Peace Education in Colombia: A Social Constructionist Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

The impact that the armed conflict and the associated violence have had on Colombian civilian population is large and complex. This is an intractable[1] conflict, difficult to explain, not only for the multiplicity of reasons that compromise the conflict, but also because of the changing participation of multiple actors, both legal and illegal[2], for its geographical extension and for the particularities that it assumes in each region of the country. This becomes evident if we consider that the conflict hasn't been experienced in the same manner throughout Colombian history, since at certain times and in some regions, those violent actions were not generally known mainly because it has never been an open civil war, but has instead taken place mainly on the country's rural margins. In the same way, the transformation of its actors and its interests, together with the social and institutional changes that have taken place in the last five decades, make of the Colombian armed conflict a case that differs from the traditional definitions of war (Penagos, Martínez & Arévalo, 2009).

Here I quote the definition of Fisas (2004) about armed conflict since it permits the conceptualization of the complexity of the Colombian armed conflict:

> We understand by armed conflict every confrontation that involves groups of different kinds, such as military, regular or irregular forces, armed opposition groups, paramilitary groups, ethnic or religious communities that, with weapons or any other means of destruction, and organized, claim more than one hundred victims per year through intentional actions, whatever their justification. (p. 14)

Since 1990 to the present moment, some of the numbers associated with assassinations of civilians and other people as a result of war actions are only contrastable with those produced by

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[1] According to Bar-Tal, Rosen & Nets-Zehngut (2010) intractable conflicts are characterized as lasting at least 25 years, where there is an involvement of a culture of conflict that is dominated by societal beliefs and collective memories of conflict.

[2] Such as guerillas groups, paramilitaries, drug traffickers, common criminals, among others.

the cruelest conflicts in Latin-American history. This is evident in the report made by the Historical memory group of Colombia that points out that between 1958 and 2012, the armed conflict has been responsible for 220,000 deaths (Historical Memory Group, 2013). "Colombia has lived not only a war of fighting but also a war of massacres" (Historical Memory Group, 2008, p.15).

The increase of displaced people, massacres, forced disappearances, kidnappings, terrorist attacks, theft of property and land, arbitrary detention, torture, landmines, extrajudicial executions, sexual violence, and forced recruitment of children has led the country to be perceived as a nation in crisis and a country where everyday life is permeated by uncertainty. Perhaps one of the most serious consequences of this extensive socio-political violence is that it has generated instantiation of cultural practices linked to the dynamics of the conflict. Specifically, there is a clear prevalence of dehumanizing relationships that legitimize the systematic and widespread human rights violation of the vast majority of inhabitants of the country. On this aspect, Joaquín Samoya (1987) points out that narratives on conflict allow dehumanization of individuals as the war causes changes in the behavior of people and in their cognitive schemes. These modifications are related to a degradation of certain attributes and human values that directly affect social coexistence; one of these qualities that becomes degraded is the capacity of individuals to be sensitive to suffering and show solidarity when facing it. For his part, Edgar Barrero (2011), in *Aesthetic of the Atrocious,* argues that war has polarized the population and has allowed the degradation of others, justifying in this way their disappearance and annihilation. This occurs because the subject, the other, contradicts the ideals or imperative narratives in the context in which violent acts take place. This also involves converting the subject into object from what he calls the disfigurement of Otherness where the human being is deprived

of his own human characteristics and is converted into an object.

As Martín-Baró (1994) pointed out, one of the most difficult war effects is that people accept these experiences and dynamics as something normal. According to Carlos Sluzki (1995),

> political violence, in any of its many variants, has a devastating and far-reaching effect on those who have been its victims. Physical and emotional violence is perpetrated, precisely, by those who have social and legal responsibility of taking care of citizens, maintaining order in their world, preserving the stability and predictability of their lives, the State. (p.351)

This situation gives place to an inconsistency in people, because those who should give protection become victimizers. In addition to not guaranteeing the rights of its citizens, the State becomes an "actor", responsible for action or omission of acts of violence against the civilian population, thus generating a hostile social space for its members.

