

## Re-imagining children's identities through informal education: the role of local libraries in peacebuilding

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### ABSTRACT

The impact of Colombia's intractable conflict on children has been profound; this includes forced recruitment, bereavement, displacement, and the imposition of limited and war-like views on their identities and futures. The exacerbation of violence and fixed dichotomies has shaped children's language, playground, and predispositions. Educational sites have been paramount in counteracting such rigidities and effects, including local libraries. Using a continuous ethnographic approach over a 5-year period, this study examines the initiatives of a local library in Putumayo, Colombia, in response to violent conflict. The first ethnographic encounter took place in 2019 for a two-month period and a second one in 2024 for two weeks. Participant observation and unstructured interviews have been used to understand the experiences of local libraries when facing conflict. The study included 15 participants and traced connections with other members of the ecosystem (e.g. social movements). This study shows how local libraries promote non-violent modes of existence, dynamic notions of peace and responses to emerging challenges in the face of conflict and cycles of violence. Local libraries mobilise peace strategies such as theatre, games, cultural activities and everyday encounters, challenging the emergence of new cycles of violence and responding to emerging challenges.

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### Fragmented encounters: traversing national landscapes

After the peace accord in 2016, Colombia has navigated a bumpy road to possibilities of a post-conflict society from the outset (Ciurlizza 2016; DNP 2017; Juvinao 2016). In fact, a bare majority decided to reject the Peace Agreement—49.22% voted in favour (mostly in rural areas), while 50.78% voted against it (Álvarez-Vanegas, Garzón, and Bernal, 2016). Despite the polarisation, the strong opposition of political sectors, and the use of emotional and rhetorical devices to manipulate the public opinion (Gomez-Suarez 2016), the agreement ushered in an extensive work on mechanisms to implement the treatise leaning towards sustainable peace. This included the special jurisdiction for peace, the truth commission and the integration of ex-combatants (including young people), amongst others. This urban-rural divide has partly been the cause and result of the

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internal conflict in Colombia (Gutiérrez 2004; Safford and Palacios 2002). Issues of land ownership, redistribution, and political representation have fuelled internal conflict for more than 60 years. In 1948, when a left-wing political leader was murdered, violence intensified and marked a period of social and political unrest known as *La Violencia* (Bushnell 1993). Since then, urban centres grew rapidly, and rural regions continued to be neglected, exploited, or oppressed by conflict dynamics. For instance, a failed peace negotiation from 1999 to 2002 granted the FARC guerrilla group a demilitarised zone of 42,000 square kilometres, providing them territorial and economic leeway to pursue military buildup and tighten control over coca production and trafficking.

During more than five decades, the guerrilla FARC embarked on an ideological project through a well-defined indoctrination system. Such sort of 'encyclopaedic endeavour' imparted knowledge to subalterns (Mejía 2018). The system structured indoctrination around six core dimensions: life skills, armed confrontation, moral structure, political and ideological doctrine, history and rules, and technical knowledge (Lizarazo Vega 2020). Every aspect of subalterns' educational instruction was percolated by the logics of war (e.g. learning how to write sentences exalting militaristic attitudes). While emotional affirming phrases, such as 'I love you, mummy' constitute part of the emotional affirming repertoire supporting children's learning, a paternalistic statement '*Manuel Ama al pueblo*' (Manuel loves the people – Manuel Marulanda Velez, founder of the guerrilla FARC), replaces family bonds with ideological loyalty (Mejía 2018). Thus, children and young people's private and social affections are subordinated to militaristic goals.

The political elites in Colombia have always utilised violence as a means to legitimise their practices and cancel any dissenting voice. As far back as the 1940s, paramilitary groups started to fight liberals and left-wing movements (Velásquez Rivera 2007). Since then, paramilitary groups have become a political and military force, using violence to protect elite political and economic interests. This was particularly relevant as of 2002, when Alvaro Uribe Velez became president under the promise of democratic security; during his two terms, guerrilla groups were heavily attacked, and the military was rewarded for meeting killing quotas. Militarism thus became a framework to think about political issues and the military institutions were seen to be of primary importance to sustain forms of security overlapped with ideas of peace (Shepherd 2018).

