

Conflict and cultural violence in Colombia. Transformation proposals from the school

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Resumen

Este artículo relata una experiencia exitosa de transformación de la violencia en un municipio rural de Colombia, mediante la intervención pedagógica en resolución de conflictos en comunidades educativas afectadas por altos índices de violencia directa, estructural y cultural. Considerando el conflicto desde una perspectiva crítica y positiva, donde éste no es sólo inherente al ser humano y las organizaciones sociales sino que, además, es un elemento necesario para la transformación de la sociedad, el objetivo es superar la cultura de la violencia, a través de la construcción, deconstrucción y resignificación de las dimensiones subjetivas de los actores sociales, de sus prácticas y sus discursos y, de esta forma, de las normas, valores y pautas de acción, que son la raíz que alimenta la violencia estructural y directa en Colombia.

Abstract

This article narrates a successful experience of transforming violence in a rural town in Colombia. It was made through the pedagogical intervention in conflicts' resolution within educational communities affected by high rates of direct, structural, and cultural violence. Considering the conflict from a critical and positive perspective, the purpose is to overcome the violence culture through building, reeling off, and reassignment of meaning to the subjective dimensions of social actors, to their practices and discourses and, in this way, to the action values and patterns, which nourish the structural and direct violence in Colombia. And this is so because conflict is not only inherent to the human being and to social organizations, but also because, moreover, it is an element necessary to transform society.



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*To the child boys and girls, the young, the teachers,
the mothers and fathers of the Rural Educational
Centre Carrizales, town of El Retiro, Colombia.*

"From suffocation and height I see the fear
of the sleepy city/ In the air nothing can
be guessed about the violence within
which everything spins/ Colombia goes on and the
world knows nothing/ And, if it knows, it forgets/
And everything goes on spinning/ Dying everyday is
a part of life"¹

Colombia is a country that generates contradictory feelings and its thousand different realities bring to confusion, shatter preconceptions and challenge certainties. It is a country that hosts numerous direct, structural, and cultural conflicts. The weakest ones are scourged by misery, hunger, social inequity, despair and fear. Childhood is stained with violence within the family, in the community, at school and in society. And too many generations have lived without enjoying the celebration of peace. In spite of that, paradoxically, most part of the population lives as if nothing abnormal would happen, or as if the end of violence would be imminent. Nevertheless, violence, in all its different expressions always driven to the disallowance of the symbolic or real other one, beats in every daily space.

The conflict dynamics prevailing in Colombia are pervaded by a culture of denying the different one, by intolerance, xenophobia, ethnocentrism,² individualism and profit making. They are pervaded by compe-

tion against the other one, however many heads have to roll, by the patriarchal-authoritative culture,³ and by the submission to the pater-messiah⁴ and to the idol.⁵ In line with this, nowadays most part of Colombian children and youngsters form their own arguments, valuations, action patterns and social relationships which are coherent with the violence they have suffered concerning the fairness of revenge. Violence is a way to being recognised and to achieving power. They consider that the strong and powerful ones have the power to make decisions about the life of the others. They do not appeal to the authority because they do not trust in it or because they consider it as a shameful act. They consider as good someone who does justice, no matter the means he may use. They think that lies are a useful mean. They hold authoritarian positions. They refuse assuming social responsibilities and supporting other people in risky situations. They create their own laws, and the like.⁶ All these values perpetuate structural⁷ and direct⁸ violence. Therefore, if what we want to do is to transform the structures and to overcome the violences in this country, it is necessary to revise the psycho-cultural⁹ elements by driving our efforts towards the transformation of all the social actors. In other words, we cannot postpone facing cultural violence.

1 *Niños*. Pedro Guerra.

2 "We find three possible variations of ethnocentrism: the other one has an inferior moral (or set of habits) because he lives far away, because he is poor or because he belongs to another generation", Gutiérrez Sanín, Francisco, p. 182.

3 The assignment of a superior position for men and of an inferior one for women.

4 Charismatic leader sent by God who was to become the liberator, putting the end to a period perceived as a negative one and inaugurating another one characterized by richness and prosperity. It means the submission to a superior being that liberates the individual from his freedom of decision and, at the same time, moves him away from his responsibility towards the other one.

5 It seems, on many occasions, that the love for the nation, the flag, the State, God or freedom is above the care for others, as if the human being were an anonymous being.

6 Saldarriaga Vélez, Jaime Alberto, p.11.

7 Social exclusion, inequality, illiteracy, infrastructure problems, access to goods and services, the immobilism perpetuating the gap between social classes, the State's absence, corruption, the lack of employment and education opportunities, lack of sufficient economic revenues, impunity, unequal distribution of property, etcetera.

8 Human rights' abuses, homicides, forced abductions, kidnappings, rape, sexist violence (physical, psychological or sexual mistreatment), torture, minors' mistreatment, child work, etcetera.

9 That is to say, "those" perceptions, images, and meanings about the world that are built and shared with others within the frame of a common culture." Ariza, A. y Pulecio, C., p. 11.