The empiric evidence taken from emblematic cases and the quantitative information recorded in different sources show that, in terms of violence repertoires, the paramilitaries carried out, to a larger extent, massacres, selective assassinations and forced disappearances and they made of brutality a recurrent practice in order to increase their power of intimidation. The guerrillas, on their side, have been centered principally on kidnappings, selective assassinations and terrorist attacks in addition to forced recruiting and attacks on civilian objects. Regarding illegal violence from the Public Forces, it has been possible to establish, based on testimonies and judicial sentences, the use of methods such as, arbitrary detentions, torture, selective assassinations and forced disappearances (Historical Memory Group, 2013, p. 21).

The consequences of such violations in individual, family and social lives have been very serious. "The social trauma affects individuals precisely in their social character, that is, in their wholeness as a system" (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 124). Some of these consequences have been

recognized and analyzed by various national and international institutions, including the Constitutional Court, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

According to Human Rights Watch

violations of international humanitarian law are not abstract concepts in Colombia, but the harsh reality of daily life. War breaks into the daily activities of a farm, a village, a public bus or a school with the arrival of armed combatants, who get there through trails or on ATVs. Sometimes the armed men choose their victims carefully from a list, or simply kill those who are nearer them in order to spread terror among people. In fact, the willingness to commit atrocities is one of the most shocking features of the Colombian war. (Human Rights Watch, 1998)

That is how, in 2003, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights emphasized that the situation of human rights in Colombia has been characterized by massive and systematic violations of these rights. (High Commissioner of the United Nations for Human Rights, 2003).

Despite this situation, the current peace dialogues between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), besides representing the hope of the end of a long war for the Colombian people, have led us to reflect on the issues that we have to engage in the post-conflict[3] in order to live in a more just and humane society. "The postwar environments limit but also facilitate co-constructions of new social structures and social identities" (Lykes, 2001 p.28).

Although there are many and varied reconstruction strategies[4] that the Colombian government and the citizens will have to undertake to lay the foundations of a lasting peace, these strategies

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[3] While there isn't a common definition of what a post-conflict situation is, we can say that, generally speaking, it refers to the period of time in which the armed confrontation stops.

[4] Such as, economic recovery, strengthening of the State and political stability, health, agreements, pacts, reintegration of former combatants, destruction of weapons, reparation of victims, kidnappings, displaced people, land reclamation among others.

cannot be focused exclusively on economic and political results in the short-term. "We could almost say that peace is a too serious problem to be left only in the hands of politicians" (Mejía, 1999, p. 32). Clearly, political and economical reflections about violence and post-conflict are necessary and important, but the only way to transform social practices that sustain a culture of violence is education.

> The emergence of the emphasis on a culture of peace and education for a culture of peace is part of a
> wider realization that the attainment of peace is not merely an institutional problem, but rather one
> that requires the subtle elements of cultural change. (Page, 2008 p. 81)

In this sense we can say that, if war is a socially organized activity, as Clausewitz (2005) points out, peace is even more. Such a construction is promissory if education is considered as the way to the construction of a culture of peace.

In line with the above, Bekerman and McGlynn (2007) emphasizes how in post-conflict situations, education is a prerequisite in order to establish lasting peace. Likewise, Wang & Zhao (2011) stress how education is the path for freedom and for the creation of informed and engaged citizenship. On the same line, Chernick (1996) suggests that it is only through education that peace processes can drive a society to revamp the underlying structures that need to be changed.

However, if we take into account that education is not neutral (Reardon, 1988), and that it is pervaded by multiple kinds of ideologies and biases (Freire, 2007), we have to be aware of the potential that it has for exacerbating or decreasing power dynamics and the conditions that contribute to violent conflict.

> Schools are almost always complicit in conflicts. They reproduce the skills, values, attitudes, and
> social relations of dominant groups of society; accordingly, they are usually a contributory factor in
> conflict. Simultaneously reconstructing and reforming education is increasingly viewed as critical in
> the strategy to reduce the risk of conflict or relapse into conflict. (Buckland, 2005, p. XV)

Likewise, education can also be an indirect cause of conflict because it promotes, amongst other things, a reproduction of economic inequality and a can promote gender or religious segregation (Davies, 2004).