However, the effects of such a framework produced unexpected outcomes that continue to be the object of discussions and heated social and political debates to this date. For example, in the pursuit of military rewards, young people – normally from precarious economic and social backgrounds – were falsely recruited, killed and presented as members of guerrilla groups, a phenomenon known as *false positives* (Torres-Vásquez and Huertas-Díaz 2023). Both state and non-state actors perpetrate violence against children and young people under the disguise of security or political resistance. All the population has experienced the stark realities of the conflict somehow or other. Urban cities reveal the dramatic transformations of their urbanscapes; displacements and an explosive urbanisation shaped the everyday of their inhabitants. The city itself is also a witness to the intractable conflict of the country.

The countryside, on the other hand, has faced the conflict with more intensity (although there is no measurement or comparison here). The presence of the military, paramilitary and guerrilla groups has dramatically changed their lives. The population has been trapped in the middle of armed conflict and subjected to pressures from different

groups, facing accusations of supporting one side or the other, displacements, massacres, and destruction of family and social bonds. Oftentimes, guerrilla groups often imposed social order, collecting taxes to finance their cause whilst forcing communities to change their economic activities. Paramilitary groups also exerted forms of control and oppression: people were scrutinised, the young suddenly disappeared – either recruited by armed groups or killed. Farmers were often taxed and methods of school teaching, over time, were fiercely controlled. Every aspect of social life seemed to be under scrutiny (Gutiérrez Sanín and Barón 2005; Oslender 2008). A schoolteacher's recollection offers more than a memory: it reveals the landscape of the armed conflict in the region:

Violence was everywhere, everywhere ... until 2000 more or less. We saw many confrontations, violence everywhere, illegal armed groups ... We all lived in fear, in the overwhelming uncertainty of what would happen next. (Henry)

Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of Putumayo, a region located to the southwest of the country. The historical development of this region has been marked by exploitation, violence and state neglect. As far back as the 1900s, the republican expansion project inflicted violence on the indigenous communities and decimated the populations while extracting rubber (Hardenburg 1912; Pineda 2003). The consolidation of political violence (1946–1962) ushered in forms of managing political dissensus through violence and stigmatisation; at this point, being a liberal or a conservative became the basis of national politics, and other political affiliations – mainly associated with leftwing politics – would be harshly punished. In the 1970s, coca crops became the main economic activity for the inhabitants of the region. This is a direct consequence of the isolation with the rest of the country, optimal environmental conditions, and quick profits (Bello and Cancimance 2011). A quick look at this reveals two prominent features; first, the relationship with the state is mediated by structures of violence and extraction. Second, the emerging social relations in the region mostly respond to structural violence. Thus, coca crops and drug dealing are intervened by the state through repressive forms rather than political initiatives seeking to address the rooting causes of violence and illicit drugs. It is in this period that guerrilla groups arrive in the region and take control of economic activities and impose 'social order.' Paramilitary groups enter the territory to counteract guerrilla groups and take control of coca production and trade. Amidst the silence imposed by the conflict, a few voices break through saying:

You don't normalise this, you say, 'Oh, here it is common to say that,' and you go quiet for fear. So you don't dare too much. And the other thing is, the community did this many times, let's say when you heard that many were killed, or one, or as it is happening now that there is no day that somebody isn't killed ... And this is happening now. And what people say is 'oh, well, there must be a reason, they must have been up to something, so in doing this they justify the killer, so you say that's how you start normalising things and saying that it is alright if the person was involved in something. But when it is somebody from your family who's killed—I told you I had a brother who was killed by the paramilitary and friends as well not only by the paramilitary, but by the guerrilla—. So, you say, 'If people say there's something (behind the killing), to me 'that something does not justify assassination.' And perhaps other people know why, but you don't know why. Then you ask why and nobody answers. (Librarian)

