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Why certain narratives do not belong in the classroom: difficult and dangerous history in South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

There is a scholarly consensus that addressing past conflicts within education is an essential ingredient in justice and reconciliation processes. In newly independent South Sudan, an unstable political context ravaged by protracted civil war, it is debatable whether and how difficult history could or should be addressed. Against the backdrop of introducing the country's first history textbooks, this article explores students' perspectives on recent and ongoing conflicts in South Sudan at the time of their publication. Drawing on student essays and theories of difficult history, our analysis examines the nature of difficult histories circulating among young people. It uncovers the multiple perspectives deriving from unofficial histories that may be at teachers' disposal in the classroom, centering on those that relate to internal divisions and mutual victimization in the past and the present. We argue that these sensitive topics have the potential to challenge the official history of 'unity in resistance,' dominating both textbooks and classroom teaching. In uncovering difficult and often dangerous history, we contribute to a theorization of why such narratives do not belong in the classroom in a politically fragile environment.

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Introduction

As often argued in research, education can serve as a tool for development, equity, peace, and social justice (Bickmore, Kaderi, and Guerra-Sua 2017; Corredor, Wills-Obregon, and Asensio-Brouard 2018). At the same time, education can increase tensions and divides between groups and communities (Bush and Saltarelli 2001; King 2013). The subject of history is frequently involved in such dynamics. This school subject is often the first to be reformed after a political power change or identity-based conflict (Bentrovato 2017a; Bentrovato, Korostelina, and Schulze 2016). Its purpose has typically been to disseminate a grand narrative promoting a certain kind of citizenship around the idea of a cohesive national past (Gross and Terra 2020; Wertsch 2002). While this objective remains prominent in many history curricula worldwide, this view of school history has been challenged

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by the rise of objectives promoting historical thinking skills and encouraging students' critical investigation of primary source evidence and multiple perspectives on the past. In deeply divided societies ravaged by or emerging from violent conflict, applying such skills, particularly when addressing difficult histories, is challenging, as scholarship has illuminated (Bekerman 2009; Bentrovato 2017b; Bentrovato and Buhigiro 2021; Chhabra 2017; Goldberg 2017; Kuppens and Langer 2016; Skårås 2019; Wassermann and Bentrovato 2018). In this context, history education has, over the last decades, witnessed an increase in research on emotional, sensitive, and challenging topics, echoing 'the affective turn' in educational research (Noddings 2013; Zembylas 2016). This scholarship explores topics often described as difficult history (Goldberg 2020; McArthur Harris, Shepard, and Levy 2022), controversial history (Pratama 2022), sensitive history (Savenije, van Boxtel, and Grever 2014), and dangerous memories (Zembylas and Bekerman 2008), addressing interconnected issues related to identity, belonging, and emotional attachment to the past.

Building on this scholarship, the study incorporates literature that highlights student perspectives and utilizes written essays as source material to explore the unique challenges and opportunities associated with a context of ongoing civil war. Focusing on the case of South Sudan, it examines the relationship between historical narratives circulating among secondary school students and their communities, and those disseminated via state-produced history textbooks to identify *difficult histories* that might challenge official history. This official history, dominating both textbooks (Bentrovato and Skårås 2023) and classroom teaching (Skårås 2019), centers on a common 50-year national struggle against the Arab Muslim north which led to South Sudan's independence. This historical narrative emphasizes the killings, mistreatment, and marginalization of Southerners by Arabs, alongside their unified resistance against a perceived adversarial Other, towards whom animosity remains prevalent today (Skårås 2022, 144). While pervasive, this account is, however, only one of many existing narratives of the recent past circulating in society and among students.

We build on Abbey and Wansink's (2022) recent investigation of teachers' potential role as brokers of multiperspectivity, in which they argue that students may resist teachers' efforts to activate multiperspectivity to reduce threats to their sense of self and authority. We understand multiperspectivity as viewing 'historical events, personalities, developments, cultures and societies from different perspectives' and as being inherent to history as a discipline (Stradling 2003, 14). Adding to Abbey and Wansink's (2022) work, we explore the benefits and challenges of students to acting as brokers of multiperspectivity in the classroom when the teachers do not. Echoing findings in similarly fragile contexts (Bentrovato and Buhigiro 2021; Bentrovato and Moyo, 2025), recent ethnographic research in South Sudanese classrooms showed that history teachers, for instance, rarely mention sensitive issues concerning ethnicity and internal divisions and seldom invite students to critically reflect on and discuss such matters in ways that make room for multiple perspectives (Skårås 2022). In her research, Skårås (2019) observed that teachers employed various strategies to avoid engaging deeply when students asked clarifying questions about the past; some provided superficial answers before shifting to a different topic. This latter example, involving some of the same students who contributed essays to our study, suggests that in South Sudan today, students may wish to express more historical concerns than their teachers currently

permit. By shifting our focus to students, we analyze their essays as unofficial sources of South Sudan's 'difficult' history of violence, exploring the nature of these narratives to assess their potential contribution to multiperspectivity. We explore what makes particular histories difficult, when they may turn dangerous, and the benefits and challenges of including them in classrooms in South Sudan, a deeply divided society. In doing so, we seek to better understand the boundaries to teachers' activation of multiperspectivity in war-torn and post-war settings. In what follows, we start by sketching South Sudan's violent conflict and uncertain current context, noting its detrimental impact on curriculum enactment and implementation of education policies.

