tamil medium students in the universities.'

Despite having a section titled 'Striking characteristics of the Sri Lankan education sector during the three decades since 1948' (Educational Publications Department, 2015, p. 107), the textbook fails to mention anything regarding the standardisation policies and district quota system. Given the strong opposition raised against these mechanisms and their direct connection to the youth unrest that was prevalent in the 1970s, this omission can be regarded as a clear attempt to avoid dealing with contentious subject matter.

- Owing to the growing frustration of Tamils against Sinhalese dominance; the post-independence period saw the transformation of Tamil demands from equality to self-rule in a separate state, and the escalation of their approaches from peaceful political tactics to separatist warfare. In July 1983, the LTTE assailed and murdered 13 soldiers of the Sri Lankan Army. This attack sparked the deadliest anti-Tamil riots the country had ever witnessed. According to Devotta's (2006) description of the events, Tamils were hacked to death and burnt in their cars and houses. While the official death count was placed at 400, other reliable sources claimed that it was between 2000-3000, with another 100,000 Tamils being displaced from their homes and approximately 175,000 fleeing abroad as refugees (Clarance, 2007). Known as 'Black July', this fatal period of rioting is regarded as the onset of the ethnic conflict.

The local history lessons covered in the textbooks end with the constitutional reform of 1978, which means the historically significant 83 riots are not included in the curriculum.

To sum up, the issues discussed above paint a picture of how relationships between the Sinhalese and Tamils gradually soured in the recent past, leading to the outbreak of the civil war. The analysis regarding the appearance of these issues in history textbooks reveals that they are either glossed over by focusing on a majority perspective and by omitting key pieces of information; or else they are completely ignored. This is not surprising, considering that the version of history presented in the books bears all the hallmarks of an official master narrative. That is, the textbook provides

one distinct account of the past, leaving no room for interpretation and not even alluding to the possibility of plurality in interpretation.

Having shown through the analysis of history textbooks that sensitive and contentious subject matter is avoided within the Sri Lankan history curriculum, the paper now turns to the task of examining the normative value of dealing with such content. The discussion is based on a combination of existing literature and primary data gathered through interviews with youth and history teachers.

The case for the inclusion of sensitive subject matter

The generally accepted benefits of teaching controversial issues are ample, particularly within the field of social studies. Summarising the key points made by some of the experts in the profession (e.g. Oliver and Shaver, 1966; Engle and Ochoa, 1988; Evans and Saxe, 1996), Asimeng-Boahene (2007) holds that the discussion of contentious matters in the classroom is seen as a means of creating civic minded citizens who could perform effectively in a participatory democracy. The usefulness of pedagogies that deal with controversial topics in improving the critical thinking skills of students is undeniable (Rossi, 2006), as is their ability to teach students how to use evidence and shared values to constructively deal with those whose perspectives differ from their own (Young, 1996 cited in King, 2009). Relating these arguments to the subject of history, Levstik and Barton (2011) note that a grave consequence of the avoidance of controversy is that it denies the interpretive nature of history and thereby hinders the aforementioned efforts of promoting effective democratic participation.

Another argument in favour of teaching contentious matters through history is that it could influence perceptions of one's own group as well as other groups, since identity is intricately connected to the portrayal of a group's past (Cole, 2007). This is particularly applicable to societies recovering from conflict, as 'The combination of countering prejudicial stereotypes with recognition of a group's own responsibility for certain aspects of the conflict may provide for new perspectives and better understanding of the other side in a way that could contribute to resolution' (Barkan, 2005, p. 230).

Furthermore, teaching the difficult past through history education is necessitated by the goals of the discipline. As contested as it is, the argument that the purpose of studying history is to build up the future by learning lessons from the past, received strong support from the primary data. In the words of Kamilia, a Tamil youth from Mullaitivu³,

Learning history is important to know about the past ... of what has happened already ... and to make sure that those things ... those mistakes ... that we are not going to make it [sic] in the future.

Certain youth in the study specifically noted the relevance of 'correcting mistakes' to the ethnic struggles that took place in recent Sri Lankan history. This could be seen as a reflection of their feelings towards the current ethnic discord, which some believe to be a repetition of past mistakes. The need to *think historically*, which has received considerable support among history educators, is also relevant to these arguments. Levesque (2009, p. 27) describes this as 'The intellectual process through which an individual masters – and ultimately appropriates – the concepts and knowledge of history and critically applies such concepts and knowledge in the resolution of

³ The identities of all respondents in the study have been protected with the use of pseudonyms. Their ethnicity and hometown however, have not been changed.

contemporary and historical issues.' What this means for school history is that students should not only be given factual knowledge but should also be endowed with the skills necessary to make sense of that knowledge in terms of how it was constructed and how it can be applied to different contexts. While dealing with contentious topics is an important aspect of thinking historically, thinking historically is in turn a useful method of dealing with contentious topics.