It is in this context where schools and local libraries as educational sites constitute powerful spaces where children can engage with alternatives that oppose to violence

whenever possible and despite being under the rifle gaze. Here, then, the purpose is to analyse how informal educational experiences in libraries contribute to demilitarisation of children's mind and provides opportunities to re-imagine their place in a socially convoluted society. By re-imagining, I understand a process by which children and educators think of possibilities that challenge the apparent avenues to navigate the social world; that is, how both children and education agents – in a horizontal process of making sense of the world – think and imagine ways of being with others without the mediation of violence (Freire 2017). That capacity for imagination is, in this view, rehearsed together. The second part of the argument is that education agents participate in this re-imagination where they question their own views and learn with and from children.

### **Mapping the local library: no violence is allowed, but you are welcome!**

Social inequality has been a pressing issue in Colombia since the foundation of the republic. The harsh geography further complicates state presence. This is especially true in rural areas, where it often reduces to military and police forces. Yet, there is an institution that has exceptionally been accessible to marginalised populations: the library. Public libraries are democratising spaces where individuals have access to knowledge, information, while engaged in social practices that foster coexistence (Jaramillo 2010). In Latin America, the public institution of the library has been a very important place where citizenship is rehearsed and practiced. It is here, too, that an informal dimension of education reaches diverse populations and provides alternative forms of learning (Foley 1999).

The first public library in Colombia – The Colombian National Library – dates back to 1777 after the Jesuits were expelled and their belongings expropriated (Tellez-Tolosa 2012). Since then, the development of the public library was slow; only until the 1920s and 1930s will the public library see a development both in urban and rural areas and the creation of the national network of public libraries. However, this was subject to the vagaries of politics, with disputes between liberals and conservatives. The Catholic church, particularly in small towns, was reluctant to support the public library as it was seen as a space where people could be corrupted and their power diminished (Melo 2000). In the second half of the twentieth century, two main libraries were created: Biblioteca Publica Piloto in Medellin and Luis Angel Arango in Bogota. This marked a milestone for public libraries in big cities. For example, in Bogota, private and public efforts contributed to the creation of local libraries. In the 1980s, Bogota integrated schools, public libraries and youth centres. And in the 1990s, major libraries were integrated to local libraries and parks in a vast network administered by the mayor office. This has been a successful programme up to this day (Tellez-Tolosa 2012). However, the landscape of libraries in rural areas is less positive. Although all the libraries make part of the national network, oftentimes resources are scarce and their functioning depends on the good will of librarians and volunteers.

Local libraries are informal educational sites per excellence. They provide a flexible learning environment that somehow escapes normativity in a formal sense (e.g. school curriculum). This allows users to engage in significant experiences through co-operation, consideration of others' views, and spaces to talk (Jeffs and Smith 2005). Of course, to achieve this requires that librarians and volunteers invest in the creation of an ethos of

acceptance and dialogue, which is all the more so important when the users are children and young people. If schools have structured learning agendas, then libraries can be spaces where flexibility allows alternative learning dynamics. Not only that, but libraries afford opportunities for families, communities and social movements to engage in horizontal learning experiences (Novelli 2010).

There are 1540 libraries in Colombia under the administration of the National Network of Public Libraries. They are located in main cities, rural areas, small villages, community councils, and indigenous reservations. The foundation of this network is underpinned by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA-UNESCO) and the Caracas Declaration on Public Libraries. This indicates that public libraries aim to provide the public with access to reading materials, technology, and updated collections while creating welcoming spaces for diverse audiences (Caracas Declaration 1999). The network is also responsible for training library staff and providing incentives and programmes that benefit the functioning of public libraries. Similarly, the principle-setting frameworks recognise the relevance of public libraries in supporting forms of formal and informal education without, perhaps, the acknowledgement that public libraries constitute a part of informal education (IFLA-UNESCO Manifesto, 2022).