A context of violent conflict and uncertainties

South Sudan's modern history is intertwined with that of Sudan, of which it used to be part. Emerging against the backdrop of longstanding marginalization of the South, sectarian tensions erupted in 1955 during the First Sudanese Civil War (1955–1972), just before Sudan gained independence from Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule in 1956. The Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972 temporarily halted hostilities, granting autonomy to the southern region. Dissatisfaction with the agreement's implementation among southerners led to the Second Sudanese Civil War a decade later (1983–2005). The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed in 2005 between the government in Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), paved the way for a referendum, resulting in South Sudan's independence in 2011. Throughout South Sudan's tumultuous history, various ethnic groups have been embroiled in intra- and inter-communal conflict and violence. Internal power struggles, fueled by fierce competition for leadership and resources, also persisted during the struggle against the northern government, often leading to violent clashes, such as the SPLA split in 1991.

Shortly after independence, in 2013, internal tensions escalated into a civil war, with forces loyal to president Salva Kiir Mayardit clashing against those aligned with then vice president Riek Machar Teny, who is currently the leader of the main opposition group (SPLM-IO). Peace agreements have been signed, broken, and revitalized, yet fighting continues, causing widespread displacement and a severe humanitarian crisis. Despite mixed political alliances in the current conflict, the Dinka are perceived to support the president, and the Nuer the opposition leader (Breidlid and Arensen 2014). Accounting for 35–40% and 15% of South Sudan's population, respectively, the pastoralists Dinka and Nuer are the two largest among the more than 60 ethnic groups (CIA 2025).

It is within this context of violent conflict that, in 2015, South Sudan launched its first comprehensive curriculum. The curriculum framework (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology MoEST 2015) foregrounds 'twenty-first-century competencies,' including critical and creative thinking, communication, and cooperation, as well as culture and identity. The effects of the war, which COVID-19 amplified, have hampered the implementation of the new curriculum and its corresponding textbooks, as the education system has faced school closures and a lack of infrastructure and resources. The system is in disarray, with overcrowded classrooms housing up to 100 students, a chronic shortage of textbooks in secondary schools, and teachers, often unqualified, receiving their salaries only irregularly. While violent conflict characterizes and greatly impacts the daily experiences of teachers and students in South Sudan, talking about it in schools is a highly

sensitive matter. A teacher illustrated the potential of ethnic conflict to 'cause problems' by recounting an incident where a Dinka and a Nuer student fought in the classroom, prompting their peers to quickly mobilize along ethnic lines. A large number of students in secondary education is over-age – at times older than their teachers – as a result of conflict. Their presence in the classroom provides both opportunities and challenges. Some may serve as important resources, providing critical insights into historical events by drawing on their direct experiences. Others may effectively disrupt teaching and learning on account of their military background. Teachers' testimonies of such realities exemplify some of the challenges. In 2015, one teacher, referring to some of his/her students being military generals, reported cases of them disrespecting and harassing teachers and shared the concern that 'someone can put you at gunpoint' for failing them in exams (teacher interview, 2015). Another teacher described the elusive nature of the classroom as a safe place in the face of the militarization and radicalization of some of his/her students. He/she reported about one Dinka student-soldier being at peace with a Nuer classmate, also a soldier, having been shot in the war of 2013; he told the teacher that 'it is good like this because he is an enemy . . . there is no brother there in fighting. The brothers are here in the school, but there no' (teacher interview, 2014). Such cases illustrate the fragile context of conflict, where students may be combatants and adversaries when they exit the classroom door.

A recent study of South Sudan's secondary school history textbooks and teacher guides uncovered an emotionally charged discourse of 'unity in resistance,' centering nationalism and national identification, as underlined in the statement that, despite belonging to different communities, 'we are South Sudanese first' (Bentrovato and Skårås 2023, 1045). Echoing primary school textbooks that describe a 'shared English-speaking, Christian, and African South Sudanese nation contrasted to the Arabic and Islamic North Sudanese' (Vanner, Kovinthan Levi, and Akseer 2020, 209), secondary school history textbooks stress the distinction between an 'Arab' and an 'African Sudan' and a Muslim/Christian divide. In doing so, they emphasize the southerners' shared experience of victimization through slavery and colonialism, and their common glory of liberation from the 'Arab invaders' (Bentrovato and Skårås 2023, 1047). Skårås (2022) found the predominance of this same grand narrative of victimization and liberation among teachers and students both inside and outside South Sudanese classrooms, where Sudan's 'Arabs' were widely described as hated past abusers. These studies identified the lack of recognition of internal historical divisions and the tendency to avoid addressing issues related to ethnicized conflict. Bentrovato and Skårås's (2023) textbook study shows that students are, through certain learning activities, encouraged to collect oral histories from 'people who were there during that time' and 'to share their inside knowledge about the . . . histories of "their people" with the class' (Teacher guide, in Bentrovato and Skårås 2023, 1051). Such tasks represent the possibilities inherent in the textbooks. Yet, as we will argue, the opportunities of bringing otherwise silenced unofficial histories into the classroom remain limited in practice.