Program of Conflict Resolution and Violence Prevention at the rural schools of El Retiro¹⁰

The program was born at the end of 2007 with the aim to transform the war culture prevailing in Colombia into a culture of peace, starting from three important premises:

1) After the family, the school is the main institution where the Colombian population is socialized and where it assimilates action values and patterns; 2) the conflict at school is an opportunity to reassign a meaning to the social practices of its authors; and 3) if we want to make an impact on the socialization of children and youngsters, it is necessary to involve in it all the members of the educational community: pupils, teachers, fathers and mothers.

The program is carried out in El Retiro, a town 30 Km. far from Medellín. Being the second town in Colombia after Bogotá, it has 18.391 inhabitants 57.88% of which (10,644 people) live in the rural area and 3,000 live in total misery (less than a dollar per day). Apart from these high rates in poverty, the town has suffered the incursion of armed groups and the forced displacement because of the political, economical and social violence afflicting Colombia. It is noteworthy, among the main dynamics affecting the town,¹¹ the presence of epidemiologic illnesses and malnutrition, the violence of armed groups outside the law, the fear and the lack of confidence in the community, the violence within the family, sexual abuses on minors, high rates of alcohol abuse and consumption of psychoactive substances, unemployment, deterioration of neighbours' coexistence, the poor connection of the population to the Health and Social Security General System, the high mortality rates for suicide, the water pollution and the spread of plagues and illnesses. Concerning the education, the infrastructures of El Retiro rural schools are not in good conditions. Moreover, there are serious deficiencies in the essential areas of the educational curriculum, such as poorly structured programs, scarcity of supporting, educational, and recreational materials, and lack of scientific and technological grants. These characteristics, together with problems such as low numbers of well trained teachers and the poor learning opportunities, typical from the poorest communities, have an influence on the high rates of illiteracy and of

school abandon, as well as on the teachers' lack of appropriate preparation and lack of resources to face the conflict situations their pupils bring in.

The general purpose of the program is to implement new pedagogical practices in the town's rural schools integrating the whole educational community and having, as main axis, the management and regulation of conflicts. This should be done by fostering democratic and peaceful coexistence values in order to form autonomous, responsible, and engaged individuals, who should be the real builders of a peace culture and should be able to express the tensions and differences without having recourse to violence. The specific purposes of the intervention are: 1) To create a constructive and peaceful school atmosphere using the conflict in a didactic way, from a non-violent and democratic perspective, so that, students learn to identify conflicts, to practice conflicts' transformation abilities, and to figure out situations alternative to the known ones, with a positive and optimistic attitude towards life. 2) To train rural teachers in new pedagogic practices of conflicts' transformation in order to improve coexistence at school. 3) With those youngsters sent to the Family Commission because of their non-compliance with the school and community rules, to work on non-violent methodologies for conflicts' transformation and to foster coexistence and democratic values and principles. 4) To create Family Schools where the fathers and mothers interact, reflect on their practices, exchange knowledge and learn to solve problems in groups, putting emphasis on the unlearning of violence in the community, cultural, school and familiar life.

The project is a comprehensive proposal based on four big pillars of the educational community:

1) Children's component: it is based on the promotion of values and abilities for coexistence (such as active communication and listening, empathy, assertiveness, confidence, self-esteem and esteem of others, cooperation, among others) through collaborative games and different dynamics. Moreover, a school mediation system is implemented in the beneficiary schools with the aim of teaching children to talk until they understand each other. In this way, they will be able to trans-

10 This project is directed by the Corporación Correcaminos, which has been working in El Retiro for 12 years. More than 4,000 children (boys and girls) and youngsters have benefited from its activities: educational, artistic, scientific, and sport activities. For this reason, it is acknowledged by all the community sectors. The project is also fund by the resources given by the US organizations Give to Colombia and McMillan Children's Foundation. It also counts on the technical and financial help of the El Retiro town hall, through the Education Directorate and the Family Commission.

11 Source: Town Development Plan 2008-2011 "*El Retiro pa Todos*" ("*El Retiro for everybody*").

form the school daily conflicts so as not to harm themselves or the others. This method consists of six main steps through which children actively participate in their conflicts' management. The work is based on the peace education and the love pedagogy. Since, as Goethe said, *knowing that you are loved gives you more force than knowing you are strong: love's certainty, when it exists, makes us invulnerable.* The methodology is based on the socio-affective method which implies three phases: feeling, reflecting, and acting.

2) Teachers' component: it consists of a course in school conflicts' treatment, personal consultancy, and classroom accompaniment. The starting point is that, in order to manage conflicts in the educational sector, more effective and appropriate systems are needed than expulsion, judiciary intervention, and arrest. For this reason, in the teachers' course pedagogic alternatives are suggested to foster those attitudes and values that help create a positive atmosphere at school, where there will be respect, cooperation, responsibility, serenity, compassion, self-esteem and esteem for the others will be promoted, among other things. Studying different kinds of conflicts and their management will help teachers to remember them when the occasion may arise and to be ready to act. The work with teachers starts from the following premises: a) at school, the penalizing ways of solving conflicts must be the last ones, they must look for other issues before; b) if atmospheres improve, the possibilities of violence reduce and other options to solve conflicts are found; c) protest must not be penalized, there must rather be a transition from unease to speaking, since words strengthen relationships; d) children have to be made co-responsible for the conflict, so that they become responsible for the situation and are able to ethically respond to their acts and to those of others.