The local library of Putumayo as an informal education site has witnessed the effects of violent configurations in the region. The members – librarians, volunteers, and users – have also been oppressed by conflict dynamics. However, it has been less scrutinised than other education institutions such as schools, and grassroots organisations. Local libraries, then, navigate a double space where they are not perceived as a threat by armed groups: it is a space where people are allowed to interact with others outside political rigidities. Everybody is welcome to be part of the library community irrespective of their political views, gender, race, or class; but the only condition for membership is non-violence.

The local library is located on the eastern side of city and can easily get unnoticed as it is a couple of unpaved streets away from the main road. This library received a national award for its recognition as a library of peace in 2014. As I walk in, I meet the librarian and a few children reading, doing homework, or playing. There are two large rooms: general and children's. Filled with natural light, these spacious rooms are bordered by large windows. There are all sorts of books from western authors, national and indigenous authors, and a section dedicated to stories of the national conflict. I find books by Gabriel García Márquez, Ernest Hemingway, and local authors who have written the story of the local conflict. There are four computers and some laptops available on request and internet connection that at times get intermittent. The library opened in 1997, and since then, it has worked on different projects with and for the community. For example, a radio programme called '*el Hormiguero*' (Ant's nest) divided into five segments: *author's voice*, presenting biographies and fragments; *Library activities*, inviting the community to engage; *conversation*, discussing community issues; *exploring rhythms*, where they play protest music and local genres; and *children talk*, where children or young people read stories.

This educational site is in itself a place for connections; NGOs, schoolteachers, volunteers, and visitors arrive at the library to create positive collaborations around peace and community building. For instance, women's associations meet at the library and host events where they discuss issues in the community and run workshops about environmental protection, memory, and gender issues. On the other hand, there are a number of

initiatives for the whole community run by the library and volunteers (mainly young people):

I came from a smaller town. So, I was surprised to see 'the library' here. Then the librarian told me about the magazine ... wow, you have a magazine, I mean, you write, so that was amazing to me and then I realised they had a radio programme, too. But when I got involved, everything was at a standstill. They had the fifth issue and hadn't done any more for 3 or 4 years, so the processes were at a standstill ... the radio programme, the reading sessions, film clubs, and the magazine. (Diana, young female volunteer)

Despite occasional discontinuities due to lack of funding, there are strategies in place to counter the effects of the conflict. The librarian remembers:

When we started with all this, we thought about how to talk about peace, and to give the youth spaces for a community experience, play, good use of free time. We saw this as a chance to think about peace. So, we invited them (children and young people) to come to the library and see a film here or at the park and then have a conversation. We offered alternative spaces for the youth and whoever was around. (Librarian)

But just beyond the bounds of the library, the school reveals something that deepens the story of children in the face of conflict:

I would say, 'Alright, we're going to do an activity under the shade of a tree', the thing is to do something other than maths, problem solving ... Something different that helps them relieve the monotony, for example, on a sunny day like this, because children get stressed. They did drawings of fighter planes, crop-spraying planes and helicopters shooting overhead, and showed children firing rifles at them. So, I asked, 'who are these? And they said, 'These are us, shooting them (the military) so that they don't annoy us here and go away. (Wilson, schoolteacher)

The reality that emerges is one of normalisation of the conflict and militarisation of the mind (Bush and Saltarelli 2000). Children see the consequences of the armed conflict and identify its actors: Guerrilla groups, paramilitary, and armed forces – military and the police-. All these groups have difficult relationships with the communities to varying degrees, but the result is rather the same. What reveals this complication is the installation of violence in the social and domestic spheres (Segato, 2018). Episodes of gender violence, discrimination, killings, and other types of aggression disintegrate forms of sociality and establish a new ethos. The relationship between the state, armed groups (some of them working as parallel states) and the communities is pervasive and configures adult life choices that exert power, domination, and economic control, becoming an aspiration for children. Of course, the intention is not to homogenise the experience of children in the armed conflict but rather show its pernicious effects and the emerging social and economic arrangements thereof, which will be positioned as alternatives for adult life.