In a book titled 'Teaching History for the Common Good', Barton and Levstik (2004) explain what it means to 'do history'. Combining the activities and purposes of history education they present four stances to clarify the practicality and importance of history teaching; one of which is the moral response stance. Advocates of this believe that students should be expected to remember and recognize the virtues and vices of historical happenings. According to these authors, remembrance is important in terms of encouraging youth to empathise with the hardships faced by different groups throughout history. This is particularly true with respect to those adversely affected by conflict (McCully, 2012). While admiration serves to identify role models, condemnation plays a part in instilling a sense of justice in young people, upon hearing of past acts which marginalised, victimised and oppressed certain groups in society (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Once again, data from the interviews with youth backed this theory. When asked their opinion of a stone inscription made by a past king of Sri Lanka which mentioned that non-Buddhists were unworthy of the throne, 60 percent of Sinhalese Buddhist youth themselves expressed anger and frustration over what they believed was the promotion of racist sentiments. Many of their comments resembled that of Akvan, a youth from Matara, who stated,

That is really unfair. Just like us the other ethnic groups should also have the same rights.

One of the main findings from the field research which highlights the need to teach sensitive matters is the glaring lack of knowledge that exists among Sri Lankan youth regarding the breakdown of relationships between Sinhalese and Tamils. When asked how tensions between the two groups first started and what they think led to the war that ravaged the country for over two decades, only a mere 17 percent of the total number of youth interviewed offered specific responses. In an effort to minimize subjectivity, the categorization applied to the responses was based on the general consensus that can be derived from the literature regarding the contentious matters that led to the war. What is referred to as 'specific' in this context are answers which mentioned any of the ethnically sensitive issues which were discussed in the previous section of the paper. Among them, only language and education related factors were brought up in this study, with even the historically poignant 83' riots receiving no mention.

While the answers presented by the remaining 83 percent of the youth cohort can be broadly identified as 'non-specific', it is possible to make a few further distinctions among them. Responses based on rights or equality is one category. Yet, even those who offered such replies were unable to elaborate on *which* rights were denied or *why* such inequality existed. Thus, the question regarding the causes of the ethnic conflict often received abrupt and noncommittal responses as follows:

The problem of majority – minority. And racism. (Imran, a Muslim youth from Ampara)

Tamil calls for a separate state formed another category of vague answers. While a few connected them, albeit hazily, to the deprival of minority rights, most respondents made questionable or inflated claims such as that of Govinda, a Tamil youth from Mullaitivu who asserted that,

Tamil thought that they can't be *slaves* for the majority people so they wanted a separate state.

The rest of the non-specific response group was made up of a variety of ambiguous suggestions as to what triggered the war. Among them were misunderstandings between ethnic groups, Sinhalese and Tamils not liking each other, caste differences, selfishness, personal reasons that blew out of proportion, and fighting for the throne. In general, the responses were riddled with inaccuracies and misconceptions. While some were merely misguided, others, perhaps unintentionally, carried racist undertones. The following is an example of each kind:

Just because they had competitions between ethnic groups ... like kind of finding who is the best ... so they fought with each other. (Praveena, a Tamil youth from Mullaitivu)

Tamil people wanted to capture *our* country. (Thamindu, a Sinhalese youth from Matara)

Some of the answers in this category contained unsubstantiated or questionable anecdotes. For instance, a youth from Ampara shared an elaborate account of a Tamil leader who died while carrying out a hunger protest and attributed the Tamil ethnic group's decision to take up arms, to his untimely death. Another respondent held that the war began because Prabhakaran, the leader of the LTTE, started hating Sinhalese people when one of them murdered his sister. Other stories included allegations of the Sinhalese imposing a particular kind of tax exclusively on the Tamil community and a tale about a party held in the North at which a small clash that erupted between Sinhalese and Tamils was taken too far.

