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EDITED BY

Delfin Ortega-Sánchez,
University of Burgos, Spain

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Selim Hilmi Ozkan,
Yıldız Technical University, Türkiye
Carlos Pérez González,
University of Burgos, Spain

*CORRESPONDENCE

Pedro Miralles-Martínez
✉ pedromir@um.es

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The conceptions of Spanish and Colombian students regarding processes of historical reconciliation

Nilson Javier Ibagón¹ and Pedro Miralles-Martínez^{2*}

¹Department of History, University of Valle, Cali, Colombia, ²Faculty of Education, University of Murcia, Murcia, Spain

In the field of history education research, the analysis of the construction, circulation and appropriation of controversial and difficult histories has become a particularly relevant issue. Based on this line of research, the present study seeks to analyze the historical judgments of Spanish and Colombian students regarding processes of historical reconciliation, linked to situations of a controversial and difficult nature. To achieve this objective, a quantitative, non-experimental, survey-based design was employed. A total of 648 Spanish and 764 Colombian students from schools located in the cities of Murcia (Spain) and Bogotá (Colombia) participated by answering a closed questionnaire. The results show that ethical judgments on controversial issues, established on what is considered to be politically correct, are more frequent when the problem being evaluated is situated in a frame of reference external to questions of national belonging. However, such judgments tend to decrease, or assume a neutral standpoint, when the controversial issue is related to the individual's own sense of identity. Thus, it is clear that the learning of difficult and controversial historical issues is not only built on a cognitive dimension. It is also supported by political, ethical and aesthetic dimensions, leading to the processes of making and receiving historical judgments being even more complex.

KEYWORDS

history education, controversial history, difficult history, historical reconciliation, students' conceptions

Introduction

The historical configuration of most modern societies is closely related to events, facts and controversial and traumatic processes. However, due to the nature and the sense of identity which defines the formation of the nation states, such events have become difficult experiences to process in that they call into question the legitimacy of the order established by those states and their reason for being. Therefore, although analyzing these controversial histories is essential to understanding the fact that the present is marked by different kinds of violence, it is not unusual to find official and unofficial discourses in different areas of society. These discourses directly or indirectly encourage the neglect, distortion or denial of controversial issues, considering them unworthy of public discussion (Ahonen, 2014; De Baets, 2015; Gellman, 2015).

In the context of education, this trend to deny or conceal certain historical experiences defined by symbolic and physical violence, in accordance with the sophism of an immaculate, exemplary and triumphal version of history, reaffirms a system of individual and collective

identity grounded in a reductionist approach to the learning of history. By neglecting the recognition of the needs, suffering and pain of others, this approach destroys all possibility of building a common present and future in which truth, reparation, justice, peace and the avoidance of repeating wrongs take pride of place.

Although it is socially and politically difficult to confront conflictive histories (particularly more recent events), this task has now become a priority in the teaching of history. Therefore, over recent years, both in terms of theory and methodology, research and reflection around the relationship between history education and controversial, traumatic and difficult issues have progressively become more important (McCully, 2012; Epstein and Peck, 2017; Ibagón, 2020; Vicent et al., 2020). This growing interest among researchers has been based, on the one hand, on criticism of forming a sense of identity via the reproduction and memorization of romantic history (Carretero and Van Alphen, 2014; Van Alphen and Carretero, 2015; Ibagón, 2023) and, on the other hand, on recognition of the potential of the teaching and learning of history as far as citizenship education and the promotion of peaceful and democratic scenarios in contexts marked by different forms of violence are concerned (Barton and Levstik, 2004; Nølgård et al., 2020; Pudar et al., 2020).

Along these lines, it has been established that history learning in education systems, rather than developing a univocal and one-sided identity grounded in a historical narrative defined exclusively by notions of triumph and grandeur, should prepare children and young people to make a critical reading of the past, the present and the future. According to different authors, to achieve this educational objective in schools would imply: (1) Questioning discourse and teaching and learning practices which directly or indirectly promote the exclusion, denial, segregation, annihilation and devaluation of others and their historical narratives (Han et al., 2012; Pudar et al., 2020; Miralles and Ibagón, 2022); (2) Rethinking the elements which give shape to the notion of an *us* (particularly in national terms) (Kokkinos, 2011; Bentrovato et al., 2016; Miles, 2018; Wallace-Casey, 2022); (3) Promoting the identification and analysis of multiple perspectives around historical experiences of a controversial and difficult nature (Ahonen, 2014; Maric, 2016; Goldberg, 2017; López-García, 2022); (4) Recognizing the influence that different spheres of socialization outside of schools have on students' ideas of history (McCully, 2012; Najbert, 2020).

Due to their nature, educational obligations deriving from such actions are not only associated with a cognitive dimension, but they also involve ethical and political dimensions. As a whole, these dimensions are essential for promoting the process of social reconstruction following the breaking of community links caused by violent confrontation in past or present conflicts. In other words, teaching and learning history via the study of a controversial or difficult past should not be limited to exercises which merely characterize the processes. Rather, it should also imply reflection of a political nature linked to a deep analysis of power relations and their pragmatic extent and the formation of positions of an ethical nature associated with the judgment of principles from which violent actions may or may not be legitimized.

From this point of view within the analysis of controversial, overwhelming and difficult histories, some authors consider that historical reconciliation emerges as a theoretical and methodological construct which makes it possible to change perspectives of the scope of history education via the integration of cognitive, political and

ethical aspects (Borries, 2011; Kokkinos, 2011; Ibagón and Miralles, 2021). Conceived as a meta-historical concept which promotes the construction of a plural, heterogeneous and integral *us*, historical reconciliation requires subjects and communities to recognize their urgent need to understand their life experiences via a shared path with different *others*. Hence, this strategic concept is directly linked with the formation of an active citizenship which participates in dialogue in favor of the defense of the common good and life of the community (Pudar et al., 2020; Ibagón and Miralles, 2021; Ibagón, 2023). In this regard, historical knowledge is considered to be a democratic tool via which children and young people can confront the symbolic burdens of the past using their understanding thereof to generate critical positions concerning injustices which determine the present and endanger the future.