### **Libraries for peacebuilding**

Informal education sites serve as laboratories for democratic experiences and citizenship (Novelli et al. 2024). Their openness, flexible agendas and inclusive ethos contribute to peacebuilding. This is not to say that informal education has no tensions or challenges; but they have the potential to counter the logics of war

and political confrontations. The social and educational role of libraries in communities has been recognised internationally. Libraries are viewed as an extension of democracy providing access to information and education to all kinds of populations without exception (Witt 2014); the scope of its work includes networking with other educational institutions, social groups and cultural organisations (UNESCO 1945).

The institution of the local library is seen as a place for cultivating ideas of internationalism and consolidation of peace (Lor and Pabón-Cadauid 2018). From this perspective, peace and libraries depend on one another. It is in the library that ideas of peace can circulate together with democratic values. It also constitutes a repository of information where the public can access information about the conflict and learn about forms of dealing with dissensus in the social arena (Mohammed 2023). Although all this is true, there are other important aspects that remain unexplored in these views. The work of the library transcends knowledge transmission and dissemination of views of sociality. Both the public and librarians – and active members – engage in relational dynamics that bring about frictions, learning experiences, and transformations on various levels. It exceeds normative expectations and opens up possibilities for re-thinking the library, its ethos, and that of the members.

The peacebuilding potential of libraries resides in the capacity to engage in frictions and better conflicts (Zuleta 2011). Whereas ideas of democracy and access to information are constitutive elements of the library, the peacebuilding dimension opens up when librarians and members are able to (re)invent themselves and their practices in the face of conflict and other social challenges (Jaramillo, 2016). This suggests that the task is rather to promote spaces where citizens exercise their capacity to navigate their social world and interact with others based on a principle of non-violence, which is all the more evident when political or social conflict is involved.

A quick look at these implications reveals two prominent features: first, that any fixed notion of peace or assumption about the dependency of libraries on peace work provides a limited understanding of both libraries and peace (see also Witt 2014). Peace and conflict are present, and the frictions thereof bring about possibilities for reinventing forms of sociality; second, informal education spaces are many-voiced, which cannot exclude the messiness and multiplicity of lived experiences. It is in this intersection where any analysis of libraries for peace makes sense. Thus, to examine how the library works with children making sense of the conflict and countering its effects requires overcoming such limitations.

Yet this hinges on sustained commitment and persistence of librarians and volunteers. While libraries hold potential for building strong community bonds during crisis, they can equally deepen divisions and perpetuate structural inequalities. By avoiding the confrontation of divisions in society, libraries run the risk of ignoring disadvantaged groups and serve privileged groups and their interests (Doran and Preston 2000). Williams and Zachert (2000) warned that bureaucratic processes often hinder institutional responsiveness, which can be detrimental for communities that need safe spaces and opportunities for participation. Libraries, as informal educational sites, have the possibility to create spaces that work as laboratories of social change (Novelli et al. 2024).

## Children in the face of conflict

Children and young people are often more vulnerable in contexts of armed conflict. Forced recruitment, indoctrination, loss of family members and violence impact their lives. As shown in this research, children and young persons have traversed different spheres of the conflict in Colombia, and their knowledge of the war affects their lives and may also have intergenerational consequences (Sanchez Meertens 2017). However, here, too, objections arrive; this is not to deny the effects of armed conflict on children, but nuances are much needed here. For example, children's participation and agency are fundamental when constructing spaces for peacebuilding in which they are engaged.

Children and young people are often viewed needing guidance and support; while this is true, this notion may hinder their participation in collective processes (Biggeri 2014). If, as noted by Sanchez Meertens (2017), children and young people possess knowledge of the war rooted in their multiple experiences and effects, then their voices need to engage with peacebuilding conversations. But a first distinction might be helpful here: Childhood, as Spyrou (2018) suggests, needs to be understood both as a 'singular and universal phenomenon based on children's structural position in the generational order' (p. 8), and the emergence of multiple forms of childhood(s) in local contexts where the particularities of structural elements affect their life experiences. It is in this tension where children's experience and agency in conflicts can be better understood.