This analysis of the values, beliefs and assumptions that lay behind education and how they contribute to perpetuating cycles of violence has been strongly addressed by Critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy sees education as a political, social and cultural practice and has centered its interest in studying "how power relations… operate in schools and how schooling operates as an apparatus that reproduces social control by the dominant class" (Bajaj, 2008, p. 137). Paulo Freire, one of its most important representatives, stressed that oppressed people need to know how oppression is presented and the way the dominant group tries to exploit their literacy (Freire, 2007), where a critical education will equip people to understand social systems of oppression and act to change the current situation (Bartlett, 2007). Doing so is very important to the critical consciousness of learners as a mean for social change. Freire, in developing his humanistic, liberating, and revolutionary pedagogy, coined the term "Conscientizacion" to define "learning to perceive the social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970). Besides the critical consciousness of learners, educators as well need to reflect on their position in the system, be aware that education is not neutral, and decide whom they are working for (Freire, as cited in Bartlett, 2007).

Meanwhile, Giroux (2011) calls attention for the hidden curriculum (such as norms and principles experienced by students throughout their education life) and the social interactions that schools promote.

> The idea of the hidden curriculum (Giroux and Purpel 1983) suggests, however, that socialization
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> also happens behind the back of teachers and students, thus reproducing existing traditions, cultures,
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> way of doing and being often, though not necessarily, in ways that benefit some more than others,

thus contributing to the reproduction of material and social inequalities. (Biesta, 2015, p. 3)

Only through this critical look, it is possible to develop conditions in which students can read and write within and against the existing cultural codes and create new forms of knowledge, subjectivity and identity.

Besides critical pedagogy, the feminist view of education challenges authoritative discourses and deepens the discussion by arguing that society's gendered view of life results in diverse manifestations of violence. "Gender is one of these processes, which would allow us to understand how structures of domination came about" (Confortini, 2006, p. 338). Along the same lines, Kristof & WuDunn, (2009) remark how education offers the chance to transform the power dynamics of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, class, and colonization.

Therefore, the school becomes not only a stage for academic formation but also the space where it inculcates values, rules, patterns of behaviour, beliefs, prejudices and other guidelines that may or may not favor peaceful coexistence. In this line of thought, the role of the classroom refers not only to the traditional system of academic formation, but also to different educative contexts that promote the development of diverse capacities in people. In this regard Pinto de Costa, quoted by Freire (1989), states that "literacy is a cultural method; it tends to awareness and criticism, to prepare men able of facing difficulties found on the way to the construction of a new society" (p. 12 y 13).

All these reflections call for a more sensitive approach towards the hidden curricula, power relations, hegemonic discourses, and the political, moral, and epistemological stands that underlie our pedagogical practices. It also invites us to question what values are being reproduced and the mechanism used (Reardon, 1988; Snauwaert, 2011) and to ponder what type of education is required in a country where violence has become part of daily practices and where relationships

are based upon force, mistrust, and fear. What kind of social realities (through language, values, and learning contents) do we want to create? Furthermore, what type of education will help us to construct new understandings, subjectivities, languages, and social practices that should enable forgiveness and reconciliation?

An answer to these questions is peace education, especially if we consider that its main purpose is the reduction of violence by empowering people with the skills, attitudes, knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors to address direct and structural forms of violence (Harris, 2004; Harris & Morrison, 2003; Reardon as cited in Bajaj, 2008; Salomon & Cairns, 2010).

However, in the dynamics of peace education and the construction of such an exercise, there is a number of gaps and difficulties in terms of concepts and practices. One of the major problems that traditional peace education faces is its individualistic heritage where education has traditionally been defined as an individual, rather than a collective practice (Gergen, 2009a). In this tradition, the main purpose of education is on educating the individual mind and filling students with knowledge as if they were *tabula rasa* or what Paulo Freire (2007) called the *banking model*, in which education becomes an act of depositing contents into the minds of students.

> Education is aimed at improving the minds of individual students. Thus, to ensure that each individual mind properly masters what is true - that each student 'possesses knowledge' – frequent assessment is essential. […] Students are thus confronted with curricula that have little intrinsic interest, and are subjected to frequent examinations of their ability to repeat the truth as determined by the experts. (Gergen, 2009a, p. 130)

Being framed in an individualistic educative tradition focuses on the development of the individual and somehow, leaves aside the collective construction of knowledge. However, peace building is only possible in coordinated actions with others. Peace is a relational and collaborative

construction.