When the relevance of historical knowledge in building more peaceful and fair societies is recognized, it becomes important to identify and analyze the positions younger generations take with regard to historical problems which affect how they define their own expectations. This is particularly true if they are aware that many violent conflicts (be they symbolic or physical) originate from the cancelation or denial of the *other* as a valid interlocutor. Although making comparisons between different conflicts and the positions people take concerning them is a complex matter, the present study analyzes the conceptions regarding processes of historical reconciliation of a sample of young people whose national contexts have been marked by traumatic and difficult historical processes associated with fratricidal conflicts during the 20th century. Thus, via the evaluation of simulated situations, a comparison is made of the conceptions of Spanish and Colombian students regarding how they understand and resolve situations between states generated by territorial disputes, how they evaluate the possibilities of establishing peace agreements between the parties involved in civil wars and how they position themselves with regard to the possibility of publicly dealing with traumatic and painful histories.

In order to interpret the data collected, certain fundamental principles from temporal orientation theory were employed to gain an understanding of the logic which defines historical learning. These principles are essentially related to ways of making sense of history which influence and configure the processes of cognitive, ethical, political and aesthetic understanding of subjects concerning connections between temporal dimensions (historical consciousness) (Rüsen, 2005, 2012). These ways of making sense of history are associated with positions of a traditional, exemplary, critical and genetic nature. In the case of traditional positions, the experience of time is linked to the origin and repetition of a socio-cultural model which is taken to be an obligatory point of reference. On the other hand, ideas of an exemplary nature define history as a set of representative cases of general dispositions and rules which come to form unquestionable patterns of life. From a critical perspective, temporal relationships are understood according to problematic diversions from socio-cultural models which have now become naturalized. Finally, genetic ways of making sense of history assume the temporal experience according to the transformation of these models and opening up to different ways of seeing life (Rüsen, 2005).

The results presented here form part of one of five research nuclei of a macro research project analyzing the conceptions of Spanish and Colombian students on history as a school subject and the relationship between these conceptions and the learning of history.

Methods

Objectives

The objective of this paper is to analyze the conceptions of Spanish and Colombian students regarding processes of historical reconciliation linked to situations of a controversial and difficult nature.

SO1: To identify the historical judgments of Spanish and Colombian students regarding territorial disputes, the establishment of peace agreements and the relationship between the study of controversial historical issues and education.

SO2: To compare the types of historical reflection through which Colombian and Spanish students construct judgments regarding historical problematizations of a controversial nature.

Design

The methodological research was based on a quantitative non-experimental survey-based design. This approach was employed due to the fact that it makes it possible to identify or clarify relationships regarding pre-existing facts and realities (not intentionally generated by the researcher) in research fields where little prior research has been carried out (Hoy and Adams, 2015; Roni et al., 2020).

Sample

The sample population for the proposed analysis consisted of Colombian and Spanish students aged between 15 and 17 in their final year of compulsory education in their respective countries in the cities of Murcia (Spain) and Bogotá (Colombia). The population was defined on the basis that students of these ages, compared with younger children, have had a greater amount of contact with experiences of formal education associated with the teaching and learning of history. Furthermore, with the aim, on the one hand, of finding common ground and making subsequent comparisons with similar research carried out in Europe (Angvik and Borries, 1997) and Latin America (Amézola and Cerri, 2018) and, on the other hand, avoiding possible biases caused by the phenomenon of overage students, the selection criterion was established that participants should be between 15 and 17 years of age. As far as the definition of the national origin of the participants is concerned, substantive aspects linked to the historical background of both Spain and Colombia were taken into account, along with formal aspects relating to the place of residence of the researchers.

In terms of the first criterion, Spain and Colombia have both experienced internal conflicts which have had a great influence on social and political positions in their recent histories. Colombia has suffered an internal armed conflict for more than 70 years, in which guerrilla fighters, paramilitary organizations and state forces have participated, and which is still ongoing despite the recent signing of a peace agreement with the most important guerrilla group (FARC). On the other hand, Spain experienced a bloody civil war which, although it ended approximately 80 years ago, still affects the foundations of the nation-state. Therefore, although the origin, development and

consequences of the conflicts are different in the two cases, the levels and examples of dehumanization experienced in these violent processes mean that they are difficult and controversial issues to deal with in different areas of the historical culture of the two countries, particularly within the education system (Rodríguez, 2012; Arias, 2015, 2018; Valls et al., 2017; Arias et al., 2019; Ibagón and Echeverry, 2021; Luna et al., 2021). Thus, the analysis of young people's judgments in these two countries regarding territorial disputes between states and internal armed conflicts makes it possible to identify certain obstacles and opportunities for fostering educational processes in history classes around the idea of historical reconciliation and the quest for the common good (two key strategic contents in the development of historical consciousness).