Such a distinction is helpful to avoid flattening definitions of childhood as a fixed category and its implications; it is even more so in the context of conflict. Boyden (2003) suggests that notions of childhood as a phase of innocence and development in understanding the world is insufficient. In a much-needed turning point, critical approaches to childhood studies have widened the understanding of childhood, moving beyond developmental and biomedical notions anchored in Eurocentric views and ignoring socio-cultural and historical elements underpinning conflicts. Whereas psychological characteristics are important to understand processes inherently human, normative conceptions of childhood exclude important debates around the nature of conflicts and social relations where children are situated not as passive observers or receivers of knowledge, but as political subjects (Beier 2022).

It is in the offerings of critical perspectives where three important points can be made: first, oftentimes, children have but no voice in the armed conflict; they are subjected to violence, discrimination, forced recruitment or labour, displacement, lack of education, and separation (Boyden 2003; Bodineau et al. 2025; Bush and Saltarelli 2000; Grünwald et al. 2025). Second, lack of agency is never definite when it comes to children in armed conflicts. Children and young people have the potential to challenge views on war, ask difficult questions, refuse to follow violent patterns, and resist through active participation in their communities: political subjecthood (Beier and Tabak 2020). Third, understanding children as political beings opens new avenues for working with children, breaking fixed notions of childhood and exclusive, often adult-specific, exploring revamped views on agency.

## Ethnographic fieldwork

This study is the result of a critical ethnographic approach that seeks to understand power dynamics and oppression (Madison 2012). Embodiment is a crucial aspect of the set of

encounters: seeing, listening, and asking questions while doing and learning with my participants made it possible. The critical dimension stems from my commitment to addressing situations of injustice and making contributions. Here, then, contribution is understood as a process of mutual growth, where both participants and the (learner) researcher engage in emancipatory practices (Freire 2017; Molano 2001). Writing this is also an act of political resistance that defies assumptions and seeks to explore creative ways in which human beings resist and re-exist beyond logics of war.

A multi-sited design allowed to traverse different educational sites in search of discourses and practices leaning towards resisting the armed conflict and its logics, as well as dynamics notions of peace turned into practice (Marcus 1995). I travelled across three educational sites: two schools, the local library, and a group women's association. This allowed to explore formal and informal education, their struggles, (dis)continuities, and prospects in relation to peacebuilding (Novelli 2010). I also wanted to explore the messiness of peacebuilding education, which is revealed in patterns or contradictions and the possibilities of better conflicts emerging from peacebuilding efforts (Zuleta 2011).

Although this research was conducted in a rural region in Putumayo, Colombia, I distinguished two types of school locations: urban and rural. This distinction is helpful as urban centres have different social and economic dynamics; both schools differ in terms of students, allocation of resources and experiences of the conflict. Teachers guided me to explore the local library as a recognised place with a focus on peace education, working on a plethora of initiatives in different spaces of the town. This local library relies on volunteering work, mainly young people who are part of the community and library users from a young age. They also host cultural activities and events run by women's associations, which constitute the third educational site of my research. Women have organised themselves in different groups seeking to address issues of structural violence, transitional justice, memory and gender inequalities. The local library serves as a place for encounters for women's groups and school visits.

Between 2019 and 2024, I conducted two distinct phases of ethnographic fieldwork in three interconnected educational sites: two schools, a local library, and a women's association. The first phase, undertaken over a two-month period in 2019, involved participant observation and interviews in all three sites. I engaged with and learned from 30 participants, including 12 schoolteachers, 5 library members, and 5 members of the women's association. This phase also included a series of focus groups with other education agents within these educational settings, enabling an understanding of the institutions' roles in peacebuilding. The second phase, carried out in 2024 over a two-week period, was a return encounter with a more focused scope. Concentrating primarily on the library, I conducted follow-up interviews and focus groups with 7 members of the library team, allowing for a deeper exploration of evolving practices and relationships within that specific site.