Theoretical framework

To frame our research, we draw on *difficult history*. We do so to uncover features of such histories evident in the multiple perspectives of the recent violent past circulating among

South Sudan's youth, as revealed by their essays. We draw on several criteria scholars have set to define this concept. Britzman's conception of difficult knowledge, which represents social and historical traumas in curriculum and learners' encounters with them in pedagogy, is foundational. Zembylas (2018) expands on Britzman's framework to theorize why teachers resist teaching difficult histories, emphasizing the emotive and discomforting nature of these narratives as possible reasons. Zembylas (2018) defines difficult history as 'histories that are rooted in the trauma, suffering, and violent oppression of groups of people' (p. 189). He emphasizes the risks involved in teaching difficult histories in the classroom due to their often politicized nature and polarizing effects, with alternative ideas emerging from such histories potentially questioning hegemonic discourses and norms. Gross and Terra (2020) similarly argue that 'difficult history tends to refute broadly accepted versions of the past or stated national values' and often involves violence that might have been committed by 'citizens of good social standing' (p. 4). Relatedly, Stradling (1984) defines controversial issues as 'those on which society at large (or the local community, or even the school itself) is divided and for which different groups offer conflicting explanations and advocate conflicting solutions based on alternative values' (p. 121). In post-conflict settings and ongoing war scenarios like South Sudan, difficult history often involves controversial topics. Stradling's (1984) concept of *untouchable issues* is particularly relevant to our case study; he defines these as controversial topics that are politically sensitive within local communities and linked to contemporary challenges.

A related concept, which our empirical material actualizes in new ways, is that of *dangerous history*. The concept typically refers to a history that challenges our assumptions, beliefs, and values; one that is perilous in as far as it questions the stories people tell about themselves or choose to forget, and which thus closely relates to who we are (Haydn 2012; MacMillan 2010). We expand on this concept by applying it to a case where certain histories, if brought into the open uncontrolled, might undermine a fragile coexistence while compromising students' and teachers' safety, with potentially tragic consequences. This brings us to the theoretical concept of *silence* as a strategy and feature of everyday peace. Mac Ginty (2014) describes everyday peace as 'routinized practices used by individuals and collectivities as they navigate their way through life in a deeply divided society that might suffer from ethnic or religious cleavages and be prone to episodic violence in addition to chronic or structural violence' (p. 553). He identifies avoidance, particularly of controversial and sensitive topics, as a principal everyday-peace strategy to avoid and minimize conflict, as confirmed by evidence from classroom practices worldwide, from Cyprus (Charalambous 2023), Estonia and Latvia (Kello 2016), to Rwanda (Bentrovato and Buhigiro 2021), South Africa (Wassermann and Bentrovato 2018) and Zimbabwe (Bentrovato and Moyo 2025). Hence, some scholars are sceptical about the usefulness and feasibility of teaching the violent past in schools too soon, fearing increased tensions (Kello 2016; Kuppens and Langer 2016).

Building on this scholarship as we seek to determine what makes particular histories difficult and potentially dangerous, we question the assumption of a universal ideal of risk-taking in history teaching, as per Kitson and McCully's (2005) popular typology of teachers. Their typology positions teachers and their teaching approaches on a continuum that goes from the *avoider* to the *risk-taker*, in which the latter fully embraces multiperspectivity, is not afraid to push boundaries, and seizes

opportunities to tackle controversial issues, consciously linking past and present. Although education literature widely endorses risk-taking teaching and learning approaches as ideal for promoting peace and social justice, research indicates a prevalent reliance on single-narrative or evasive approaches when studying recent violent histories (Bentrovato 2017a; Skårås 2021). Research further suggests that reconciliation might occur through silencing rather than exposing controversial topics (Stefansson 2010). In light of these scholarly debates and empirical findings, it is worth looking at silence as a practice of resistance and agency among teachers and students in deeply divided societies, and as a technique to minimize risk and provide 'enough social glue to prevent a society from tipping from sustained tension to all out-war' (Mac Ginty 2014, 553). This article adds to this literature in its reflection on why and when there might be situations in which risk-taker approaches to history teaching may simply not be worth the risks.

Research method

This study draws on 118 secondary school students' essays, D1-D118. They resulted from a writing competition that was initiated by the first author as part of a broader study of history and national identity in South Sudan (Skårås 2019; Skårås and Breidlid 2016). The essays were collected in 2015 simultaneously with the launch of the new South Sudan curriculum framework (MoEST 2015), and subject panels' incipient work in developing the country's first secondary school textbooks that are in use today. Participants included students studying history in their second or third year of secondary schooling. Sampling was informed by the fact that South Sudan's recent history was primarily addressed in the first and second years, as per the Southern Sudan Certificate of Secondary Education Syllabus (SSCSE) (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST] 2007). SSCSE was the most influential curriculum at the time of data collection and was being implemented alongside bits and pieces of curricula from neighboring Sudan, Uganda and Kenya. The students could choose one out of two proposed essay questions, both informed by teachers' prior feedback. Students' participation was consensual and voluntary. The three students writing the best essays from each school were rewarded (with a headlight) based on the stated quality criteria, including personal reflections and views.

The first question involved interviewing a grandparent or a parent about the Second Civil War (1983–2005), and more specifically, about the causes of the war and the students' respective family's role in it. The aim was to collect narratives from older generations who directly witnessed history while simultaneously encouraging intergenerational dialogue on the recent violent past. These essays served as windows into the memories of families and local communities and related unofficial histories circulating outside the classroom.