On the other hand, the second criterion for the definition of the sample is related to the material possibilities of the researchers to gain access to information. Thus, a convenience sample was used, located in the cities in which they work (Bogotá and Murcia). However, with the aim of fulfilling statistical requirements associated with the quantitative rationality of the study, the final number of participants was calculated to fulfil the scientific criterion of sample representativeness (99% confidence and 5% error). To achieve this, the statistical data available for students registered in the final year of compulsory education in Murcia and Bogotá was consulted before the tools were applied. In the case of Bogotá, this figure, according to the DANE (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística – National Administrative Department of Statistics), was 85,861 students, whereas in Murcia, according to the CREM (Centro Regional de Estadística de Murcia – Regional Centre for Statistics of Murcia), there were 4,597 such students. Based on these totals, the recommended size of the sample in order to fulfil the guidelines for statistical representativeness was 661 and 578 students, respectively. However, during the data collection phase, using the tools established for this purpose, it was possible to count on the participation of a greater number of individuals (648 students in Spain and 764 in Colombia). As the surplus number of participants did not have a big enough influence in terms of statistics to significantly alter the results, the decision was taken to include all of the responses gathered in both Murcia and Bogotá. This decision was based on the consideration of the importance, in terms of the consolidation of the information, of the different characteristics of the students' schools of origin and their geographical location in inner-city areas.

Tools

The data collection tool consisted of a closed questionnaire previously employed in quantitative and comparative research in Europe and Mercosur countries. This tool was adapted to the aims of the research by excluding some questions and partially modifying others, with some new questions also being included.

Procedure and data analysis

The questionnaire was submitted to a process of evaluation via expert judgment ($N=9$) and its reliability and construct validity were reviewed via a pilot study involving 119 Colombian and 110 Spanish students. The final ACONHIS (Questionnaire on Historical Learning

and Historical Consciousness, in its Spanish acronym) questionnaire consisted of 25 questions and 180 items grouped into five analytical areas: (i) epistemological conceptions concerning history; (ii) school culture/historical culture; (iii) conceptions on first-order contents; (iv) the resolution of problems via historical thinking skills; and (v) perspectives of experience and expectation. For the purposes of this paper, three questions from nucleus 4, focusing specifically on the problem of historical reconciliation, are taken into account (Table 1).

It should be highlighted that the statistical evaluation of the reliability of the research nucleus of which these three questions form a part was confirmatory, in that the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was $\alpha=0.857$. This indicator would suggest that the statistical measurements presented for this nucleus offer reliable data on the problem studied. Of the three questions analyzed, the first forms part of the questionnaire used in research projects conducted in European and Mercosur countries entitled "Terranova case." The two other questions were new inclusions regarding an evaluation of signing peace agreements and the possibility of dealing with controversial issues in the classroom. It is important to bear in mind that, in this study, the fictional nature of the Terranova case proposed in the European and Mercosur studies was maintained with no alteration to its general conception and wording. This decision was taken due to the possibilities it offered to reduce possible biases deriving from the lack of knowledge among the students of specific real-world cases and from media influences surrounding them. Likewise, it was assumed that maintaining the imaginary Terranova case would facilitate comparisons not only among the Colombian and Spanish samples analyzed in this study, but also with the findings of the research conducted in Europe and Mercosur which employed this scenario. The criterion of simulation

was maintained for the other two questions as it prevented the judgment being made from being altered directly by allegiances and feelings affecting the present positions of the students concerning the conflictive historical backgrounds of their respective countries.

The three questions posed were accompanied by a series of items (closed-ended responses) which were to be evaluated by the students on a Likert scale aimed at establishing the *importance* (question 1) and the degree of *agreement* (questions 2 and 3) of the option chosen. The data collected via the ACONHIS questionnaire was transferred to a database, before being codified and analyzed using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software. The descriptive statistical analysis was based on the calculation of the median (Md), mean (M), mode (Mo) and standard deviation (SD). The inferential statistical analysis employed to compare the data of the Spanish sample with that of the Colombian students was based on a process of the determination of statistically significant differences between the medians. This was performed via the non-parametric Mann-Whitney *U* test for independent samples.

Results

Ethical judgment and sense of belonging

The descriptive statistics in Table 2 provide a summary of the results of the evaluation made by the participants in the study concerning the six response items on the degree of importance of the arguments put forward (of a pacifist and pro-war nature) regarding the Terranova case and the inter-state conflict it represents.

In line with this statistical data, both in the sample of Colombian and Spanish students the greatest percentage rate of negative options

TABLE 1 Questions and items analyzed regarding historical reconciliation.

Questions	Items
Terranova is an imaginary territory. It was occupied by our country (A) from 1,500 to 1900. However, from 1900 to the present day, it has been occupied by country B. Our country wishes to regain Terranova and presents several arguments in order to achieve this aim. What importance do you attach to the following arguments?	<p>P1.1. The people of Terranova speak our language and share our culture.</p> <p>P1.2. Terranova was under our control longer than it has been under the control of country B.</p> <p>P1.3. Our country's colonies were established in Terranova in 1500, while those of country B were only founded after 1900.</p> <p>P1.4. When asked, the inhabitants of Terranova say that they would prefer to live under our control rather than under the control of country B.</p> <p>P1.5. An international peace summit examined the case and recognized our country's right to recover Terranova.</p> <p>P1.6. We have military power and can exercise it to take Terranova back.</p>
After decades of suffering the effects of a devastating war between the state and rebel forces, the conflicting sides have put forward a peace plan to seek to avoid future conflict. As a citizen of this territory, what would be your position regarding the following actions which form part of the agreement?	<p>P2.1. The political participation of the rebels in state organisms and institutions.</p> <p>P2.2. The definition of new policies regarding the distribution of wealth.</p> <p>P2.3. Moral and economic reparations for victims.</p> <p>P2.4. The formation of a historical memory commission to seek the truth regarding what happened.</p> <p>P2.5. A legal pardon for rebels who participate in the peace process and provide reparations for their victims.</p> <p>P2.6. The insertion of the rebels into civil society with support from the state.</p> <p>P2.7. Economic and social reforms which benefit the population.</p>
A country which has experienced violent internal conflicts with thousands of victims in its recent history finds itself deciding whether these events should be analyzed at school. What is your position regarding the following initiatives?	<p>P3.1. Emphasis should be placed on what unites us as a nation, rather than on what divided us at a specific moment in time.</p> <p>P3.2. The version of the victims should be recovered enabling them to move past the injustices and pain which they had to endure.</p> <p>P3.3. National identity should be recovered by studying the feats of the great heroes of the homeland.</p> <p>P3.4. The study of these processes should be avoided as to analyze them would prevent society from closing the "wounds" left by the conflict.</p> <p>P3.5. These processes should be analyzed critically in order to avoid their repetition.</p> <p>P3.6. National reconciliation should be promoted by ignoring processes which, at times, have led to internal conflict.</p>

