

# No one can take away my living memory: Teaching about violent past in Colombia

Enrique Chaux / Alexander Ruiz / Maria Andrea Rocha / Juliana Machado /  
Juana Yunis / Laura Bastidas / Charlotte Greniez

## *Historical memory in the classroom: Challenges in a troubled country*

Colombia has been immersed in an internal armed conflict dating back to the 1950s. This confrontation can be considered a war that is both old and new (Kaldor, 2012; Münkler, 2005): old in the sense that it coincides with and is framed within the Cold War, that global political moment in which socialism and capitalism were posed as diametrically opposed models of society and their main representatives as bitter enemies. And new, because it crosses the borders of politics and since the 1980s has drawn on resources from criminal economies, such as drug trafficking.

Beginning in the 1980s, a number of Colombian governments have pursued peace processes with some of the guerrilla organizations created in the 1960s and 70s. Most of these efforts failed for various reasons, instead giving rise to new cycles of violence (Sánchez, 2003). In 2016, the Colombian government signed a Peace Agreement with FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) the largest and oldest guerrilla in the Western hemisphere. More than any previous agreement, this agreement was conceived to comprehensively respond to the basic pillars of transitional justice and, in particular, to the victims' right to truth, justice, comprehensive reparation, and the pursuit of non-repetition. However, the current government of President Iván Duque (2018-) has not fully upheld its side of the bargain. Moreover, some FARC leaders have reverted to armed struggle, and irregular armies have reassembled to continue to contest part of the national territory, operating under unlawful and violent conditions. Peace, therefore, remains an aspiration.

There has been a marked polarization between those who defend the Peace Agreement and those who are against it. Indeed, on October 2, 2016, a plebiscite was held in Colombia for citizens to express their approval or rejection of the Agreement. The 'No' vote won by a narrow margin. One of the aspects that causes this separation is the memory that defenders and opponents have built of the recent past. For some, it is an armed conflict



with political actors who can negotiate their agendas and reconcile; for others, the guerrillas represent illegality and terrorism, and should therefore be judged as mere criminals.

In many countries, educational policies refrain from opening up uncomfortable or difficult debates about opprobrious periods (Rousso, 2016), or from focusing on memories that extol some events and figures while censoring or hiding others. As a result, narratives may become official memories at the service of the most powerful sectors (Jelin, 2002). Although no censoring has occurred in Colombia and, in fact, many teachers have brought the history and memories of a violent past to school, this has not been a clear priority in educational policies. Much more could be done by the National Ministry of Education and local Secretaries of Education to promote the study of the recent history of violence in Colombia.

In this article, we present four initiatives developed by groups that we have been part of and that address different critical moments of Colombian violence: 1) Teaching about *La Violencia* between liberals and conservatives in the 40s and 50s, an initiative led by Universidad de los Andes; 2) A Toolkit called A Journey Through Colombia's Armed Conflict Historical Memory: Learning peace and unlearning war<sup>1</sup>, developed by the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica*; 3) *Grabar en la memoria*, implemented by the *Universidad Pedagógica Nacional*, with mothers and sisters of young victims of extrajudicial executions and visual arts students; and 4) the *Escuelas de Palabra* program established by the Educapaz alliance of organizations for the Truth Commission created as part of the Peace Agreement with the FARC. Each of these initiatives focuses on different times and events in Colombian history; has worked with different groups and populations; includes specific pedagogical approaches; and has different perspectives on various dilemmas and challenges, which we present at the end of the chapter. However, they share an emphasis on using education about historical memory as an opportunity to contribute to peacebuilding in Colombia, and ensure that learning about this history serves to prevent future repetition of the country's violent past.

As classroom conversations about Colombia's recent history are held in a polarized country, meaning that teaching historical memory poses difficult challenges. The country's ongoing internal armed conflict through the restructuring of armed actors and the current upsurge of political violence, with its trail of massacres, attacks and assassinations of social

---

1 *Caja de Herramientas: Un viaje por la memoria histórica. Aprender la paz. Desaprender la Guerra.*



leaders (Rettberg, 2020), means that educators have to deal with differing interpretations of a past that has not ended, and that has not yet been established as a historical milestone.

Notwithstanding the challenges, some researchers in the field of education highlight proposals that promote student and teacher participation in spaces for debate, inside and outside the classroom, based on their life stories and the recognition of those of others: their memories, narratives, needs and longings, and a historical analysis of contexts, sequences, and linkages (Arias, 2015, 2018; Herrera & Pertuz, 2018, 2016; García et al., 2015; Rodríguez, 2012, among others). Some of the initiatives focus on the multiple relationships between history, memory and peacebuilding and propose readings in two distinct but complementary spheres: 1) the intellectual sphere, focusing on knowledge of recent painful or traumatic events. The readings here would be based on questions such as: what happened, how, and why —investigating the causes, motives, interests, modes of action— and what characteristics of the social, political, and cultural context made such events possible; and 2) the ethical-emotional sphere, which places such questions in the minds of individuals, the groups concerned or affected, and society at large, but that also highlights the duty to remember. In other words, it emphasizes a sense of responsibility towards the victims and survivors of past injustices from perspectives that cultivate empathy (Ruiz et al., 2021).

Silencing this history and excluding it from formal education does not seem a reasonable alternative (see also the contribution by Peters to this volume). Teaching the recent past presents multiple challenges and remains the best option for dealing with a history of violence as it provides students with the opportunity to develop critical thinking, empathetic attitudes towards those who have suffered most from the effects of war, it offers a setting in which they can practice democratic debate on controversial issues, and promotes the reinforcement of historical awareness. This, of course, does not happen automatically, simply by including the violent past in teaching programs; it requires solid teacher training and constant pedagogical reflection.

Although some countries choose to exclude the history of their recent violent past from their curricula, arguing, among other things, that at least one generation needs to pass before such events can be discussed (Shaheed, 2013). This globally influential position, however, runs the risk of hindering a deep, critical, and structured elaboration of the events that took place, thus limiting the possibility of reconciliation. It also neglects the fact that new generations receive historical narratives from other sources (media, arts, etc.). It is not a matter of "establishing educational institutions as



exclusive sources of knowledge. What we need is for schools to serve as a fixed point of reference among the whole spectrum of available sources of knowledge, and, at the same time, to favor a critical view of all the others” (Sánchez Meertens, 2017: 117).