3) Families' component: it consists of creating Schools for Fathers and Mothers within the educational communities. Their purposes are: to get the families and the community involved in the school life; to accompany and offer specialized, committed, and responsible orientation for the resolution of inter-personal, family, community, educational and marital conflicts, among others; to unlearn violence by becoming aware of the daily violent acts; and to promote the development of more peaceful communities and homes.

4) Youngsters' component: the proposal is based on forming youth groups so as to facilitate their appropriation of conceptual and practical elements for conflicts' transformations. Those principles and values will allow them to re-dimension the conflict with positive elements, to act as mediators, to build identity and a sense

of membership, and to strengthen local youth dynamics and scenes from positive and conciliating perspectives.

All the Program's methodologies, used in each one of its components, include a permanent and continuous educational process, which is based on the concepts of positive peace and conflict's creative perspective. Through the application of trouble methods (learning through experience), it aims to help the beneficiaries to critically reveal the complex and difficult reality, so as to face it and act consequently in order to build a peace culture in those communities.

OBTAINED RESULTS

There have been numerous successes with children. Just to mention a few, we can point out that affection, unconditional support, artistic and creative activities and games have allowed the learning and the development of potentials in children that have improved the coexistence at school. The pupils have learned to identify violent and aggressive situations through games; they have made progresses in learning and in the competences to solve conflicts in an autonomous way, respecting the others and coming to satisfactory solutions for both parties, without needing revenge; they have learned to create alternative paths and solutions for conflicts, always through the word and the dialogue; they have discovered that they are able to solve their problems without the teacher's help; there has been a decrease in mockeries and in refusing the others' opinions and expressions, among other things.

Teachers benefiting from the program, on their side, have introduced new pedagogic actions to manage conflicts beyond expulsion. They have progressed in understanding conflicts as a pedagogic opportunity to learn, transform, and improve school coexistence. And they have realized that children can solve their conflicts without their help and, in this way, they have more time to teach the planned courses.

As for the fathers and mothers, they are involved in the programmed activities at the Families Schools. They have questioned their daily way of acting and they have understood that there are other ways of facing conflicts different from violence. It is noteworthy that some youngsters and male adults have regularly attended these schools, breaking thus, the sexist prejudices that relate spaces of this kind to women's responsibility.

Concerning the results with the young ones, we can underline the consolidation of a youth club in El Retiro. It allows destroying the stigma generated

about those boys and girls within the educational institution and the community. Different activities have invited the youngsters to build new ways of communication with the others and to consider as theirs the town public spaces in order to promote the sense of membership. Moreover, families and teachers have been offered reflection spaces where they have been able to identify the troublesome situations that are caused by the link with young people, and to discover new strategies that improve family and school coexistence. In line with this, those different dynamics have promoted abilities among the young ones to transform conflicts non-violently.

The evaluation of the obtained results has showed that it is possible to make contributions to the transformation of the Colombian conflict and to overcome the violence culture through the comprehensive pedagogic intervention in educational communities that suffer situations of direct, structural, and cultural violence; through promoting learning for all the parties in the sense that “any fair cause, if defended with terror, becomes immediately illegitimate because it cancels the human way of defending causes, which is the use of word and not its definite silencing”.¹²

Therefore, we must be convinced that the violence circle is not inexorable. That Colombian society is not doomed to be violent. And that it will be possible to progress considerably in the construction of the peace culture if the educational communities implement pedagogic systems being democratic and respecting the universal human rights. The target should be to show the current problems in order to underline the need of

getting into action concerning the task of looking for non-violent and constructive issues for peaceful coexistence. We have to appeal to the responsibility of all society’s actors to make them feel all the problems as their own and generating the values of social commitment and solidarity, so as to reinforce peace, liberty and responsibility as opposed to paternalism, authoritarianism, and the belief that it is necessary to get rid of the other one to achieve one’s objectives.

Author’s note: for those people interested in going further, the book *Conflicto y violencia cultural en Colombia. Propuestas de transformación desde la escuela*¹³ includes a detailed analysis of the conflict situation in Colombia, as well as a systematization of the Program for Conflicts’ Resolution and Violence Prevention that is carried out at the rural schools of El Retiro. There is a thorough description in it of the objectives, content, and methodologies used with children, youngsters, teachers and families. That work also offers an evaluation of the project and the results achieved according to the indicators, as well as its real contribution to cultural violence. Similarly, the main reflections and learning stemming from the project are presented, as well as the proposals and action recommendations according to the actors’ levels in order to go on working on conflicts’ transformation. Finally, there is a series of annexes where, in the form of index cards, the reader may have access to some of the sessions celebrated with the beneficiaries, so as to help understanding how to practically apply the project and how to learn, improve, and/or innovate from the experience carried out. ■

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