(very little importance and little importance) were for the statements “Terranova was under our control longer than it has been under the control of country B” (P1.2) and “We have military power and can exercise it to take Terranova back” (P1.6). The figures for the Colombian group for these statements were 32.1% ($N=245$) and 31.2% ($N=238$) and for the Spanish group 35.6% ($N=231$) and 35% ($N=227$), respectively. On the other hand, the statements with a higher percentage of positive evaluations were “When asked, the inhabitants of Terranova say that they prefer to live under our control rather than under the control of country B” [Colombia (58.5%; $N=447$) and Spain (72.9%; $N=472$)] and “An international peace meeting examined the case and recognized our country’s right to recover Terranova” [Colombia (63.3%; $N=483$) and Spain (69.2%; $N=449$)]. Finally, the statement with the highest percentage of the neutral option (average importance) was, among the group of Colombian students, “The people of Terranova speak our language and share our culture” (P1.1) with 39.8% ($N=304$), whereas for the group of Spanish students, it was statement P1.3 “Our country’s colonies were established in Terranova in 1500, while those of country B were only founded after 1900,” a variable which reached 36.1% ($N=234$).

When taking into account the median (Md) as a descriptive statistical indicator of the set of answers obtained for the items of the Terranova case (Table 2), the proximity of the main positions of the two sample groups is ratified. In this regard, for the six items evaluated, one divergent and five identical positions have been identified between the sample groups. Of the five items in which the same core value is shared between the groups, three (P1.2, P1.3, and P1.6) were evaluated from a neutral position ($Md=3$) (items reflecting postures of accentuated coercion and domination) and two (P4 and P1.5) were evaluated from a positive position ($Md=4$) (items which were structured upon principles closer to conciliation). Finally, the item with a median indicating disparity between the two groups (P1.1) shows a neutral axis of central distribution in the group of Colombian students ($Md=3$) and a positive central distribution among the Spanish students ($Md=4$).

In a complementary way, the means (M) obtained for the six premises of the Terranova case (Table 2) indicate, in four cases, the existence of similar response trends in the two groups: three of a neutral character (P1.1, P1.5, and P1.6) and one negative (P1.2). The recorded means only show different positions between the two groups for two options (P1.3, P1.4). In both cases, these are neutral for the

TABLE 2 Comparison of evaluations of the items of the Terranova case.

Item	Conception										
				Negative		Neutral	Positive		Md	M	SD
				Very little importance	Little importance	Average importance	Important	Very important			
P1.1	Col	Fr	764	42	129	304	221	68	3	3.19	1.000
		%	100	5.5	16.9	39.8	28.9	8.9			
	Sp	Fr	648	21	66	217	245	99	4	3.52	0.977
		%	100	3.2	10.2	33.5	37.8	15.3			
P1.2	Col	Fr	764	60	185	280	191	48	3	2.98	1.029
		%	100	7.9	24.2	36.6	25	6.3			
	Sp	Fr	648	45	186	210	156	51	3	2.97	1.059
		%	100	6.9	28.7	32.4	24.1	7.9			
P1.3	Col	Fr	762	43	157	262	242	58	3	3.15	1.016
		%	100	5.6	20.6	34.4	31.8	7.6			
	Sp	Fr	648	48	169	234	158	39	3	2.96	1.020
		%	100	7.4	26.1	36.1	24.4	6			
P1.4	Col	Fr	764	22	97	198	275	172	4	3.63	1.055
		%	100	2.9	12.7	25.9	36	22.5			
	Sp	Fr	648	23	46	107	180	292	4	4.04	1.104
		%	100	3.5	7.1	16.5	27.8	45.1			
P1.5	Col	Fr	764	12	53	216	300	183	4	3.77	0.943
		%	100	1.6	6.9	28.3	39.3	24			
	Sp	Fr	648	9	55	135	231	218	4	3.92	1.002
		%	100	1.4	8.5	20.8	35.6	33.6			
P1.6	Col	Fr	764	70	168	254	190	82	3	3.06	1.124
		%	100	9.2	22	33.2	24.9	10.7			
	Sp	Fr	648	101	126	161	155	105	3	3.06	1.306
		%	100	15.6	19.4	24.8	23.9	16.2			

group of Colombian students, whereas P1.3 is negative and P1.4 is positive for the Spanish sample.

Finally, in terms of inferential statistics, it is important to bear in mind that, after performing the Mann–Whitney U test, statistically significant differences were found ($p < 0.5$) between the conceptions of the two groups in four of the six items (P1.1, P1.3, P1.4, and P1.5) (Table 3).

Historical judgment and historical reconciliation

Table 4 shows the results of the evaluation of a hypothetical historical problem linked to a past marked by a war between the state and rebel forces, a present defined by the quest for a solution to the devastating effects of the war (a peace agreement) and the projection of a peaceful future (the conditions of the agreement).