In this article, we present different initiatives advocating teaching about the recent past, in this case, the internal armed conflict in Colombia, illustrating its scope and limitations. Finally, we present some dilemmas and tensions inherent to this decision, in a country where the violence of the conflict has not ceased, under the conviction that facing our own past —no matter how difficult or controversial— is a fundamental part of peacebuilding.

### *Peace Education Law and teaching about “La Violencia”*

*La Violencia* was one of the worst periods of violence in Colombian history. It was a civil war between the two main political parties (liberals and conservatives) which lasted about 10 years between 1948 and 1958 (Bushnell, 1993). The violent confrontation between liberals and conservatives was greatly exacerbated when the progressive liberal presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, who was almost certainly going to be elected president, was killed on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1948, in Bogotá. This ignited violent riots later called *El Bogotazo* which started in Bogotá and spread throughout the country. *La Violencia* is crucial to Colombian history, not only for the high number of victims (about 200,000 killed) and its cruelty, but also because it was the origin of the largest and longest guerrilla armed conflict in the continent. In fact, the largest rebel group in Colombian history, FARC, was born from a small group of liberal fighters which remained from *La Violencia* (Bushnell, 1993).

In 2014, while Peace Negotiations with FARC were still underway, Colombian Congress approved a Peace Education Law, which indicated that each school and university should include a peace education class in their curricula. Since the Colombian educational system is highly decentralized, the Ministry of Education does not define what each school needs to teach, but offers only general guidelines. Several of us helped the Ministry of Education create these guidelines and examples (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2017). For 10<sup>th</sup> grade, we included a sample of sessions adapted from our previous work about pedagogical interventions about *La Violencia* (Machado, Chaux & Ossa, 2012). Several schools throughout the country might have implemented these sessions since, although there is no formal tracing of this implementation.



In order to identify how this pedagogical intervention works and is received by students and teachers, we have conducted qualitative evaluations in which we have implemented an expanded version of the intervention (Bastidas & Borrero, 2018; Greniez, 2019). Specifically, the intervention intends to teach 10<sup>th</sup>-graders about *La Violencia* while, at the same time promote critical thinking, empathy, and intergroup conflict resolution.

Inspired by the educational program *Facing History and Ourselves* (2019; see also: Stern Strom, 1994), this intervention seeks to help students understand the complexities of that critical period and connect that understanding to their own lives in the present. For instance, in one of its 10 one-hour sessions, students identify the positive or questionable characteristics of Gaitán as a leader, and compare them to current leaders in their own communities, and to the leaders they would like to be in the future. In another session, students are organized in pairs to participate in role plays in which one is to impersonate a liberal leader and the other impersonates a conservative leader in a town where La Violence has not arrived yet. During the role-play, each pair is asked to recreate an intergroup conflict that was occurring at the time, and improvise a negotiation in which they would try to reach an agreement to prevent their town from following the same path towards violence that neighbor towns have suffered. In that way, they understand better the complexities of the time, while at the same time, have the opportunity to practice socio-emotional competencies associated with conflict resolution such as perspective taking, active listening, or creative generation of alternatives.

In other sessions, students analyze social psychology dynamics involved in the liberal-conservative confrontation, such as identifying with one of the two political parties only because their families have always been part of one or the other group. They also analyze in-group and out-group biases such as blaming all the negative on the other group, and remembering only the positive actions of their own group. Furthermore, they identify similar social-psychology dynamics in intergroup conflicts occurring close to them in the present, such as violent conflicts between football fans or between youth gangs in their neighborhoods. Finally, they learn about peace initiatives that have been developed in the middle of violent contexts in Colombia, and reflect on possible peace initiatives that they could promote. Again, inspired on *Facing History and Ourselves* (*Facing History and Ourselves*, 2019; Stern Strom, 1994), they can even design specific initiatives and propose to implement them in their own contexts.

In our qualitative formative evaluations, we have found that students are greatly motivated by the activities, especially by those in which there is a clear and explicit connection with current contexts closer to their



lives (Bastidas & Borrero, 2018; Greniez, 2019). We have also observed that, during the activities, students put into practice socio-emotional competencies such as perspective-taking, empathy, creative generation of alternatives, and critical thinking. Furthermore, we identified that intergroup conflict resolution is more complex and requires a higher level of development of socio-emotional competencies than interpersonal conflict resolution, and thus students should have learned to manage interpersonal conflicts before they are to be confronted with intergroup conflicts. Finally, we have found that teachers need much training and on-site support in order to implement the activities, especially if they are not used to active pedagogical strategies such as role-playing. Future studies could evaluate the impact of this and similar interventions, not only in terms of development of socio-emotional competencies that could promote peaceful interactions, but also in terms of historical understanding of complex periods such as *La Violencia*.

*ToolKit: "A Journey Through Colombia's Armed Conflict Historical Memory: Learning peace and unlearning war"*

The *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* (2012-2019) pedagogical team<sup>2</sup>, joining efforts with a diverse group of teachers, created the Toolkit to teach about Colombia's armed conflict from a historical memory standpoint (CNMH, 2018: 16). This meant to respond to some of the challenges that arise from different territorial contexts, such as: 1) how to address this issue of the country's conflict-ridden past in regions still immersed in war, while prioritizing teacher's and their students' wellbeing and safety; and 2) how to do so in territories that have not been directly affected by violence and where indifference abounds. Between 2012 and 2018, more than 317 educational institutions in 49 municipalities in Colombia participated in building and implementing the Toolkit in classrooms (CNMH, 2018: 100).

---

2 From 2012 to 2017, the CNMH Pedagogy Team was led by María Emma Wills Obregón, former Advisor to the CNMH Directorate. It was she who conceived and led the pedagogy team made up of María Juliana Machado, Alejandra Londoño, Alejandra Romero, Nicolas Serrato, Laura Giraldo, Laura Rojas, Daniela Muñoz, Víctor Ávila, Tatiana Rojas and María Andrea Rocha, who coordinated the team between 2018 and 2019. The collective construction of these materials also involved the participation of teachers, CNMH officials, and academics from different schools of education around the country.