Another critical issue is how programs about post-conflict education stress the importance of a revolution in education. This transformation must emerge from the State taking into account that it must design and implement policies, contents and methodologies of what should be taught throughout the country. Although this macro social transformation is important, it runs the risk of homogenizing education and as a consequence it eradicates indigenous, peasant, and African descendant's knowledge about health, medicine, agriculture, philosophy, spirituality, ecology, and education. "Additionally, in many countries the school system is centralized under one Ministry of Education with almost dictatorial powers over the curricula, controlled by bureaucrats or communities unable to reflect new ideas or quickly incorporate the demands of younger generations" (Galtung, 2008, p. 52). On this aspect, Dunn, Woods and Mutuku (2008) point out that children may be more likely to benefit from pedagogical practices that are respectful of rural cultures and employ strengths acquired in rural life. In this sense, peace education programs in a country with such an ethnic and cultural diversity, must introduce activities that promote their local knowledge and the contents must be able to link the classroom with their context so that education becomes more relevant to their local life and values, and the very unique ways in which local communities coordinate their activities towards peace building.

Linked to this, another difficulty that peace education faces is that, in an attempt to institutionalize and make peace an obligatory school subject, the educative institutions fall easily into a curriculum centered program, which most of the time is a reproduction of experiences from other countries. Being centered in the content, rather than on the teaching-learning process, makes peace education programs repetitive and boring for students, mainly because the topics discussed have not come from their interests and their social reality. "More important for curricula

development are questions of pragmatics. What does a given curriculum enable students to accomplish in the world? And this question cannot be answered outside deliberation on issues of needs, values, and possibilities" (Dragonas, Gergen, McNamee & Tseliou, 2015, p. xi).

A different problem that arises with curriculum-centered programs is that there isn't any coherence between content and the form in which it is presented, in other words, the pedagogical practices used for this purpose. This issue is particularly important when it comes to peace building as long as structural violence can be easily reproduced in daily pedagogical practices. "Peace education focuses on the processes involved in the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Not only the subject matter, but also how it is taught, in what context, and how this knowledge is reproduced later" (Spruyt, et al, 2014, p. 4).

A clear and very frequently used example of this incoherence between content and practice is hierarchical and teacher centered dynamics. This one-sided transactional relationship, in which teachers are seen as content experts and students are positioned as passive receptacles, empty of knowledge, gives the teacher power to decide all the activities about teaching (content, assessments, etcetera), and the student simply has to obey them.

Unfortunately, this kind of practice contributes to the perpetuation of unequal structures that reproduce violence by neglecting participatory and dialogical processes among students. "Using education as a sorting device is problematic for peace educators, since the idea of peace itself is antithetical to vertical social relations and hierarchies in any form" (Galtung, 2008 p. 52). The above involves a deep look at the microsocial space where we develop our everyday life as people involved in the educational field, and review aspects related to the pedagogical practices where conditions to support democratization processes that promote the sustainability of relationships among people are present. These conditions help participants coexist, to get to know each other in

a better way, and to create a disposition towards the fulfillment of common projects and peaceful resolution of conflicts.

In this sense, if we are looking to address content such as conflict resolution, justice and human rights, diversity and plurality, participation in politics, inclusion and reconciliation among others, teachers must not only model for their students the kind of citizens required in a post-conflict country, but the pedagogical practices used for this purpose must generate reflexive and transformative processes. "The form of peace education has to be compatible with the idea of peace, that is, it has to exclude not only direct violence, but also structural violence" (Galtung 2008, p.51).

That is why a relational view of the teaching-learning process is crucial in any peace education program. "When a relational process is placed in the forefront of concern, a major shift occurs. One begins to ask how pedagogical practices can become more participatory and collaborative; and to explore alternatives to the evaluation of individuals" (Dragonas, Gergen, McNamee &Tseliou, 2015, p. xii).

Now, in addition to a relational view of peace education, a field of special interest in this work refers to the non-formal contexts of education for the adult population.

