

MARIE CURIE ACTIONS

Project No: 322229 - **Project Acronym:** UNDERVIO

Project Full Name: “Social Studies Teachers’ Understanding and Ethical Discussion of Political Violence and Nonviolence”

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Project Website: <http://undervio.deusto.es/en/>

PUBLISHABLE SUMMARY

UNDERVIO is an international qualitative research project on the relation between history teaching and the legitimization or de-legitimation of political violence. Principal Investigator Dr. Angela Bermudez is housed at the Center for Applied Ethics at the University of Deusto. The aim of the study is to generate knowledge about different processes and mechanisms by which history education in different socio-cultural contexts fosters or hinders a critical understanding of political violence. Research was conducted in Spain, Colombia and the United States. These three countries have had distinct experiences of political violence at different times in their history.

The study was conceived in three phases dedicated respectively to the analysis of history textbooks, interviews, and focus groups with history teachers. Phase 1 involved the analysis of a purposeful sample of forty-five history education resources in the three countries. The sample included widely disseminated school history textbooks and alternative educational resources, such as specialized museum exhibits and didactic units developed by NGO’s or research centers. We examined how political violence is represented in accounts pertaining to three watershed historical events that are prominent in the national narratives of each country and are deeply connected to a sense of civic identity and the understanding of their present societies.

Table 1. Historical topics selected for analysis in each country.

	Spain	Colombia	United States
Territorial expansion / ethnic discourse	Spanish Conquest of America (1492-1550)	Spanish Conquest of America (1492-1550)	Westward Expansion “Trail of Tears” (1830-1840)
Civil War	Civil War / Postwar (1936-1945)	Liberal-Conservative Violence (40-50’s)	Civil War Era Abolitionist Movement (1830-1865)
Current armed conflicts	Basque Conflict and ETA related violence (1960 to present)	Colombian Armed Conflict (1960 to present)	9-11 & War on Terrorism. (2001 to present)

In phase 2 we conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with a purposeful sample of history teachers and/or peace educators in each country. Interviews followed an open-ended protocol designed to capture a) the processes of meaning making in teachers’ understanding of the accounts of violence available in education resources, b) their experience teaching these topics in diverse classrooms and c) their perception of challenges and opportunities to foster a critical understanding of political violence. During phase 3, we conducted focus groups with the teachers who participated in phase 2 in each country. These discussions examined in more depth the opportunities and challenges of teaching the history of political violence from a

critical and human rights perspective. To conduct the focus groups we selected the challenges and opportunities that teachers had identified individually during the interviews (phase 2), and used them as starting points to collectively reflect about the extent to which pedagogical practices in history education could de-normalize political violence and promote its critical understanding. Additionally, selected findings from phase 1 of the study were presented and discussed with participants to contrast our analysis with their experience.

The analysis of data collected in the different phases integrated two different theoretical approaches. We drew upon models of discourse analysis that shed light on the different ways in which language and narrative are used to achieve social goals such as framing the meaning of events and negotiating personal and collective identities. We also drew upon cognitive and developmental perspectives that shed light on how history education builds upon and encourages the use of disciplinary concepts and cognitive tools that are essential to critical reflection and historical understanding.

The research conducted yields valuable results that expand the knowledge we have about the role of history education in fostering or hindering a critical understanding of political violence. This knowledge is of fundamental importance to better understand the contribution that history education can make to the construction of a democratic civic culture and to sustainable peace building. There are interesting differences as well as recurrent patterns that emerged from the results obtained in each country. The analysis of textbook narratives (phase 1) identified 10 Narrative Keys that describe interlocking mechanisms that allowed them to describe violent events and processes while keeping their meaning and implications invisible to students:

1. Conflation of conflict and violence.
2. Narrative framing that justifies violence.
3. Biased representation of different narratives.
4. Marginalization of the perspective and voice of the victims.
5. Disjointed discussion of the social structures that propel and sustain violence.
6. Removal of human agency.
7. Silence about non-violent alternatives.
8. Simplistic account of the costs of violence.
9. Omission of the benefits of violence.
10. Disconnected past and present.

The analysis of interviews and focus groups with teachers (phases 2 and 3) exposed the very different obstacles they experience when trying to generate a critical reflection about the use of violence in their nation's history. These differences are partly due to the varying degrees to which violence is present in their most immediate social contexts (across and within countries), but they are also influenced by educational issues, such as the curriculum and assessment guidelines that define their practice, or the pedagogical approaches adopted by their schools. Despite these differences, the study reveals important similarities. The majority of students in the three countries learn the narrative of history textbooks that, according to our analysis, do not question the use of violence but portray it as an inevitable phenomenon or as a necessary means to achieve social ends. Teachers across countries recognize that the curriculum is not designed to reflect critically about the roots of violence, its causes, consequences, social implications, and alternatives. Further, they recognize their capacity and responsibility (in their role as teachers and citizens) to interrogate the narratives about the violent past that are conveyed to the students. Some teachers in each country identified past efforts in their teaching to disrupt the dominant narratives that justify and/or accept the inevitability of political violence as a means to solve social conflicts. However, teachers also

note the weight of institutional and contextual obstacles to teach about the violent past in ways that foster a critical understanding of violence. Consistently, teachers highlight the importance of different forms of support, ranging from ongoing access to alternative teaching resources, more flexible curriculum guidelines and testing policies, and the participation in wider communities of practice where they can explore, learn, and exchange knowledge and experiences.

The development of this research project has strengthened the academic expertise of the Marie Curie Fellow (P.I. Angela Bermudez). She recently obtained an open-ended full time research contract with the Center for Applied Ethics in the University of Deusto. This has given her the opportunity to consolidate a research agenda on the intersection of history and peace education, to develop a research team and network, and to prepare several publications.