The Toolkit is made up of a total of twelve books<sup>3</sup> for students in grades nine to eleven, as well as a storybook for elementary school. “*El Salado*” and “*Portete*” are student textbooks (with teachers’ guides), dealing with the massacres of El Salado in the Department of Bolívar, in 2000, and Bahía Portete in the Department of La Guajira, in 2004, which aim to help students learn, through an inductive route, some of the factors that have originated and protracted war in Colombia. *El Salado* offers insight into the construction and consequences of the rural community’s stigmatization in a war context fueled by an agrarian conflict; and Bahía Portete, which analyzes a massacre whose main victims were women of the Wayuu indigenous people, addresses how ethnic and gender discrimination have played a role in the armed conflict.

All these materials follow an inductive pedagogical path (CNMH, 2018: 44) that connects students’ identities and everyday lives with broader social and political processes. The fundamental premise underlying this approach is that one cannot transform what one does not understand, which is why the CNMH team felt that avoiding a deep, meticulous, and democratic discussion of our recent history in the classroom is not an option. However, in order to decrease tensions and social divisions that often arise when revisiting the past, the Toolkit encourages students to question dogmas by being rigorous in their analysis, using empirical support, and comparing sources. Also, it promotes recognizing and celebrating collective and personal diversity in cultural and political spheres reflected in a diversity of interpretations of the past.

Students are asked to critically examine political discourses, in the context of the armed conflict, as well as structural or systemic discrimination, through an exhaustive review of the empirical support and being mindful of avoiding the reproduction of denialism or the justification of human rights violations. Accordingly, the pedagogical route proposes that students should recognize irrefutable facts surrounding atrocities and human rights violations perpetrated by armed actors, and differentiate them from justifying or denial-based interpretations of what happened that respond to the worldviews of those involved (CNMH, 2018: 72). In sum, the pedagogical route intends to “activate a process of teaching historical memory in the classroom that contributes to the formation of critical, empathetic

---

3 *Los Caminos* the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the ToolKit, and *Recorridos*, gathers activities proposed by teachers that showcase their creativity in adapting the materials to their own contexts. All tools can be accessed at: <https://centrodehistoriahistorica.gov.co/micrositios/un-viaje-por-la-memoria-historica/>.



citizens who are agents of peace and democracy in their environments” (CNMH, 2018: 45).

For example, the student book *El Salado* begins with a chapter on identity and territory, based on the rural community's attachment to the land, as well as the disputes that have surrounded the land's use, titling, and access throughout Colombia's history. Specifically, students are first asked to reflect on their own significant places. Then, they are asked to compare and contrast different sources of information, including traditional rural song lyrics and laws that promoted agrarian reform in the 1960s, in order attempt to grasp the conflict dynamics that surrounded the massacre, including the colonization practices that contributed to the inequality in land distribution, and the economic and political disputes over the development of rural plots. Finally, students are challenged to think about how they would distribute a set of hectares among 20 families, in order to develop a sense of the complexity of land reform in this context.

Subsequent to studying the political decisions about land use and distribution, as well as the arrival of the left-wing guerrillas, and the birth of right-wing paramilitary groups in the region, the massacre perpetrated by this last group in El Salado in 2000 is addressed. In this chapter, students are invited to ask themselves, *when do I use and apply stereotypes and when I have experienced situations in which others use them and reduce me to a stereotype?* Next, various sources are presented (press articles, court rulings, testimonies, among others) exposing the construction of stereotypes and the stigmatization of the rural community. Afterwards, students read stories told by the people from El Salado about those who were victims of the massacre, with emphasis on the contributions they made to their community when they were alive. Finally, students are invited to reflect on the following factors as a group: the historical sequence that led to the massacre, the perpetrators, and the memory of the communities. To close, they are asked: *How can you challenge everyday stereotypes and those that fuel and sustain armed conflict?*

In sum, students are invited to study the past from a structural perspective (i.e., the role of the land struggle in Colombia's armed conflict), and make political and emotional connections between these events and their own present, while promoting their capacity to construct their own political stance around them, and fostering their agency for change.

The Toolkit's pedagogy is rooted in the belief that the classroom should be a place for intergenerational communication, where students' memories and experiences have a fundamental role, and where everyday knowledge, popular and ancestral wisdom, and heritage-based traditions can be communicated and discussed. This, in turn, allows the inclusion of



the students' identity, their memories, and their communities' history, as well as rigorous social science methods, in the exercise of learning about the country's past. This turns the educational process into a dialogue of co-construction that offers tools to explore and understand both the past and the present, to build bridges between the issues that concern young people and the contexts that their parents and grandparents lived in, and allows us to question deep-rooted notions, like the belief that Colombians are condemned to resolve our differences through violence. Such alternatives are based on the study of history and therefore indicate the steps to building a more democratic and fairer society.

An example of this intergenerational communication is the first activity suggested in the student book "*Portete*" in which they are asked to draw a map of their affective environment, including their relatives, communities, etc., and identify the links between them, as well as the roles and customs that develop within this network. To do so, students have to talk to and interview members of their families and community, not just to determine the links that have been established but also to understand and represent the roles and practices performed within these environments.<sup>4</sup>

The Toolkit's implementation monitoring strategy, which aimed to identify the way in which this approach was applied in the different territories, showed that the materials allowed teachers to awaken students' interest in the armed conflict history and, in turn, to promote the development of empathetic skills, critical thinking, and a sense of historical agency. These achievements are not homogeneous across the country and different variables moderate the results of implementation. However, it is worth highlighting, in the words of one of the teachers who took part in this initiative, the contributions that the Toolkit made to her teaching practice:

*One of the great contributions that the Toolkit has made to my teaching practice is that it has made me more aware of the contrast of sources when teaching any subject. We know that textbooks and other sources of information report facts from different perspectives and under specific*

---

4 On the other hand, Edgardo Romero calls for the development of an "oral history research group" whose premise is "to use oral history as a methodological resource for the meaningful teaching of social sciences through the construction of research projects on local memory" (CNMH, 2018: 46). This strategy is developed in three phases: awareness-raising, fieldwork, and the writing and socialization of the results. To learn more, see: <http://www.centrodehistoriahistorica.gov.co/micrositios/un-viaje-por-la-memoria-historica/recorridos-de-la-memoria-historica-en-la-escuela.html>.