These factually bare anecdotes prove that misinformation is spreading within and across communities. This brings to mind the need to 'reduce the number of lies that can be circulated unchallenged in public discourse,' (Ignatieff, 1998, p. 173 cited in Cole, 2007, p. 119) which according to Cole, should be addressed not only through truth commissions but through history education as well. The validity of this point stems from the prime position held by formal education among the various means through which knowledge of the past is transmitted to the younger generation. In fact, 58 out of the 59 youth who were interviewed in this study confirmed that school was the main source through which they learned history, with media and parents being secondary influences. In a similar study conducted by Conway (2006) in Oxford in England and Mid Ulster in Northern Ireland it was found that although students gained historical insights through multiple avenues, they were influenced most by the history lessons taught in school. Conway's respondents in Oxford agreed that compared to anything else, public perceptions of present day issues were most effectively challenged through history education. Referring to the prevalence of historical myths in Northern Irish communities, Conway states the following:

I argue that these versions dynamic as they undoubtedly are, have not been as uniformly pervasive as we have been led to believe and that school history can make more inroads into myths learnt outside the classroom than has been previously thought. (2006, p. 67)

If this argument is applied to the Sri Lankan case, teaching youth about sensitive issues in recent history could go a long way in addressing the significant lack of historical knowledge and related spread of misinformation that is rampant in the local community.

Conway's research with educators showed that a majority of teachers involved in the study advocated the teaching of contentious matters through the discipline of history, believing it to be useful in easing communal conflicts. Similarly, nine out of the 12 teachers in the Sri Lankan study felt that such matters, most of which are connected to ethnic issues, need to be explained to the students. For instance, the sentiments of Ms. Saakshi from Mullaitivu were conveyed by the translator as follows:

So they didn't tell the real stories, real problems that caused the ethnic war/ethnic conflict in the country. So her opinion is that students should know it. Students should know everything.

While these teachers cautioned that the inclusion of such issues should be done in a manner that does not promote racism or discrimination, the propensity for it to do so was the basis of the argument of the three remaining teachers who were opposed to this measure. This brings up the need to explore the other side of the debate on teaching contentious matters in history.

The case against the inclusion of sensitive subject matter

A simple statement made by a Sinhalese teacher sums up the concerns raised by respondents about ethnically sensitive issues in Sri Lankan history and their place within the curriculum.

If you include these it (sic) will promote racial issues. (Mr. Bathiya, a teacher from Matara)

Freedman et al. (2008) discuss similar concerns put forth by some teachers in Rwanda who supported the government's stance that the discussion of historical matters relating to ethnicity would rekindle tensions between different communities. While this is a legitimate concern, the risk of it occurring needs to be weighed against the consequences of withholding information about difficult events. Based on the empirical evidence, the ignorance displayed by youth regarding significant events in their country's past, could be considered as a main consequence in the Sri Lankan case. It remains to be seen whether this general ignorance is in some way connected to the active role played by youth in propagating religious and ethnic intolerance in recent times.

On the other hand, even if contentious matters are taught in school, personal biases and external influences may prevent students from accepting them. Referring to research carried out among Estonians regarding their knowledge on Estonia's entry to the Soviet Union, Wertsch (2000) explains that although the respondents were better acquainted with the official version of events taught in school, they placed greater belief in the private version that was passed around within the community. According to Wertsch (2000, p. 39) the interviewees reactions to the official account could be considered as a case of 'knowing but not believing.' It can be argued however, that students are not expected to unquestioningly believe what is presented, but to critically analyse the information provided through history lessons. In fact, in a later work Wertsch (2002) asks if the objective of history teaching is to encourage critical thinking or to create a shared identity based on a historical narrative endorsed by the state. This question was posed in relation to the concept of promoting a 'useable past' through history instruction at the school level. According to Fullinwider (1996) a proponent of 'patriotic history', a useable past is needed to help students to become good citizens with an interest in improving their country. In his view the discussion of contentious events could hinder the promotion of such a past. This problem, which appears unresolvable for the most part, is explained clearly by Cole who writes,

Closely related to the conservative nature of history education and the political discord that negative portrayals of the in-group inspire is the problem of finding a balance between frank critique and a narrative positive enough to engage students, as well as between nationalism and patriotism. (2007, p. 128)

Incorporating the ideas of Foner, Cole herself presents a response which, though not a solution in itself, offers some valuable insight in this regard. It reads,

Teaching, which presents history to students as an academic discipline with widely accepted standards and methodologies, rather than as a political tool or expression of nationalism, can

help make the study of history “at its best … not simply a collection of facts, not a politically sanctioned listing of indisputable ‘truths’, but an ongoing means of collective self-discovery about the nature of our society” (Foner, 2002, p. 88). (Cole, 2007, p. 126)