Acknowledging the potential sensitivity of the personal conversations expected by the first question, an alternative question prompted students to discuss similarities between the Second Civil War and the current civil war within South Sudan. The question invited narratives of historical and current intergroup dynamics by noting, 'During the second civil war there were conflicts between southerners and the conflict between the north and the south'. This question assessed how students compared and linked past and present –

a question which might not be less sensitive, but which left it up to the individual students to navigate controversial topics.

Notably, the essays revealed practices of plagiarism. Some students copied from Wikipedia and other internet sources – despite widespread lack of electricity and internet connection. Others apparently copied from each other, as their essays showed similar paragraphs that could not be traced back to particular sources. The book *A Concise History of South Sudan* (Breidlid, Breidlid, and Said 2014), appeared influential in one out of six schools where the teacher had received the book before data collection. This indicates the teacher's influence in this particular case, despite the expectation for the students to write their essays at home and the researcher's collection of the essays directly from the students as measures intended to avoid undue influences. Framing the essays as part of a writing competition might have led to greater teacher involvement out of a desire for their students to do well as a reflection of their classroom practices; however, except for one school, teachers were not involved in the task.

The essays were collected in two geographical locations, Juba and Narus. The locations, both having experienced a massive influx of internally displaced people, were purposefully selected because of the ethnic diversity of students likely to be encountered in the schools, thus potentially offering the opportunity to collect diverse historical narratives. The two sites were also among the few accessible and relatively safe locations in the midst of the war in 2015. Due to uncertainty about the sensitivity of ethnic belonging, the students were not asked to identify by ethnicity. In many cases, however, students' ethnic belonging could be uncovered through their names and, in fact, many willingly shared their ethnicity; during fieldwork, it emerged that ethnic identification was openly and often proudly spoken of in communities. Significantly, attempts to trace students' ethnic affiliation did not allow us to confidently identify any Nuer students in our sample. However, a small minority of essays seemed to articulate 'Nuer' perspectives. A possible reason for this imbalance is that in 2015 many Nuer in Juba resided in Protection of Civilians (PoC) camps, sites not included in the sample due to security issues. As for Narus, this location had been experiencing a massive influx of primarily Dinka refugees, whose more substantial presence is reflected in our sample. While the essays reveal a biased student perspective in this regard, the sample includes representatives of many of the more than 60 ethnic groups present in the country, among them Equatorians, namely agriculturalists living in eastern, central, and western states.

We used content analysis to examine the student essays, focusing on narratives of historical events and issues that we found to be silenced in the textbooks or that presented alternative perspectives. We considered the frequency of these narratives as an argument for exploring them further and investigating why teachers and textbook authors might avoid them. We focused our attention on the most frequent unofficial narratives, for their strong presence among the students and possibly among their communities. Similarly, we highlighted those most rarely mentioned, i.e. critical incidents revealing important insights (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007, 404) into particular features of difficult history that may challenge official history.

In the following sections, we present the study's findings by elaborating on students' conflict narratives that we identified as constituting difficult histories, often in dissonance with the official history of *unity in resistance* – the latter otherwise reproduced by many

students. We examine selected narratives highlighting a) conflicting political objectives and visions, b) conflicting experiences of popular *contributions* to a just war, c) tribalism, variously presented as either a new phenomenon or a historical constant, and d) competitive victimhood and the sustained primacy of in-group suffering.

Students' knowledge and construction of difficult and untouchable histories

a) Conflicting political objectives and visions

The grand narrative of unity in resistance that South Sudanese textbooks and classroom teaching disseminate portrays the SPLM/A late former leader John Garang de Mabior as the Father of the Nation and the leader of a long and unifying struggle for 'total liberation' (Bentrovato and Skårås 2023). In contrast to this official history, the student essays reflected a dichotomy of interpretations as to the political objectives of the liberation war.[1] While many students claimed that 'the war of 1983–2005 had [the] aim of getting independence' (D116), a large number referred to the SPLM/A's less radical vision of 'end[ing] the long marginalization suffered [both] by the southern sudanese and other marginalized groups in northern Sudan' (D39) and creating a 'New Sudan' – a concept which the textbooks fail to mention – 'based on equality, justice, freedom of worship, expression and movements' (D49). This vision of a New Sudan reflects a reality widely documented by scholarship, which reports that during the Second Civil War, the objective of the SPLA, led by Garang, was not secession and independence from the north; rather, 'the stated policy of the SPLA [was] to liberate Sudan from tyranny and to create a democratic, secular state' (Hutchinson 2001, 308; see also Young 2005). A frequently mentioned narrative states,

> The SPLA/M took up arms against the Arabized North so as to create a New Sudan. In the New Sudan all Sudanese would be treated equally, whether they are black, brown, Arabs or Africans, Muslim or Christians.[2] (D27)

The reoccurrence of this narrative across schools in the same geographical area suggests that it may be openly promoted by some teachers, thus not particularly sensitive. However, it is absent from textbooks and collides with the SPLA liberation objective, which claims credit for achieving independence, and might be downplayed by the SPLA/M currently in power. Student essays further challenge the grand narrative of unity in resistance by highlighting the internal disunity stemming from these conflicting political objectives and visions. This disunity violently manifested in the 1991 split within the SPLA, following an unsuccessful coup led by the Nuer Machar and other high-ranking officers against their Bor Dinka leader Garang (Hutchinson 2001, 208). Machar's new rebel movement, the SPLA-Nasir faction, claimed the objective of gaining political independence for the South. The fact that both factions, whose successors are still in tense competition today, have taken ownership of the objective of independence as the ultimate goal of the struggle, might raise a sensitive political issue. Thus, questions about the divergence of political objectives during the liberation struggle and related competing claims constitute difficult history – typically silenced in the classroom for everyday peace to prevail.