*interests, but this is undervalued in everyday life, and limited sources of information tend to be used without comparing them* (Interview with political science teacher; Mondeyal Educational Institution, Isnos, Huila; CNMH, 2018: 70).

Throughout the implementation, the CNMH realized the arrival of the Toolkit served as an excuse for teachers to meet and discuss the challenges and opportunities regarding teaching our violent-ridden past historical memory in the classroom. As a result, and in order to strengthen the CNMH's support for the grassroots teacher's efforts to co-construct their own sequences, in 2017 the Network of Teachers for Memory and Peace was created. The Network provided a space for national dialogue intended to "leverage the efforts of a group of teachers in the field of historical memory and its teaching" (CNMH, 2018: 8). The strategies developed by the teachers were classified into three categories: didactic sequences, in-depth activities, and time and space activities, based on the cross-cutting themes concerning memory, democracy, citizenship, and human rights.

### *Grabar en la memoria: Mothers of extrajudicial executions and peace education*

Political violence in Colombia has occurred in different ways, although perhaps extrajudicial executions is one of the cruelest forms, and the one which has most questioned the legitimacy of state institutions. President Uribe's government (2002-2010) pressured senior military commanders to certify enemy casualties at all costs and created an incentive scheme for members of the army engaged in this task: financial bonuses, short holiday periods, recognitions and awards, among others. A significant group of high- and low-ranking military personnel misused the policy and killed innocent young men, falsely claiming they were guerrillas who had fallen in combat. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights estimated that around 5000 innocent people were killed in extrajudicial executions (Naciones Unidas, 2015), and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace created after the Peace Accords has identified more than 6400 extrajudicial executions between the years 2002 and 2008 (JEP, 2021).

As a result, hundreds of families in different parts of the country have been defrauded and sullied by the state that was supposed to protect them. There are few cases in which those most affected, especially the mothers of the murdered youths, have been able to join together to demand justice or defend their own violated or threatened rights (Ruiz et al., 2021). The organization *Madres de Falsos Positivos* (MAFAPO) provides a good example



of the struggle against such extrajudicial executions. These women united in 2008 to make their voices heard and fight for the truth behind the disappearance and murder of their sons and brothers. These sons and brothers were nineteen innocent young men murdered by the Colombian National Army, under pressure from the executive branch, as propaganda to sustain the war, spread fear, and justify the supposed military defeat of the enemy.

In 2019 and early 2020, members of MAFAPO were involved in a course to learn about etching and memory, in the Bachelor's degree in visual arts at Universidad Pedagógica Nacional. In this *art training laboratory*, they were invited to create, work as a team, strengthen their personal and collective memory, and produce works based on the images and memories of their children and siblings. *Grabar en la memoria* was implemented with the active and constant participation of ten members of MAFAPO, together with eighteen students in their final semesters of the Bachelor's degree in visual arts at UPN, most of them members of the research group *Arbitrio: Gráfica y formación*. Each of the mothers always had one or two printmaking teachers (young teachers in training) available, who supported them throughout the process, teaching them how to use the materials and tools; they were taught to carve, engrave, and preliminary outlines; they planned, sketched and designed the works; printed in small, medium, and large formats, and produced the final works.<sup>5</sup>

The teachers who led this experience (Alexander Ruiz and Eduard Barrera) provided additional support at all stages of the project and were often invited to intervene on some of the surfaces being etched. It was a collective construction based on the joy of teaching, experimentation, play, and cooperation, in short, the creation of a new world.

*Grabar en la memoria* was conceived as a laboratory for artistic creation, as well as a space for training and research. This implied a kind of expansion of the field of action and the traditional practices of an art workshop towards new approaches to exploring and understanding society. The process thus combined individual forms of work and spaces for collective construction, while at the same time mobilizing disciplinary knowledge with political intentions, around the narrative of a collective that cries out and continues to demand justice. It was also about trying alternative forms

---

5 Dies are the rigid surfaces usually made of wood, linoleum or metal on which the incisions or carvings are made. To print from them, they are covered in ink and pressed onto paper, fabric or other surfaces.



of teaching, and of giving personal and group meaning to the experience of exploring, imagining, inventing, constructing and sharing.

Since its inception in 2008, MAFAPO has resisted silence and oblivion, demanding justice for the perpetrators and vindication of the good name and honor of their children. This formative experience went beyond denouncing injustice. The mothers constructed alternative narratives to the painful story of the disappearance and death of their children, and have been able to reconstruct and recreate their life experiences. Thus, while in the courts what prevails is the memory of their dead children murdered by the state security forces, the etchings designed in the art lab focus on the memory of their living children, which appears with unusual force, while the women experience the joy brought on by combining remembrance and creation, at the same time as their demands for justice are upheld.

A broader and better understanding of the past is, of course, required if we are to counteract beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes that reproduce violence. From this perspective, the art lab has provided a universe of possibilities, in which the participants are conceived of as going far beyond merely being victims of war, generators of information or, perhaps, producers of expressive objects, and are assumed as creators, but also as active political subjects. It is about working with pain, and, at the same time, with desire and imagination. The following testimonies perhaps illustrate this idea:

*It was a challenge for me to approach Doris' [MAFAPO member] story with the frankness and dignity of a mother who has not let herself be defeated by oblivion and so much impunity [...] Doris' story of resistance has marked my life. When we talk and hug, I feel an unusual affection for her, which is impossible not to reciprocate. Now, that feeling of emptiness and strangeness that marks the memory of this mother nestles in me. Her struggle became mine too (Karen, Visual arts undergraduate student).*

*No one can rob me of what I learnt in the art lab, no one can take away my living memory, the memory that I put on a board. It is a memory that we can carry forever, a memory that I was able to carve with my own hands, a memory of which we should all be proud. This institution has opened the doors so that we could study, record, and tell our stories, our life experiences, and open the path to memory (Cecilia, MAFAPO member).*

It is worth highlighting the enormous power of education, whose resources —material and immaterial— convey messages, and constitute the axis of relationships and communication between educator, learner, creator, witness and spectator. This is, in short, an attempt to deal with



conflicting pasts, based on the deployment of pedagogical, autobiographical and creative capacities and resources of a singular experience, rich in nuances. It is also, of course, the confluence of experiences, sensitivities, interests, commitments and affections.