According to the statistical data in Table 4, in both the Colombian and Spanish groups of students, the statement registering the highest percentage of negative responses (“disagree” and “totally disagree”) regarding the agreement to resolve the problem proposed was “The political participation of the rebels in state organisms and institutions” (P2.1), which reached 32.5% ($N=248$) in the first case and 36% ($N=232$) in the second. This item also registered the highest percentage of the neutral option (indifference) in both groups, reaching 44% ($N=336$) in the Colombian sample and 38.7% ($N=249$) among the Spanish sample. On the other hand, as far as the statements which obtained the highest percentage of positive responses (“agree” and “totally agree”) are concerned, the following can be highlighted in the two sample groups: “Economic and social reforms which benefit the population” [Colombia (74.9%; $N=572$) and Spain (81.5%; $N=528$)]; “Moral and economic reparations for victims” [Colombia (72.2%; $N=552$) and Spain (70.8%; $N=459$)]; and “The formation of a commission of historical memory to seek the truth regarding what happened” [Colombia (64.5%; $N=493$) and Spain (56.9%; $N=368$)].

In general, the similarity in the selection of the response options shown above is confirmed by the value of the median recorded in each of the items evaluated by the two groups (Table 4). Based on this statistical reference, six identically evaluated core values can be identified (P2.1, P2.3, P2.4, P2.5, P2.6, and P2.7), along with one different posture (P2.2). Of the six items in which shared core values were recorded between the two sample groups, three (P2.1, P2.5, and P2.6) indicate a neutral conception ($Md=3$), while the three remaining items (P2.3, P2.4, and P2.7) indicate a positive conception ($Md=4$). In the item with a median denoting a difference between the two samples (P2.2), the evaluation of the Colombian students was

neutral ($Md=3$), while it was positive among the Spanish sample ($Md=4$).

On the other hand, the means obtained (Table 4) for the seven items indicate similar response trends for both of the sample groups. Thus, there are no differences in the orientation of the positions between one group and another. The means show shared negative conceptions regarding one of the items (P2.1), neutral conceptions for five items (P2.2, P2.3, P2.4, P2.5, and P2.6) and positive conceptions for the final item (P2.7).

However, when the Mann–Whitney U test was performed, statistically significant differences ($p < 0.5$) were identified between the responses of the Colombian and Spanish students in four of the seven items (P2.2, P2.4, P2.5, and P2.7). Three of these correspond to issues of changes and measures related to society in general (Table 5).

Dealing with difficult and controversial histories in the classroom

Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics associated with the students’ responses regarding whether they perceive that it is possible and viable to deal with and discuss difficult and traumatic historical issues in the classroom.

According to the statistical data contained in Table 6, the statement with the highest percentage of negative answers (“disagree” or “totally disagree”) among the sample groups was that “(t)he study of these processes should be avoided as to analyze them would prevent society from closing the “wounds” left by the conflict” (P3.4). This statement received a total of 51.9% ($N=396$) responses associated to disagreement and total disagreement among the Colombian students and 55.7% ($N=361$) in the case of the Spanish group. On the other hand, the statement which received the highest percentages of approval (“agree” or “totally agree”), in both the Colombian and Spanish samples, was that stating that “(t)hese processes should be analyzed critically in order to avoid their repetition” (P3.5), registering 73.7% ($N=562$) in the former group and 71.3% ($N=462$) in the latter. Also worthy of note are the percentages of positive (“agree” or “totally agree”) and neutral (“indifferent”) response options obtained for the following statements: “Emphasis should be placed on what unites us as a nation, rather than on what divided us at a specific moment in time” (P3.1); and “National identity should be recovered by studying the feats of the great heroes of the homeland” (P3.3). In the first case, the Colombian group recorded a high percentage of indifference (38%; $N=290$), whereas the Spanish group attributed this statement with one of the highest percentages of agreement and total agreement (56%; $N=363$). In the second case, the opposite occurred,

TABLE 3 Results of the Mann–Whitney U test for items in the Terranova case.

Item	Mann–Whitney U	Colombian group	Comp.	Spanish group
P1.1	$U = 201793.5; z = -6.282; p = 0.000$	$Md = 3; \text{rank} = 646.63$	<	$Md = 4; \text{rank} = 777.09$
P1.2	$U = 245,103; z = -0.331; p = 0.740$	$Md = 3; \text{rank} = 709.68$	No diff.	$Md = 3; \text{rank} = 702.75$
P1.3	$U = 219720.5; z = -3.716; p = 0.000$	$Md = 3; \text{rank} = 741.15$	>	$Md = 3; \text{rank} = 663.57$
P1.4	$U = 188,464; z = -8.067; p = 0.000$	$Md = 4; \text{rank} = 629.18$	<	$Md = 4; \text{rank} = 797.66$
P1.5	$U = 223379.5; z = -3.320; p = 0.001$	$Md = 4; \text{rank} = 674.88$	<	$Md = 4; \text{rank} = 743.78$
P1.6	$U = 246,468; z = -0.144; p = 0.886$	$Md = 3; \text{rank} = 705.10$	No diff.	$Md = 3; \text{rank} = 708.15$

TABLE 4 Comparison of frequencies and percentages of items in a case of historical reconciliation.