While leaving the various factions' divergent political objectives unmentioned, students frequently framed past and present internal conflicts as pure and simple 'power

struggles'; this points to the individualization of blame as another strategy of everyday peace in South Sudanese history classrooms. Many framed the conflict within the SPLM/A as one which from '[Its] foundation … was marked by internal rivalry for leadership, especially between Akuot Atem [an older commander, senior to Garang] and John Garang' (D29; D42; D55; D57; D58; D66), and throughout the struggle. Several students established continuity in the 'power struggle' narrative through explanations of the 1991 split as one caused by 'rivalry for power in leadership [between Garang and Machar] instead of them joining hands to fight the Northern government' (D89). Other students, by contrast and more in line with the official narrative, referred to a unity of purpose that ended with independence, as detailed further below.

b) Conflicting experiences of popular 'contributions' to a just war

Regardless of the struggle's ultimate political objective, students unanimously interpreted the Second Civil War as an inevitable and just war against the 'brutal rule of Arab[s]' (D112), in ways that echo the country's official history. They portrayed it as the inevitable result of denied rights leaving the southern Sudanese with no choice but to take up arms. Reflecting the textbooks' account of thousands 'flock[ing] to join rebel training centers' (Book 2, in Bentrovato and Skårås 2023, 1050), one student noted that 'the southerners [had] asked for their rights, and it was not given to them, so that made them [. . .] run into the bush' to fight (D24). Another student further elaborated:

> This [taking up of arms] exactly happened in southern Sudan on May 16^{th,} 1983 when people, youth, women, men, educated and uneducated, voluntarily trooped out [*sic*] of cattle camp, school, and farm to pick up arms against the repressive Arab regime. There was no parent sound of mind to close his ear, and this was how my parents get involved to play [a] key role in [the] liberation of [. . .] our country. (D26)

Some students proudly shared about their parents' or grandparents' contribution to the struggle; one student, for instance, articulated his admiration for his father for having 'trained very many recruits who carried out the raids very effectively' (D49). Celebration and admiration make room for more critical voices in several other student essays; some referred to the reality of forced conscription, and particularly the use of child soldiers by various conflict parties – an issue that the textbooks' romanticized liberation narrative silences. Students referred to paramount chiefs appointing young men between the ages of 17 and 18 'to be train[ed] as soldiers and fight in the [second civil] war', adding that 'If the parents refuse to select their child, their properties like bull, goat, maize they have to give to the soldiers in the war' (D46). With similar wording and accompanied by similar narratives from the same school where the teacher got the 'Concise history of South Sudan', two students provided further details on the numbers and fate of young and ill-trained recruits forcefully conscripted in the SPLA specifically. In the words of one of them:

> It is estimated that SPLA had at least 10.000 boys in their ranks. The battalion of the child soldiers was called the 'Red Army'. Many of them died in battles because they were not good soldiers. (D116)

The frequent mention and question of forced recruitment in the past from essays emerging from one school could point to the teacher´s influence. One of these two students identified continuity in such practices, underscoring that, in the ongoing war as well, 'the SPLM in Opposition recruit[ed] children at teen ages to fight against government where many of them were killed in Bor and Malakal' (D114). Along similar lines, another student drew parallels between the 'Red Army' and 'the so called white army of Riek Machar' (D92), comprising, according to Breidlid and Arensen (2014), 'defense groups representing Nuer rural communities at various levels' (2). This student referred to the white army as composed of 'young boys who even do not know what they are fighting for' (D92). The essays indicate that the topic of forced recruitment, particularly of children, might be promoted by one teacher in the study. However, the continuity of the activity is an example of a crime still committed by powerful forces, thus an example of difficult history.

c) Tribalism: a new phenomenon or a historical constant

In line with official history, students lamented their nation's descent into a 'senseless' and costly internecine war after conquering freedom through a just war of collective sacrifice. Students' unanimous interpretation of the latter as an inexorable, necessary and legitimate war against an oppressive Other contrasted with their understanding of the current war. They variously described the ongoing conflict in political terms, as a fight 'between Riek Machar and the government of South Sudan' (D113); in ethnic or 'tribal' terms, as a war between 'Nuer and Dinka' (D113); or, more broadly, in national terms, as a war 'between southerners'. In comparing the Second Civil War and the current war, several students underscored, in line with the textbooks, the parochial selfishness and 'tribalism' motivating the ongoing conflict – one where 'everybody is struggling for power of himself and his community [and] not for the nation', and 'with all the parties involved [. . .] in [the] killing of innocent people and [the] rape of girls and [. . .] women' (D84). Underscoring the senselessness of the current war, one student described it as one which is 'of no benefit other than hatred, suffering, and disunity among ourselves', unlike the Second Civil War which was 'for our freedom' – an unfathomably 'misused' (D93) freedom achieved at great cost, as detailed in this extract:

> Roughly two million people died as a result of war, famine and disease caused by the conflict [;] four million people in South Sudan were displaced at least once and [some] of them repeatedly during the war [;] civilian de[a]th toll is one of the highest of any war since world war II and [the] war [was] marked by a large [number] of human right violations [;] these include slavery and mass killing [un]til conflicts officially ended with the signing of the peace Agreement in January 2005. (D109)[3]

As mentioned earlier, textbooks and teachers (Skårås 2019) are largely evasive on the subject of ethnic differences and conflicts within South Sudan before independence. Among the textbooks' rare indications of internal divisions during the struggle is a brief reference to the earlier mentioned SPLM/A's split into Torit and Nasir factions in 1991, which scholarly sources describe as a full-scale military confrontation between Nuer and Dinka (Hutchinson 2001). Such references are so evasive that they fail to mention any of its central actors. That said, the textbooks are suggestive of an uneasy relationship between the two communities, positioning the Nuer as the primary wrongdoers against

the Dinka, although 'they fought together in the SPLA' (Bentrovato and Skårås 2023, 1051). The textbooks, more broadly, acknowledge 'tribalism' as a current threat to the nation's survival (Book 2, in Bentrovato and Skårås 2023, 1050).

Unlike the textbooks, which scarcely mention internal divisions, several students elaborated on past and present internal rivalries, defections, and power struggles, identifying tribalism within South Sudan as a historical constant. They also highlighted instances of sectarian mass violence that are typically omitted in formal education. In doing so, the essays revealed students' diverse construction of in- and out-groups, evidencing polarized and 'polarizing attributions of group-based victimhood and blame' (Bentrovato 2017b, 407). They thus reflected and reproduced tribal accusations that heavily infused the political discourse at the time of data collection, and which possibly colored students' perspectives and historical interpretations. We understand these narratives as a distinct threat to everyday peace in their context, which do not seem to generally belong in ethnically heterogenous classrooms.

The students frequently attributed blame for tribal hatred to the top political leadership, often mentioning the culprits by name. One student, for instance, described the Second Civil War as the backdrop to increased tribal hatred among South Sudanese political leaders, as it manifested in the 1991 split between factions 'led by Dr. John Garang de Mabior who was Dinka Bor by tribe and by Dr. Riek Machar who was Nuer' (D89). Highlighting continuity with the present, this student observed, in 'the current civil war, there is hate between our current H.E. president Salva Kiir Mayardit, who was Dinka Bahr-el-Gazal and Riek Machar who was Nuer'. Consequently, 'this hatred spread to the rest of the communities fighting each other' (D89). Other students referred more explicitly and emphatically to central political leaders *creating* such hatred in their quest for power, something which, according to one student, has been 'continuously taking place in South Sudan' (D98). One student referred to 'people in top position only tend[ing] to give jobs to their tribes leaving out other people which is an act [. . . that] undermined [. . .] fellow citizen' (D102). Whereas this latter narrative exemplifies views that referred broadly to 'citizens' or 'the southerners' as mere victims, others (also) pointed to 'us the southerners' (D82) as agents to be blamed for the current war on account of their engaging in corruption and tribalism that had resulted in lack of equity and justice.

d) Competitive victimhood and the sustained primacy of in-group suffering

Machar's and Nuer's responsibility

Numerous student essays more narrowly portrayed Machar and, by default, the Nuer ethnic group as the primary wrongdoers against the Dinka, thus echoing the textbooks' discourse. Referring to the 'internal dissension among the rebels' that led to the SPLA split, one student, for instance, mentioned 'The attempt to overthrow Garang [. . .] led by Riek Machar and Lam Akol in November 1991', which culminated in the 'SPLA Nasir carr[ying] out the Bor Massacre, killing [. . . many] civilians' (D118). The 'Bor Massacre' – an instance of mass violence which saw more than two thousand people killed in Bor Dinka county, Garang's home area, and more than 100,000 displaced (A. Breidlid, Breidlid, and Said 2014; Hutchinson 2001) – is a manifestation of internecine violence that took place during the liberation struggle. Such narratives, reflecting a reality that disturbs the textbook discourse of unity in resistance against the Arab north, find no place in the SSCSE

(MoEST 2007) in use until recently, nor in the new curriculum framework (MoEST 2015), including its related textbooks and classroom teaching (Bentrovato and Skårås 2023; Skårås 2019; Skårås et al., 2019).

Machar appears as an element of continuity in Dinka victimhood narratives, linking the past to the present. These narratives frequently drew parallels between Machar's 'defection' in 1991 and the ensuing Bor Massacre, and the outbreak of fighting and violence in Juba in 2013. A student attributed the 2013 unrest to Machar's renewed 'power struggle' (D74), reflecting Kiir's government of an attempted military coup by the then former vice president. However, this claim is disputed by the Machar-led opposition (Community Empowerment for Progress organization n.d.), and an African Union commission of inquiry found the evidence to be inconclusive[4] (AU 2014). One student noted that 'the SPLM war [1983–2005] led to [the] massacre of Dinka Bor in 1991 by Riek Machar, and it happened again in 2013 where most people from Dinka Bor were killed in brutal ways' (D114). Another student, similarly, yet without pinpointing the identity of the victims, drew a parallel between the continued 'shooting and killing of people by both the northern government and SPLM/A soldiers, more especially the Nasir faction under Riek Machar' during the Second Civil War, and the current civil war, where 'many people lost their lives and they are mostly killed by Riek Machar' (D98).