*Escuelas de Palabra (Schools speaking truth) : experiencing the importance of truth-seeking and telling for peacebuilding in schools in Colombia*

One of the most complex and notorious aspects of the Peace Agreement signed between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrilla group in 2016 is the Comprehensive System for Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non Repetition. At the core of this system are three autonomous institutions: the Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition Commission (hereafter Truth Commission); the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP); and the Unit for the Search for Persons Presumed Disappeared in the context and by reason of the armed conflict (UBPD). It also includes reparation measures for peacebuilding and guarantees of non-repetition. In this text, we will present an overview of the work that some of us have carried out in order to support the Truth Commission's pedagogical work in schools.

After six months of preparatory work, the Truth Commission has a three year extra-judicial mandate that began on November 28, 2018 and will end on the same day in 2021, a period during which it will build and deliver a final report. According to the Commission itself, its objectives are “to contribute to clarifying the truth of what happened in order to offer a broad explanation of the conflict's complexity; to encourage recognizing the severity of what happened to us as a society, victims' dignity and individual and collective responsibilities; to foster coexistence in territories; and to lay the foundations of non-repetition” (Comisión de la Verdad, 2018: 12).

The Truth Commission highlights the importance of working with new generations in order to help them learn about their history and reflect upon it. Moreover, in contrast with what has happened with other commissions around the world (Paulson, 2009), the Colombian Truth Commission has actively engaged children, young people, teachers, and decision-makers and influencers in the educational sector to identify strategies and tools to facilitate an understanding of why truth-seeking and truth-telling are important for peacebuilding in our society. In turn, although the impact of the armed conflict on the educational sector was unfortunately not prioritized in the Commission's research themes (an important issue for future research), some workgroups led by the Commis-



sion's staff and allies are working on conducting public dialogues that can shed light on the kind of changes needed within the educational sector in order to strengthen its existing contributions to non-repetition.

In this context, in mid-2018, the civil society alliance EDUCAPAZ<sup>6</sup> was invited by the Truth Commission to design a pedagogical initiative to promote the importance of truth-seeking and truth-telling in schools. Specifically, our work has tried to respond to the Commission's innovative discourse: positioning truth as a public asset.

Based on the premises of building on lessons learned by teachers in their own practice and on the importance of embodied rather than rhetoric pedagogical experiences (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2010), EDUCAPAZ invited a group of 32 inspirational educators from throughout the country to collaborate on the design of this initiative. This dialogue, carried out in the second semester of 2018, resulted in the creation of *Escuelas de Palabra* (which could be translated as "Schools speaking truth"), a program based on participatory action research methodologies through which educators, students and other school community members can themselves experience the Truth Commission's four objectives: truth clarification, recognition, coexistence, and non-repetition of violence and its causes. Basically, *Escuelas de Palabra* translated the Truth Commission's methodology at the macro level into a didactical sequence that school communities can themselves experience at the micro level with regards to a specific conflict prioritized by each school.

Now, this implies assuming that truth-seeking and truth telling are important for peacebuilding not only with regards to the armed conflict, but also in regards to inter-personal and inter-group conflicts that affect schools and local communities in their everyday life. Therefore, *Escuelas de Palabra* posits that, if truth is indeed a right and a public asset, truth-seeking and truth-telling need to become part of our peace culture discourses and practices, and therefore, of peace education efforts in Colombia.

In a year-long process, inter-generational research teams<sup>7</sup> are encouraged to carry out their own truth clarification efforts vis-à-vis one of

---

6 EDUCAPAZ is the National Education for Peace Program, an alliance comprised of the following institutions with long trajectories in formal and non-formal education in Colombia, which have joined efforts since 2017 in order to enhance the education sector's contribution to peacebuilding: Fundación para la Reconciliación, Fe y Alegría Colombia, CINEP, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana de Cali, Fundación Escuela Nueva, Aulas en Paz, and Universidad de los Andes.

7 These inter-generational teams can range anywhere from 5 to 30 members and are composed by students, teachers, school leaders, and other school community



the following four action-research lines: “Truth as a principle in school coexistence”, “Finding the truths of our territory”, “Bridges between memory and truth”, and “Our school as an agent in the armed conflict and peacebuilding”. In each of these research lines, selected by the schools in accordance to the characteristics, needs, interests, and possibilities of their communities, the inter-generational team has to carry out a process that emulates the Truth’s Commission’s work: 1) explore their imaginaries around truth and gain new understandings of truth-seeking and telling in peacebuilding; 2) select the specific conflict that they wish to elucidate; formulate a research question and a hypothesis; 3) identify and consult primary and secondary sources; 4) contrast and verify sources in order to discern “irrefutable facts” around which consensus can be built; 5) promote “truth meetings” in order to recognize victim’s rights and efforts as well as individual, collective, and institutional responsibilities; 6) support strategies aimed at peaceful coexistence; 7) promote public dialogue and advocacy around the transformations needed to take place to guarantee the non-repetition of different forms of violence; 8) produce a final report based on their findings; 9) and create context-sensitive material in order to communicate their findings to diverse audiences.