Conception											
Item				Negative		Neutral	Positive		Md	M	SD
				Totally disagree	Disagree	Indifferent	Agree	Totally agree			
P2.1	Col	Fr	764	61	187	336	146	34	3	2.88	0.959
		%	100	8	24.5	44	19.1	4.5			
	Sp	Fr	644	58	174	249	131	32	3	2.85	1.006
		%	100	9	27	38.7	20.3	5			
P2.2	Col	Fr	763	21	120	261	293	68	3	3.35	0.942
		%	100	2.8	15.7	34.2	38.4	8.9			
	Sp	Fr	647	20	66	212	258	91	4	3.52	0.960
		%	100	3.1	10.2	32.8	39.9	14.1			
P2.3	Col	Fr	764	5	43	164	309	243	4	3.97	0.904
		%	100	0.7	5.6	21.5	40.4	31.8			
	Sp	Fr	648	7	37	145	260	199	4	3.94	0.924
		%	100	1.1	5.7	22.4	40.1	30.7			
P2.4	Col	Fr	764	5	49	217	322	171	4	3.79	0.884
		%	100	0.7	6.4	28.4	42.1	22.4			
	Sp	Fr	647	12	53	214	251	117	4	3.63	0.933
		%	100	1.9	8.2	33.1	38.8	18.1			
P2.5	Col	Fr	764	47	136	291	207	83	3	3.19	1.047
		%	100	6.2	17.8	38.1	27.1	10.9			
	Sp	Fr	648	35	99	218	220	76	3	3.31	1.040
		%	100	5.4	15.3	33.6	34	11.7			
P2.6	Col	Fr	764	39	108	328	240	49	3	3.2	0.937
		%	100	5.1	14.1	42.9	31.4	6.4			
	Sp	Fr	648	37	118	241	196	56	3	3.18	1.014
		%	100	5.7	18.2	37.2	30.2	8.6			
P2.7	Col	Fr	764	6	36	150	333	239	4	4	0.877
		%	100	0.8	4.7	19.6	43.6	31.3			
	Sp	Fr	648	3	15	102	219	309	4	4.26	0.838
		%	100	0.5	2.3	15.7	33.8	47.7			

TABLE 5 Results of the Mann–Whitney *U* test for items in the case of historical reconciliation.

Item	Mann–Whitney <i>U</i>	Colombian group	Comp.	Spanish group
P2.1	$U = 242,207; z = -0.526; p = 0.599$	Md = 3; rank = 709.48	No diff	Md = 3; rank = 698.6
P2.2	$U = 222,695; z = -3.341; p = 0.001$	Md = 3; rank = 673.87	<	Md = 4; rank = 742.8
P2.3	$U = 242995.5; z = -0.629; p = 0.529$	Md = 4; rank = 712.44	No diff	Md = 4; rank = 699.49
P2.4	$U = 224,185; z = -3.182; p = 0.001$	Md = 4; rank = 736.06	>	Md = 4; rank = 670.5
P2.5	$U = 229291.5; z = -2.492; p = 0.013$	Md = 3; rank = 682.62	<	Md = 3; rank = 734.66
P2.6	$U = 244678.5; z = -0.394; p = 0.693$	Md = 3; rank = 710.24	No diff	Md = 3; rank = 702.09
P2.7	$U = 205,107; z = -5.937; p = 0.000$	Md = 4; rank = 650.96	<	Md = 4; rank = 771.98

with the Colombian sample recording a high percentage of agreement and total agreement (54.6%; $N = 417$), while the Spanish sample registered its highest percentage of indifference (39%; $N = 253$) among the set of six items evaluated.

In terms of the median obtained for each of the items (Table 6), four shared and two disparate core values can be identified. As regards the identical values, three indicate the predominance of positions of a positive nature ($Md = 4$) (P3.1, P3.5, and P3.6), while for the remaining

TABLE 6 Comparison of frequencies and percentages of items regarding controversial issues in the classroom.

Conception											
Item				Negative		Neutral	Positive		Md	M	SD
				Totally disagree	Disagree	Indifferent	Agree	Totally agree			
P3.1	Col	Fr	764	15	51	290	318	90	4	3.55	0.858
		%	100	2	6.7	38	41.6	11.8			
	Sp	Fr	648	18	51	216	236	127	4	3.62	0.976
		%	100	2.8	7.9	33.3	36.4	19.6			
P3.2	Col	Fr	764	21	119	268	279	77	3	3.36	0.953
		%	100	2.7	15.6	35.1	36.5	10.1			
	Sp	Fr	648	24	82	191	265	86	4	3.47	0.996
		%	100	3.7	12.7	29.5	40.9	13.3			
P3.3	Col	Fr	764	7	85	255	298	119	4	3.57	0.914
		%	100	0.9	11.1	33.4	39	15.6			
	Sp	Fr	648	22	120	253	195	58	3	3.23	0.964
		%	100	3.4	18.5	39	30.1	9			
P3.4	Col	Fr	763	155	241	212	120	35	2	2.53	1.117
		%	100	20.3	31.6	27.8	15.7	4.6			
	Sp	Fr	648	135	226	178	75	34	2	2.46	1.101
		%	100	20.8	34.9	27.5	11.6	5.2			
P3.5	Col	Fr	763	13	36	152	293	269	4	4.01	0.946
		%	100	1.7	4.7	19.9	38.4	35.3			
	Sp	Fr	648	10	35	141	229	233	4	3.99	0.966
		%	100	1.5	5.4	21.8	35.3	36			
P3.6	Col	Fr	764	23	81	248	263	149	4	3.57	1.015
		%	100	3	10.6	32.5	34.4	19.5			
	Sp	Fr	648	22	53	236	188	149	4	3.6	1.034
		%	100	3.4	8.2	36.4	29	23			

item (P3.4) the median indicates that more than 50% of the students from both countries ($Md=2$) manifested their disagreement or total disagreement concerning the statement evaluated. In the case of the items with different core values, the first (P3.2) indicates a positive posture among the Spanish students ($Md=4$) and a neutral position among those from Colombia ($Md=3$). In the second item (P3.3), the opposite is true with a neutral position in the case of the Spanish sample ($Md=3$) and a positive response among the Colombian students ($Md=4$).