In our research we also observe othering discourses at play and one student essay particularly stands out, which refers, with an accusatory tone, to the 'disloyal', traitorous behavior of 'other communities [who] collaborated with the Arabs fighting their own people just like the war of today which has led all other loyal southerners to hate Riek and his allies' (D104). While, again, unspecified in this essay, presumably the reference to 'other communities' implicitly alludes to Machar's Nuer. The context of this collaboration, as sketched by several students, was one of attempted internal destabilization by the Khartoum government during the liberation struggle as it resorted to 'arming tribal militias in the south to fight [the] SPLM on their behalf' (D95; D8; D46). In more ambiguous and evasive terms, another student referred to the 'thousands of human beings hav[ing] either been butchered by the radicals of SPLM/A or the anti-revolutionaries or Khartoum government' before suggesting that 'it is just the same case with the current civil war' (D100). References to the 'radicals of SPLM/A' effectively allow the movement's deresponsibilization for the atrocities it committed during the war. In this way, the narrative does not collide with the official history that celebrates the SPLM/A as the entity that successfully fought for independence. However, it disturbs the grand narrative of unity in resistance that the textbooks espouse in constructing a usable past for nation-building by referring to internecine dissension and violence.

The incidents highlighted in these narratives, showcasing friction within SPLM leadership, primarily between the Dinka and Nuer groups, are fraught with complexity. They represent untouchable and politically sensitive issues due to their connection to power dynamics, and remain controversial because of societal divisions over how these events are interpreted, as illustrated below.

Kiir's and Dinka's responsibility

Few student essays in our sample shifted the blame for divisions and violence to central governments for their continuous repressing policies – the Khartoum regime during the 1983–2005 war, and the ruling SPLM during the current conflict. Referring to the present,

one student pointed the finger specifically at 'H. E. president Salva Kiir Mayardit [who] was practicing tribalism in the country', arguing that 'Since he was from Dinka Bahr-el-Ghazal, he tends to employ the Dinka Bahr-el-Ghazal in high posts neglecting other tribes' (D89).

In contrast to the many students who blamed Machar and the Nuer for atrocities against Dinka — possibly a product of the Dinka bias in our sample —, a minority of students emphasized Kiir's and Dinka's responsibility in the victimization of the Nuer. These narratives, focusing on the recent war and ongoing violence, noted that conflict started when 'president Kiir removed Riek Machar from his office of vice president' (D101). In a detailed account of the outbreak of war in 2013, one student reported that, 'Civilian causalities began when Dinka element[s] of SPLM began targeting Nuer civilians in the capital city of Juba' (D109), and went on to blame Dinka troops for continuing to kill Nuer civilians in Juba and beyond.[5] (S)He underscored the role and responsibility of (Dinka) general Marial Chanuong Yol Mangok, whom the UN Security Council later accused of involvement in human rights violations in the country (United Nations 2023). This student referred to 'eyewitness accounts [that] also cite SPLM Dinka troops assisted by guides in house-to-house searches of Nuer homes and killing civilians in Juba' and elsewhere in government-held territory (D109). This narrative echoes UN reports of 'Mangok's Presidential Guard [having] led the slaughter of Nuer civilians in and around Juba, many who were buried in mass graves' (United Nations 2023). It is estimated that between 15,000 and 20,000 Nuer were killed in the first three days of the war (AU 2014). Such fresh experiences and memories of targeted violence – otherwise silenced in the classroom – explain and are an important determinant of the emotionally charged context of teaching and learning in schools and of connected challenges today.

Nuer's and Dinka's responsibility

Several student narratives attributed blame to both Nuer and Dinka and victimhood to other communities; they thus voiced a perspective held by minority groups who are silenced in the textbooks' narrative of the current war. A case in point is one student describing the two groups as 'against all other tribes' in the most recent conflict. This student juxtaposed the Second Civil War, 'where all tribes participated to fight against the Arabs,' to the current civil war, in which 'Dinka and Nuer [were] fighting themselves [and] making other tribes suffer for no reason' (D93). These narratives indicate a split between pastoralist communities and agriculturalists, a perceived divide confirmed in informal conversations during fieldwork.

Concluding discussion

Our study uncovered evidence that students possess detailed knowledge of significant historical events and issues that are sidelined or silenced by textbooks and teachers in their classrooms. Their narratives, although diverse, frequently present one-sided perspectives on conflicting war objectives, conflicting war experiences of (proud or forced) popular participation in relation to the liberation struggle, and to enduring internal political rivalries, military defections, and connected intercommunal violence and atrocity crimes. These students provide alternative historical interpretations to the central sanitized and celebratory official history of the liberation war. This highlights the potential for

students to serve as brokers of multiperspectivity in the classroom, should they be given the opportunity to freely express their views.

In challenging the official narrative of 'unity in resistance', these alternative narratives have the potential to destabilize what is arguably the primary source of cohesion that has united southerners across community lines in recent years. This poses a risk to further unsticking the social glue of this deeply divided society. As such, these narratives represent difficult history insofar as, following Gross and Terra's (2020) definition, they refute broadly accepted official, versions of the past. In line with Zembylas (2018) conceptualization, they likewise bring up controversial, highly politicized, and societally divisive and polarizing questions around traumatic collective experiences of violence. The potential risks connected with the circulation of these unofficial histories, and the predominance of conscious everyday silences that the teachers seem to be sustaining in their often heterogeneous classrooms, should be understood within the current fragile context of ongoing power struggles between key political actors and fears of all-out war.