All throughout the year-long process, school members position themselves not only as receptors of information produced by transitional justice institutions, but as active agents in truth-seeking and truth-telling processes who constantly reflect upon the connections and differences between their work and the Truth Commission’s mission. Underpinning *Escuelas de Palabra*’s approach is father Leonel Narváez’s<sup>8</sup> idea that truth-seeking and truth-telling can be understood as an approach to conflict-transformation framed by “logics of truth” based on a reinterpretation of the “w” questions: What happened and who and how did it impact? Why did it happen? Who is responsible for what happened and whose rights and efforts need to be recognized? What needs to change and what needs to be

---

actors such as alumni, parents, other care-takers, and local community leaders who voluntarily decide to spearhead the *Escuelas de Palabra* process.

- 8 Father Leonel Narváez is the president of Fundación para la Reconciliación, and organization that is part of the EDUCAPAZ alliance and has more than 20 years of experience in forgiveness and reconciliations pedagogies in Colombia and other countries in Latin America and Africa. In 2021, the *Escuelas de Palabra* methodology will be strengthened with contributions from the Fundación para la Reconciliación’s previous work on socio-emotional education, ethics of care, restorative practices and restorative justice, and forgiveness and reconciliation pedagogies.



strengthened in order to contribute to the non-repetition of violence? How can we contribute to individual and collective healing?

In this way, *Escuelas de Palabra* features different kinds of truth-seeking and telling processes, such as primary school kids, teachers, and parents trying to clarify the truth around a certain conflict involving inter-personal relations in the classroom, an ethnic school community aspiring to seek and tell the truth about the impacts of a hydroelectric dam on its territory, or a group of leaders, teachers, and high school students working on directly contributing to the Commission's clarification objective through their own memories on how the armed conflict has affected their school and how they have resisted and contributed to peace. In any case, the initiative seeks to further the idea that *understanding* and *recognizing* the truth around different types of conflicts is important for peaceful coexistence and is necessary in order to identify what needs to be transformed and to mobilize support for the changes needed to build a society committed to the non-repetition of violence.

EDUCAPAZ piloted the *Escuelas de Palabra* methodology in 33 schools in Colombia's Caribbean region in 2019. Although a formal impact evaluation is upcoming, participants have reported that the initiative not only helped them understand the Truth Commission's role, but it also helped them strengthen inter-generational dialogue and democratic practices in their school communities, socioemotional competencies such as active listening, critical thinking, perspective taking, and empathy, and skills related to social science research, historical thinking, story-telling, and community work. Most importantly, *Escuelas de Palabra* has empowered school communities to understand themselves as active participants of Colombia's transitional justice process.

### *Conclusions: Dilemmas and challenges*

The pedagogical experiences we presented here share the challenge of teaching about past violence in contexts where violence is still very much part of the present. This particular challenge creates several dilemmas, which the different experiences have managed in a range of ways. The following paragraphs summarize four of these dilemmas and provide examples of how we have dealt with them. We hope that this provides useful insights to others dealing with similar dilemmas in violent contexts around the globe:



### 1) *Distant vs. close violent situations*

One of the tensions identified in our work is whether to teach about the past through distant or close situations to the students. Teaching about situations close in time and space to students' lives can be very relevant and meaningful to them as it allows them to easily connect with these moments. In addition, it gives students the opportunity to talk about recent experiences that they might need to process cognitively and emotionally, thus, helping to promote healing, or even forgiveness and reconciliation.

However, studying situations close to students' lives can also bring several difficulties. For example, it can open emotional wounds difficult to manage collectively in class, a situation that would require a therapeutic context and professionals. In addition, students might come from families of victims or victimizers, and talking explicitly about situations in which their families might have been involved could arise strong tensions and discomfort. Finally, these situations might imply current threats that are difficult or impossible to talk about it because it means a risk for the students and teachers.

An alternative option, inspired by the program Facing History and Ourselves (Facing History and Ourselves, 2019; Stern Strom, 1994), is to teach about events distant geographically or temporally, but making permanent connections to the students' present. These distant situations rarely awaken discomfort in the students, but become more meaningful when connected explicitly to their own lives. This helps them take the perspective and empathize with those of the past while, at the same time, understand how they can contribute to change their own present.

In this sense, some of the projects presented (e.g., *La Violencia*) have chosen to study a situation distant in the past (1940s and 1950s) but making connections to the present. Others (e.g., *Madres de Soacha*) deal with recent violent events for which wounds are still open, but to so in a very careful and caring environment. Others (e.g., *Toolbox*) analyze situations that, for most, occurred in a different region of the country, but are similar to what occurred to them. Still others (e.g., *Escuelas de Palabra*) share the pros and cons of different options with school leaders and teachers and support them in the process that they decide to embark on.

### 2) *Cruel vs. optimistic perspectives*

A second dilemma derives from the pessimism and hopelessness about human nature that can be generated among students when studying horrible



events in history. Learning about a violent past can create much despair, can generate negative affective effects, and can promote a sense that there is not much that can be done to prevent similar violence from occurring in the future. However, terrible acts of violence have taken place many times in Colombia, and we consider ethical to present an unmasked and accurate account of what really occurred. Furthermore, being faithful with what really occurred seems to be an honest way to honor the victims.

The initiatives presented here, to a greater or lesser level, have dealt with this dilemma -of whether or not to include in class such terrible episodes of our history- by also studying positive experiences of resilience and peace initiatives that have taken place in the middle of horrible violence. For instance, the artistic project with Mothers of Soacha create the opportunity for university students to interact directly with victims of one of the cruelest crimes in Colombian history. It does not hide the painful experience they suffered. On the contrary, the close contact with the Mothers help promote empathy towards them. However, the experience also promotes hope by directly observing their resilience. Similarly, the materials developed by the CNMH seek to show the horror of the war and the suffering of the victims aiming to generate a feeling of indignation that leads to the opposition and decision-making against the continuity of the war, but also highlight the processes of resistance, social reconstruction and peace initiatives promoted by the victims and communities. Presenting peace initiatives helps create a sense that, in spite of all the suffering they have received, many are able to transform those experiences into their motivation to help create a better world, a world where others do not have to suffered what they did.