> In the decades of the sixties and the seventies, non-formal adult education has its most important and meaningful development from the impact caused by the Cuban Revolution. In those years, an extraordinary impulse is given to an adult education marked by the perspective of 'community development.' In the same way, Freire's 'Pedagogy of Liberation', as he originally calls his proposal, also emerges at that time. (Jara, 2010 p. 4)

Even though Latin American popular education has sought to rethink the pedagogical approach for different types of population and contexts (Jara, 2010), not much literature about peace education for an adult population can be found in Colombia.

These theoretical gaps, as well as the conviction that it is only through education that we, as members of a society, will be able to reject the naturalization of violence, have inspired me to create learning environments from a social constructionist perspective, one that fosters a way to collectively overcome violence, and creates the necessary conditions to live the peace process of Colombia in the exercise of participation, respect and recognition of differences.

> Research suggests that incorporating positive values and building relationships with a teacher are essential conditions in preventing violence among youth (Smith & Sandhu, 2004). Educators have the potential to play a crucial role in building a culture of peace, especially in deeply divided societies that experience ongoing conflicts. (Abu-Nimer, Mahmoud & Nasser 2014, p. 33)

In accordance with a constructionist approach, this dissertation does not seek to be a universal truth of how curricula and methodologies of peace education should be conceptualized and practiced. Far from trying to build a corpus of closed truths that can be generalized and applied in all countries with sociopolitical violence, I seek to propose a theoretical and practical framework of reference for creating learning environments where relational engagement is the scaffolding for peace building in contexts of non-formal adult education. In this sense, the approach underlying this work is that education for peace is materialized not only in the contents but it also takes form and strength in the way the contents are addressed and in the pedagogical practices that are employed. Therefore, it is appropriate to speak within the topic of education for peace, not only about specialized educative practices, but to analyze any daily encounter in the educational context as a situation of collaborative communication, social and historically determined, in which social agents converge with differentiated reference frames that connect each other and dynamically co-construct a sense of the pedagogical practice in which they participate.

Thus, the invitation to the readers of this paper is to be curious, innovative, and to co-create new proposals for peace education from the very life of the community to which we belong.

Structure of the dissertation

This document consists of eight chapters, the first called, *Problem statement,* describes the different places and groups of people with whom I worked and the relevance of the research proposal as it relates to the formulation of the research question. In the second chapter, Chapter 2 *A historical look at the Colombian context,* I outline some of the key milestones in the configuration of the Colombian conflict and the evolution that it has had from its beginning to the present. Chapter 3, *Peace Education*, is a theoretical review of concepts and developments of education for peace as a specific field of knowledge and the challenges that this construction of peace implies in the educational environment. In Chapter 4, *Social Construction as a philosophical stance,* I consider the basic principles and premises of social construction and the implications of this meta-theory in peace education. Chapter 5, *Method*, I give an account of the guidelines for the research that respond to the need presented by the contexts where the present research was carried out. Furthermore, in this chapter I explain the analysis of the qualitative information of the pedagogical experiences. In Chapter 6, I present a pedagogical experience conducted with the training schools of the National Police of Colombia, and Chapter 7 is a peace education experience with the professionals of the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR)[5]in peace education, conflict resolution and mediation. In both experiences, I give a descriptive account of the experience and show different stages of implementing peace education with different dialogical methodologies where several principles of social constructionism and a collaborative approach are taken to illustrate how these ideas can contribute to peacebuilding

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[5] The Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR) is the entity responsible for advising the National Government on the implementation of policies of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) and reintegrating into civilian life the people or the armed groups operating outside the law who voluntarily demobilize, individually or collectively. For more information: http://www.reintegracion.gov.co/es

within classroom settings. In this way, theoretical and practical frameworks for guiding pedagogical practices from a collaborative stance, promoting a culture of peace, are presented. Chapter 8, *Framework to develop a peace education program from a Social Constructionist perspective*, is where I point out some guiding principles to develop learning environments that foster peace building. The principles propose in this chapter are the result of the systematization of the experiences described in chapters six and seven. The last chapter, *Conclusions*, I point out the contributions generated from the process, the successes and transformations that I would make to future research and some connections related to the national Colombian context.