On the other hand, the means recorded (Table 6) for the evaluation of the set of statements linked to the problem posed suggest a similar response trend in both sample groups in five of the six items. In four of these five items, this trend was neutral (P3.1, P3.2, P3.3, and P3.6), while the remaining item (P3.4) was negative. In the case of item P3.5, the mean for both groups narrowly showed a dissimilar response trend, being neutral in the case of the Spanish students ($M=3.99$; $SD=0.966$) and positive for the Colombians ($M=4.01$; $SD=0.946$). It is worth noting that, in the responses of the two groups, statistically significant differences ($p<0.5$) were only found in two of the six items related to the problem (P3.2 and P3.3) (Table 7).

Discussion and conclusion

First of all, the findings in the two sample groups show that the ethical judgments formulated by the participants concerning certain controversial historical processes in terms of their national identity depend, to a large extent, on this identity being associated to the idea of an *us*, and the underlying differentiation between this *us* and *others*.

These types of positions are particularly evident in the students' evaluation of the statements regarding the Terranova case. In general, the conceptions of the students in the two sample groups regarding this hypothetical case are characterized by a positive evaluation of the statements of a pacifist nature (a priority for negotiating toward peace and defending the will of the inhabitants based on the idea of the existence of a social contract) and, at the same time, by a rejection of positions based on the direct or indirect use of violence (putting into action the mechanisms of war and mentions of processes of domination). However, the statistical difference identified concerning the traditional option of resorting to language and traditions for claiming possession over a territory (P1.1) suggests the continued existence of a theory of identity sustained by the idea of an imposed *us*, which is legitimated or

TABLE 7 Results of the Mann–Whitney *U* test for items relating to controversial issues in the classroom.

Item	Mann–Whitney <i>U</i>	Colombian group	Comp.	Spanish group
P1.1	$U = 234442.5; z = -1.818; p = 0.069$	Md = 4; rank = 689.36	No diff	Md = 4; rank = 726.71
P1.2	$U = 228404.5; z = -2.635; p = 0.008$	Md = 3; rank = 631.8	<	Md = 4; rank = 736.02
P1.3	$U = 199131.5; z = -6.661; p = 0.000$	Md = 4; rank = 769.86	>	Md = 3; rank = 631.8
P1.4	$U = 237528.5; z = -1.316; p = 0.188$	Md = 2; rank = 718.69	No diff	Md = 2; rank = 691.06
P1.5	$U = 244,793; z = -0.335; p = 0.737$	Md = 4; rank = 709.17	No diff	Md = 4; rank = 702.27
P1.6	$U = 244,012; z = -0.482; p = 0.630$	Md = 4; rank = 701.89	No diff	M = 4; rank = 711.94

refuted depending on historical experiences. Thus, while the group of Spanish students established that the criteria of language and tradition have considerable weight when settling the hypothetical territorial dispute, the Colombian students (based on the statistics of the median) evaluated these elements neutrally. What is of interest in the position of the latter group is these students' closeness to the approaches of other Latin American students, who, when analyzing the same case in research carried out in Mercosur countries, have clearly expressed that language and a common culture are elements which do not possess sufficient legitimacy to justify the possible annexation of certain territories, along with their inhabitants (Cerri et al., 2014; Amézola and Cerri, 2018). The difference recorded in terms of this issue between Spanish and Colombian students may be related to the type of master narratives which have been used to build their systems of national identity. While in Spain the education system reinforces the idea of an identity rooted in the notion of the grandeur of the "Spanish Empire" and the civilizing role of the Catholic Monarchs (Sáiz and López-Facal, 2015; Sáiz, 2017), in Colombia the national narratives taught at school and in different spheres of historical culture are mainly based on the struggle against that empire and the process of independence.

As far as identity is concerned, the notion of belonging, therefore, begins to emerge as a variable which has a direct impact on the formation, orientation and scope of students' ethical judgments and their direct link with positions of a traditional, exemplary, critical and genetic nature. From this point of view, the statistical data gathered concerning the dilemmas analyzed by the two sample groups demonstrate that the learning of history is not only structured according to a cognitive dimension (although this is extremely important), but it is also supported by political, ethical and aesthetic dimensions, which make processes of the emission and reception of historical judgments more complex. Thus, it becomes clear that this capacity does not depend exclusively on historical knowledge, but also on the knowledge and mastery of operations which make it possible to give meaning and coherence to the interpretation of the past and a perspective to guide practical life. In other words, the learning of history is directly linked to the mobilization of students' historical consciousness (Rüsen, 2005, 2012; Körber, 2017).

Upon comparing the statistical data regarding the responses given by the Spanish and Colombian students on the three controversial hypothetical cases, it can be stated that the historical judgments made, supported by what is considered to be politically correct, and which are closely related to genetic ways of making sense of history, appear with greater frequency when the circumstance or problem evaluated is situated in a space of reference which is outside of that of national

belonging. These types of judgment tend to diminish or be perceived from a neutral point of view, linked to positions of a traditional or exemplary order when the controversial phenomenon is closely linked to a place of identity (e.g., the country of origin). Along these lines, when real or hypothetical situations, such as the Terranova case are evaluated, it was easier for the students of the two sample groups to support and share pacifist postures defined by a constitution of a genetic meaning (as these are far removed from historical experience) (Körber, 2017), than when they were required to evaluate difficult realities which directly or indirectly affect their own spaces of identity and articulation.

In the historical dilemmas based on the analysis of historical reconciliation and the public debate of traumatic and painful historical events (questions 2 and 3), pacifistic principles became weaker in the conceptions of the students from both countries and, in some cases, were diluted through their denial or the predominance of neutral postures closer to exemplary and traditional criteria. Although the exercises did not mention data or direct information regarding particular controversial historical events in Colombia and Spain, the general sense of the dilemmas evoked, to a greater or lesser extent, characteristics of difficult processes experienced in those countries, to such an extent that in the data collection process attempts were made to veto these questions by the management teams of some schools.