### 3) *One truth vs. multiple perspectives*

Understanding a recent past marked by profound social inequality and an armed conflict that reproduces and exacerbates it can make a conflict-ridden society feel like it has to make a choice between: a) a single, agreed account of this past based on “unobjectionable truths”, and b) multiple perspectives based on particular interests or specific needs of various social actors, directly or indirectly affected by this past. Each of these options has advantages, but at the same time, marked disadvantages or risks.

Single versions of the recent past can allow a society to reach consensus on what its greatest threats are and trace, with relative precision, a way forward; for example, the rejection of the violent actions of illegal armed groups. However, the issue is enormously complex, since it is almost never



a matter of simply choosing between violence and peace or between good and evil. On the one hand, a conflict like Colombia's has many actors involved: guerrillas, paramilitaries, criminal drug trafficking gangs, the State, victims, the media, academia, unions, empathetic citizens, indifferent citizens and civil society at large. All these actors could eventually come to reject armed violence, but most of them do not agree with each other when it comes to the interpretations of its causes and consequences, and the responsibilities implied. This means that the only possible way of putting forward a single narrative on the Colombian armed conflict would be by imposing it as an "official truth", which is clearly unacceptable.

On the other hand, although, in principle, it is plausible to make way for a plurality of interpretations and accounts of our traumatic recent past, this does not occur in a neutral way. Some versions of the past confront others and not all have the same validity or moral legitimacy. The narratives of a rural community, living peacefully in its territory, and that of a faction of the guerrillas or paramilitaries responsible for this community's forced displacement with the intention of producing narcotics to finance war and favor the patrimony of its leaders, are not at the same level, nor can they have the same social acceptance. The decision of a ruler to protect the life, honor and property of citizens cannot be equated with the decision of a leader who uses war to perpetuate himself in power. The version of a journalist or an academic who denies that there has been an internal armed conflict in Colombia, a conflict that has inflicted deep and unnecessary pain on a significant part of the population, cannot carry the same weight as the voices of those who recognize the injustices of war and shed light on how to overcome it.

Perhaps it is necessary to avoid both the imposition of a single "absolute truth", as well as the complete dissolution of irrefutable facts when the "multi-perspectives approach" leaves us with a dangerous relativism (Plessow, 2019, makes a similar point with respect to teaching about sexual violence in the war in former Yugoslavia). In fact, in this article we have highlighted the importance of helping students ask and answer questions about direct and indirect responsibilities in different violent situations, which involves engaging young people in the effort of contrasting different sources and narratives. Moreover, it is crucial for young people to acknowledge the importance of enhancing the voice of those who have suffered from political violence and to support their demands for justice. In this direction, truth is understood as a public good and as a right of victims. In this way, amongst other challenges, Colombia's education sector has the enormous task of designing and implementing pedagogical strategies that can help citizens of different generations to clarify the truths



of our painful past, and, above all, to strengthen their commitment to a peaceful coexistence.

#### 4) *Victim vs. victimizer dichotomy*

Teaching about violent pasts always involves the challenge of balancing the acknowledgement of victims' demands for truth, justice, and reparation, and the importance of making way for their memories in schools, on the one hand, and the need to contribute to reconciliation in highly polarized and fractured societies, on the other. This challenge becomes particularly complex in contexts like Colombia, where, in some, although not all cases, the "victim" vs. "victimizer" dichotomy does not reflect important nuances. According to Iván Orozco, victimization in Colombia is more "horizontal" than in other traumatized societies such as Nazi Germany, South Africa, Argentina, or Chile, where "vertical" lines between victims and perpetrator groups were very clear (Orozco, 2003). Orozco proposes that the concept of grey areas, "where the distinction between victims and perpetrators, best represented by certain kinds of 'collaborators' and 'avengers', lies at the heart of the logics of forgiveness and reconciliation" (Orozco, 2003: 3). For instance, in Colombia it is common to find members of illegal armed groups or of State forces that are both responsible for serious crimes, but who, in a previous moment of their lives, were also victims in the context of the armed conflict. At the same time, although it is very important to stress that this is usually not the case, some victims of the Colombian armed conflict have participated in acts of social and political violence. Speaking on the "peace vs. justice" dilemma that lies at the heart of transitional justice Orozco argues, "for a certain priority of punishment in contexts of vertical victimization and for a partial precedence of reconciliation in contexts of horizontal victimization" (Orozco, 2003: 3). In the case of Colombia, Orozco (2003) proposes a model of transitional justice based on "the primacy of truth and forgiveness for the inhabitants of grey zones and punishment for the engineers and managers of barbarism".

In our pedagogical interventions, we have found that in teaching about some situations (e.g. extrajudicial executions committed by the Colombian army against young people) the "victim vs "perpetrator" dichotomy is absolutely clear, while in others (e.g., liberals vs. conservatives in *La Violencia*) it does not seem to be the most relevant category. In this way, without diluting the importance of recognizing the rights of the victims of each particular situation (rather than assuming that specific people or



groups have a certain kind of monopoly over “victimhood”), our work has suggested an interesting approach: helping students reflect on the different kinds of individual, collective, and institutional responsibilities (both direct and indirect) that should be recognized in order to contribute to truth, justice, reparation, and the non-repetition of violence. For instance, in *Escuelas de Palabra*, students and teachers in a town highly affected by the armed conflict at the end of the 90s and the beginning of the 21st century were able to identify the different responsibilities of the guerrillas, paramilitaries and State armed forces in the history of the armed conflict in their town. Likewise, they engaged in interesting discussions around situations such as the following: the partial responsibility of their community, which normalized the fact that the Colombian army camped in their school and that soldiers engaged in personal relations with high school students, and the fact that their own community had reproduced discourses of stigmatization against particular groups (e.g.: urban groups stigmatizing rural groups) that contributed to the escalation of violence.

In this way, the pedagogical process allowed both for a human rights perspective in which different actors are held accountable for the violation of victims’ rights, and for a more restorative approach centered not on disputes over finding the one to blame, but rather on the identification of partial responsibilities, that to different degrees, need to be recognized in order to restore trust and take the necessary actions to transform unfair and violent situations.