Aside from these ideological dilemmas, the bulk of issues relating to the treatment of difficult pasts through history instruction, are more practical. Teachers are often hesitant to tackle contentious matters through history lessons and thereby tend to skim over or completely avoid them. This reluctance could be due to a lack of capacity or it could stem from fears of individual perspectives compromising the objectivity required to teach controversial topics (Hess, 2005). The latter concern is particularly applicable to ethnically diverse societies such as that of Sri Lanka. As Low-Bear (2001) explains, teachers too are exposed to the same cultural and community influences as the students they teach. This could colour their perspectives and affect their ability to carry out fair, unbiased discussions in the classroom. In fact, the Tamil teachers in the study disclosed that in relation to certain contentious events they teach students the ‘real stories’, which differ from those narrated in the textbooks. A couple of teachers also admitted to presenting disclaimers to their students about some of the content in the textbooks, as shown in the following example.

So this is just for your exams … so just study this for the exams but it is not 100 percent true... whatever is stated here is not 100 percent true. (Mr.Lokesh, a teacher from Mullaithivu)

Thus, the way teachers interpret curriculum content has a significant effect on how students understand it. Using findings from extensive primary research, Evans (1989) explains that while teacher conceptions of history greatly vary, they are closely related to the backgrounds, beliefs, and knowledge of teachers as well as to pedagogy. Therefore, the inclusion of contentious material into the history curriculum is risky since the effectiveness of the effort is largely dependent on the orientation of the teacher.

Furthermore, the pressure to cover the entire syllabus and adequately prepare students to face examinations is another common reason that leads teachers to avoid the time consuming endeavour of tackling difficult subject matter (King, 2009). This point too, received the validation of several teachers involved in the study.

Additionally, sensitive subject matter could elicit emotional responses from students, particularly in post-conflict settings where certain issues are still raw and painful to handle. Hence, when it comes to tackling contentious topics teachers sometimes prefer to deliver a monologue instead of engaging in a dialogue with students, for fear of letting the situation get out of hand (Hess, 2004). As Valls (2007) notes, students are not complaisant recipients of history education. Yet, that is how they appear to be viewed in many countries including Sri Lanka, where history pedagogies either inadvertently or purposefully promote the memorisation and regurgitation of information rather than critical thinking. Such pedagogies, which are unable to generate new insights that would be conducive towards reconciliation, severely impede efforts to educate youth about contentious events in the past.

Conclusion

The first section of this paper revealed that several historically significant sensitive matters pertaining to the recent past of Sri Lanka are either addressed very lightly, or not at all, in the secondary school history syllabus. In doing so, it uncovered that the textbooks contain a state approved official narrative of the past which is presented as the one and only historical account of the Sri Lankan nation. The books, which are written in a way that leads the reader to unquestioningly accept what is given as pure fact, could thus be viewed as tools of indoctrination. This type

of history education denies some of the most basic features of the discipline, as explained by Chapman (2016, p. 5) who holds that 'histories are representations and constructions of the past', they are 'inherently plural and variable', 'histories are authored and shaped by the subjectivities of their authors', and they are typically 'narratives grounded in evidence and argument.' Hence, the avoidance of controversy which is visible in the textbooks, is indicative of larger issues related to history education in Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, the skillful handling of textbook content by teachers is essential if it is to create a positive impact on students. Comprehensive teacher training is therefore a pre-requisite in teaching difficult pasts through history education. While believing that altering the way history is taught is of greater urgency than curricular reform in countries emerging from conflict, Cole and Barsalou (2006) hold that the use of pedagogies that support critical analysis could greatly aid the discussion of contentious matters in a non-discriminatory manner. Based on the views expressed by participants at the Unite or Divide conference held in 2005, Cole (2007) notes that it is not unrealistic to expect teachers to adapt to and utilise new pedagogical approaches and textbook content, since many actually do so. However, greater support which is sensitive to their specific needs and challenges should be extended to them, particularly in post-conflict situations.

Although establishing the research problem of this paper through textbook analysis was a straightforward task, deriving an answer to the research question was understandably more difficult. Based on the arguments that have been presented for and against the introduction of sensitive topics, it is evident that a simple yes or no response will not suffice. While it is both necessary and important to discuss the controversial issues that are believed to have led to the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict in the secondary school history curriculum, inclusion of such sensitive subject matter needs to be preceded by teacher training and pedagogical reforms. Taking steps to address the broader issues related to history education that were exposed through this study, is also of vital importance. In the absence of these measures, efforts to educate the seemly ill-informed Sri Lankan youth regarding the country's difficult past, could prove to be more harmful than helpful.

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Correspondence

Mihiri Warnasuriya,
msw45@cam.ac.uk

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