The essays reveal unofficial histories that include accounts of power abuse and human rights violations by central political figures and entities, such as the SPLM/A. As such, they encompass another element of difficult history in line with Gross and Terra's (2020) criteria. Examples include students' accusations of political leaders promoting tribalism, ordering or overseeing mass violence, forced conscription, and enlisting child soldiers. While some students partly embraced the narrative of pre-independence 'unity in resistance' against a common Arab/Muslim enemy, others challenged it by emphasizing a continuity in leaders' power-hunger, which fueled factionalism and rivalry. They also did so by uncovering experiences of coercion, alongside voluntarism, hidden behind the textbooks' exaltation of ordinary people 'flock[ing] to join the rebel training centres' to contribute to the liberation struggle. Furthermore, the student narratives challenged the master narrative by testifying to the 'tribalism' and targeted, sectarianized discrimination and mass violence sponsored and presided over by authoritative figures, around which competing victimization narratives have been constructed. Since many of the central personalities in these narratives are still powerful political leaders, the narratives – vectors of unofficial knowledge that students may bring to the classroom – threaten the official history that legitimizes current leadership, their positions, and their politics. Consequently, these narratives are also untouchable because they connect closely with South Sudan's current problems. Perceptions of the historical continuity and primacy of in-group suffering at the hands of internal Others reinforce the freshness of painful memories of violence experienced by different communities. The connections the students make between past and present conflict, including abuses, atrocities, and hatred, compound the difficult nature of such histories and connected pedagogical challenges. Not surprisingly, teachers may hesitate to allow such narratives to circulate in their classrooms. They may consider encouraging students' evaluation of different perspectives not worth the risks, instead favoring, in line with Eastmond and Mannergren Selimovic's (2020) theorization, the application of strategic public silencing and avoidance of divisive and painful memories for everyday peace.

We believe in the positive potential of promoting multiperspectivity in history teaching, and in centring students' voices and agency while doing so. Based on our findings, we must, however, question the ideal of the risk-taker teacher in the case of South Sudan today and in similar contexts. The risk-taker teacher who, in engaging with students,

pushes boundaries, tackles controversial issues, and consciously links past and present will almost inevitably bring out narratives of division, hatred, and factionalism in a politically fragile state like South Sudan. Within a context of ongoing violent conflict that implicates the political leadership and that involves and tragically affects students' and teachers' communities, the term 'difficult history' does, arguably, not go far enough. In our view, it fails to adequately encapsulate the nature and extent of the challenges and risks this history may involve. In the case of South Sudan, these histories are not only difficult, but also 'dangerous'. They are dangerous to a fragile, peaceful coexistence and to an ideal of social cohesion that may hinder its materialization by the open circulation of intergroup hatred and competitive victimhood narratives. Likewise, they are dangerous to individual students and teachers themselves. The chances of safely engaging students to act as (co)brokers of multiperspectivity in the classroom are particularly slim when teachers often lack teacher education, and, most significantly, when freedom of speech is limited. Thus, encouraging multiperspectivity will put teachers at considerable risk. This is a context where the risk of being put at gunpoint for failing students in exams, and more generally for disagreeing, is real among teachers where minimal conditions of safety are not guaranteed. Caution in this environment is understandable if one considers recent reports of practices of '[c]lose surveillance and intimidation' and '[h]arassment, arbitrary detention, torture or execution-style murder' of journalists for failing to self-censor; this notably applies to criticism of the SPLM or government-associated individuals in the context of 'issues linked to the conflict' (Bentrovato and Skårås 2023, 1045, citing Reporters Without Borders, 2021).

More research is needed on whether and how teachers could purposely rely on students as (co)brokers of multiperspectivity in such contexts, and we question if there might be other arenas of teaching and learning that may be more adequate than the school classroom to venture in such risky undertakings. If silencing particular narratives and memories in the classroom may be a preferred conscious option for the immediate purpose of upholding everyday peace, especially in heterogenous spaces, it remains to be seen what the long-term downside effects of such public silences of multiple experiences and perspectives may be on internal peace and stability.

Notes

1. Alongside the two political war objectives mentioned here, the students frequently cited control over natural resources such as oil, water and land.
2. This exact passage is identified in 16 essays from two different schools in the same geographical location.
3. The quote seems to be taken from Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Sudanese_Civil_War.
4. The commission's final report, in acknowledging the competing narratives on what triggered the 2013 violence, concluded that 'the initial fighting within the Presidential Guard arose out of disagreement and confusion over the alleged order to disarm Nuer members' (AU (2014), 27).
5. The student recounted that 'President Salva Kiir ordered the Sudan Peoples Liberation movement (SPLM) major General Marial Chanuong, commander of the presidential Guard the Tiger batallion to leave the meeting venue and return to the barracks to disarm the troops [;] after disarming all ethnicities within the guard, Marial allegedly ordered that the Dinka member be re-armed. His deputy from the Nuer ethnicity began to question this order and

> fight ensured when surrounding officers saw the commotion. The Nuer soldiers also re-armed themselves [and] fighting erupted between the Dinka element from Sunday night until Monday afternoon. Civilian casualties began when Dinka element of SPLM began targeting Nuer civilians in the capital city of Juba' (D109).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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