In the first of the dilemmas (question 2), which sought to identify how the students of the two countries approach the issue of historical reconciliation when this includes different agents, the responses in the two groups of students concerning the victims (P2.3 and P2.4), with the exception of some statistical differences, maintained a line directly related with values such as justice and reparation. However, these types of positions oriented toward peace changed substantially with regard to policies aimed at combatants. In spite of the fact that the orientation of the three options (P2.1, P2.5, and P2.6) referring to these agents was designed based on criteria which have been identified as key policies for promoting reconciliation in real post-conflict scenarios (Cole, 2007; Bentrovato et al., 2016; Ibagón, 2020; Pudar et al., 2020), the postures of both Colombian and Spanish students in terms of the median (Md) were of indifference. Thus, it was assumed by a large percentage of students from both countries that neutrality is a viable option for processing highly complex decisions in which the exercise of empathy is difficult, ignoring the fact that impartiality in itself is not enough to reduce human violence as it prevents people from feeling empathy for the needs and limitations of others (Edling et al., 2020).

Although the evaluation of the reincorporation of combatants into civil society is a complex issue due to the different variables which must be taken into account, according to the results obtained,

it is clear that there is a predisposition among the students to assume a traditional posture. This is, in some way, an obstacle to overcoming a difficult past when the exercise of forgiveness is implied. In this regard, there is some indication in the students' responses of attitudes which go against the idea of historical reconciliation. This may be due to the fact that reconciliation requires certain mental preconditions, such as distancing the past without forgetting it, not allowing the past to completely determine the present and looking forward to the conditions and possibilities of a common future (Borries, 2018, p. 41).

It must be highlighted that the greatest difference between the Spanish and Colombian students in the solution of this historical dilemma focuses on the evaluation of the agreement generated by carrying out reforms leading to the transformation of the economic and social realities of the general population (P2.2 and P2.7), particularly in reference to the distribution of wealth. Thus, while more than half of the Spanish students stated that they were in agreement with this type of transformation as a means of ensuring peace, a considerable percentage of the Colombian students proved to be either indifferent or in disagreement with this statement. What is of interest in this response trend as far as the group of Colombian students is concerned is that the armed conflict which has afflicted the country for more than six decades has been grounded precisely on the concentration of wealth among a small minority of the population. One possible explanation for this posture may lie in discussions which took place in the media during the 2018 presidential campaign, around the time that the data for the present study was collected. At that time, right-wing factions succeeded in instilling in society the dangers for the institutional and economic status quo of the rise of the left and the application of its ideas to redistribute wealth in the midst of the implementation of a peace deal with the guerilla forces of the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) (Cardona and Londoño, 2018; Alvarado et al., 2020). This demonstrates that the learning of history and the construction of historical judgments surpasses the field of education and involves different spaces of the historical culture in which people live.

In the second dilemma, which required the students to evaluate different positions concerning whether to deal with a difficult recent past in the classroom or not (question 3), the results show how different constitutions of meanings are mixed in the formulation of judgments on controversial issues. This strengthens the idea that young people's historical consciousness is expressed in different ways depending on the reality being evaluated, with there being no internal coherence between the structuring of positions. For instance, while more than half of the Spanish and Colombian students flatly rejected the statement suggesting the avoidance of studying painful historical processes (P3.4), both groups supported the promotion of national reconciliation based on forgetting the processes which led to the confrontation (P3.6). Furthermore, while a high percentage of students from both countries agreed with the need for critical analysis of painful periods of history in order to ensure that they were not repeated (P3.5), at the same time, the two groups also validated the idea of placing particular importance on the meaning of national unity, more than on the reality which called it into doubt (P3.1). Such evaluations indicate that positions of a critical and genetic nature coexist with those of an exemplary and traditional order when dealing with controversial issues. This coexistence should be problematized and taken into account when teaching historical thinking with the aim

of encouraging, via the mastery of the mental operations upon which it is based, the quest for a greater coherence between the different conceptions from which young people understand and organize their experiences of the past, present and future.

As a whole, the data collected makes it possible to establish three general lines of analysis: (1) In the students' positions regarding the approach to dealing with controversial and difficult histories, visions of democratic openness converge with limited perspectives which promote, to a certain degree, the continuation of (symbolic or physical) violent confrontation. The challenge facing the teaching of history and the social sciences in schools lies in strengthening the aforementioned openness while, at the same time, progressively and critically dismantling the persistence of ideas and postures which deny otherness and block possibilities of progressing together, moving past any differences which may exist; (2) The differences observed between the positions of the Spanish and Colombian students concerning the evaluation of controversial and difficult historical problems are, on the whole, linked to the particular historical experiences of their respective countries. This suggests that educational processes aimed at developing mechanisms and processes of historical reconciliation among younger generations should be based on the identification of particular needs and shortcomings, without this implying the legitimization of the nation as the only point of reference for identity; (3) Although it is important to acknowledge the specific historical backgrounds which affect the temporal frameworks of the subjects' identity, there are processes and events which, by engaging society's sense of humanity, require a unified position from society as a whole. When faced with violent and unjust situations of dehumanization, independently of the space and time in which they arose or arise, history education should provide students with tools which enable them to assume a critical position. The development of this critical, complex and genetic vision around the past and the present is a fundamental step in advancing toward processes aimed at the eradication of violence as a mechanism for conflict resolution.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Research Ethics Commission of the University of Murcia (Comisión de Ética de Investigación de la Universidad de Murcia). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin.

Author contributions

NI: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. PM-M: Formal

analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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