Teaching about a violent history is particularly challenging if violence is still common in the present. Furthermore, there are several dilemmas associated with teaching about a violent past, as we have discussed in this chapter. However, as we tried to show here, there are also many ways in which history of violence can be taught while, at the same time, contributing to the construction of peace. Caring and creative pedagogical strategies can help students understand that they can make important contributions to avoid repeating terrible situations of the past, and to help construct more peaceful and just communities and societies in the present and future.

## *References*

Arias, D. (2015): La enseñanza de la historia reciente y la formación moral. Dilemas de un vínculo imprescindible. In: *Folios*, 42, 29-41.



- Arias, D. (2018): Enseñanza del pasado reciente en Colombia. La violencia política y el conflicto armado como tema de aula. Bogotá: Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas.
- Bekerman, Z. & Zembylas, M. (2011): Teaching contested narratives: Identity, memory and reconciliation in peace education and beyond. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bastidas, L. & Borrero, J. (2018): Manejo de conflictos intergrupales y la enseñanza de la historia de la Violencia partidista en Colombia. Tesis de grado en Psicología. Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes.
- Bushnell, D. (1993): The making of modern Colombia: A nation in spite of itself. Stanford: University of California Press.
- CNMH (2018): Los Caminos de la Memoria Histórica. In: *ibid*. Caja de herramientas: Un viaje por la memoria histórica. Aprender la paz. Desaprender la Guerra. Bogotá: CNMH.
- Comisión de la Verdad (2018): 21 key points to understand the Truth Commission. <https://comisiondelaverdad.co/images/zoo/publicaciones/archivos/21-keys-comision-verdad-english-version.pdf>
- Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos (2016): Quiénes somos. <https://coeuropa.org.co/quienes-somos>
- Corporación Vínculos (2019): Travesías entre la guerra y la paz: acompañamiento psicosocial a víctimas del conflicto armado. ACG diseño publicidad.
- Facing History and Ourselves (2019): How do we know it works? Researching the impact of Facing History and Ourselves since 1976. Brookline: Facing History and Ourselves.
- García, N.; Arango, Y.; Londoño, J. & Sánchez, C. (2015): Educar en la memoria: Entre la lectura, la narrativa literaria y la historia reciente. Bogotá: Universidad Pedagógica Nacional.
- Greniez, C. (2019): Educar para la paz por medio de la enseñanza de la historia: Evaluación formativa de una secuencia didáctica sobre violencia bipartidista. Tesis de grado. Maestría en Psicología. Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes.
- Herrera, M. & Pertuz, C. (2016): Educación y políticas de la memoria en América Latina: por una pedagogía más allá del paradigma del sujeto víctima. Bogotá: Universidad Pedagógica Nacional.
- Herrera, M. & Pertuz, C. (2018): Subjetividades caleidoscópicas, relatos y espejos trizados. Bogotá: Universidad Pedagógica Nacional.
- Jelin, E. (2002): Los Trabajos de la Memoria. Madrid: Siglo XXI.
- JEP (2021): Auto No. 033 de 2021. Bogotá: Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz. Sala de Reconocimiento de Verdad, de Responsabilidad y de Determinación de los Hechos y Conductas.
- Kaldor, M. (2012): New and old wars: Organized violence in a global era. 3rd Edition, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Machado, M.J., Chaux, E. & Ossa, M. (2012): Historia de la Violencia partidista en Colombia. Diseño de actividades para grado 11º. Documento sin publicar. Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes.



- Ministerio de Educación Nacional (2017): Secuencias didácticas de Educación para la Paz (1º a 11º grado). Bogotá: Ministerio de Educación Nacional.
- Münkler, H. (2005): *The new wars*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Naciones Unidas (2015): Informe del Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos sobre la situación de los derechos humanos en Colombia. [www.acnur.org/fileadmin/Documentos/BDL/2015/10170.pdf?file=fileadmin/Documentos/BDL/2015/10170](http://www.acnur.org/fileadmin/Documentos/BDL/2015/10170.pdf?file=fileadmin/Documentos/BDL/2015/10170)
- Orozco, I. (2003): *La postguerra colombiana: Divagaciones sobre la venganza, la justicia y la reconciliación*. Working Paper #306. Kellogg Institute for International Studies.
- Paulson, J. (2009): *Re-creating education in post-conflict contexts: Transitional justice, education, and development*. International Center for Transitional Justice.
- Plessow, O. (2019): *El manejo didáctico de la violencia sexualizada en la guerra. Una mirada a través de las guerras de disolución de Yugoslavia como ejemplo*. Documento de Trabajo 6-2019. Bogotá: CAPAZ.
- República de Colombia. Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz (2018): Acuerdo No. 001 de 2018. Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz. Bogotá.
- Rettberg, A. (2020): Colombia in 2019: The Paradox of Plenty. In: *Revista de Ciencia Política*, 40 (2), 235-258.
- Rodríguez, S. (2012): Formación de maestros para el presente: memoria y enseñanza de la historia reciente. In: *Revista Colombiana de Educación*, 62, 165-18.
- Ruiz, A.; Ávila, A.; Cabezas, D.; Clavijo, J.; Espejo, M.; Galindo, K.; Gutiérrez, M.; Molina, R.; Ortega, A.; Patiño, G.; & Ramírez, L. (2021): *Para que no me olvides. Memoria histórica y educación para la paz en el aula*. Bogotá: Universidad Pedagógica Nacional.
- Rouso, H (2016): *Passé. Essais Sur La Memoire Contemporaine*. Éditions Belin.
- Sánchez, G (2003): *Guerras, Memoria e Historia*. Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia (ICANH).
- Sánchez Meertens, A. (2017): Pensar la paz aprendiendo de la guerra. In: *Ruta Maestra*, 19. <http://www.santillana.com.co/rutamaestra/edicion-19/pensar-la-paz-aprendiendo-de-la-guerra>
- Shaheed, F. (2013): *Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights: The Writing and Teaching of History (history textbooks)*. New York: United Nations.
- Stern-Strom, M. (1994): *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and human behavior*. Brookline, Massachusetts.
- Universidad Nacional de Colombia (2011): *Acción Sin Daño como aporte a la construcción de Paz: Una propuesta para la práctica*. Bogotá: Armonía Impresores.