I utilised a narrative approach seeking to understand how my participants made sense of their educational experiences across the three sites (Webster and Mertova 2007). I see the value of storytelling in peacebuilding research as it can connect to lesson on a social, economic, political and moral level, consistent with ethnographic writing (Clifford 1986). Here, too, narratives are socially situated performances that reveal how individuals navigate and contest the armed conflict, its logics and other power structures. The analysis focused on both what is said and the construction of

thought and intent (Britton 1970; Hardy 1977; MacIntyre 1981; Rosen 1985). Grounded on a critical ethnographic framework, this research also uncovers subjugated knowledges and assumptions about educational practices. For this article, the main focus is on practices related to children and their experience in the library based on notions of peace and peacebuilding.

### **Echoes from the field**

The experience of the library offers perspectives that enrich the understanding of peacebuilding and how children navigate their views while engaged with others'. It is in the relational opportunities, their frictions and creative responses that both children and other individuals make sense of their realities and counter the logics of the armed conflict:

### **Non-violent modes of existence take shape in the library**

Through everyday interactions and collective agreements, the library's members – librarian, youth, and adults alike – have cultivated a non-violent ethos: no violence is permitted, either within the venue or in the initiatives it supports. This radical arrangement is continually shaped in dialogue with newcomers and maintained as an underpinning principle. The librarian recalls an encounter that brings this agreement into sharp relief:

There was one child who used to come to the library to fight and take things away from other children. And I used to tell him off and now we bump into each other, and he says to me, Thank you, teacher. I learned from you. You taught me to be sociable because at home it was ok to fight all the time with my brothers, but in the library, you didn't let me fight, and when I did, you didn't even talk to me or help me to do my homework. I used to say 'teacher, it is just that ...' I would reply, 'When you behave in the library, then I will help you. (2019)

The recognition of a space where no violence takes place is a starting point for more nuanced understandings. For example, considering alternative forms of dealing with conflict, children – and other members – can renegotiate images of themselves and others (Taylor 1992). The emphasis here is clearly on alternative forms of relating to others, where difference is not a cause of either aggression or discrimination. This, in turn, promotes social bonds, trust, and collective action, countering the war-like logics (Galtung 1990). Here, too, children have the opportunity to rethink how social relations around them operate – and how they might be transformed. The library provides non-violent choices, offering choices that can feel radical in both intention and practice (Butler 2021).

As the local library takes root as a community space, collective action and shared experience begin to weave the fabric of peacebuilding. Dialogue becomes a primary source of action (Freire 2017), which allows for seeking solutions and making sense of the social world. For instance, the library brings reading activities to distant communities. This is often an intergenerational space where children, young people and adults engage in learning activities, creative, artistic activities that promote the transformation of social relations in the community and locally, while fostering peace and imagination (Cancimance 2019). They co-construct spaces where they express their views and propose new topics to explore while engaged in playful activities. This is a two-fold process, where

both children and library members engage in transformative action. A library volunteer recalls a moment that powerfully illustrates this:

People's response is great. For example, in 2016, everyone –children, adults, everyone indeed, felt free to feel and do things and they say it was a very nice space. They also expressed their satisfaction collectively, and you could see that they got together and shared in a more personal way. We also saw how they confided in us, particularly the librarian. So, they talked about problems related to the community, its organisation, or a serious issue. And we were a reference to conflict resolution as well. (Leidy)

The radical move towards non-violence recognises that individuals inhabit the world in relations of interdependence (Butler 2021); therefore, it produces spaces for coexistence based on principles of trust and care. The library makes sense as an institution only in relation to the community, and any initiative is meaningful only if the community is actively involved. One library member echoes this dynamic:

She (The librarian) invites us (to take participate in the library activities) and makes us feel confident. We can talk about anything here and we know we are safe. We know the library respects your religious beliefs, your political ideas, your sexual orientation, which is not possible in other places. You can be red or yellow, you can like men or be catholic. Here you are respected and accepted. (Diana)

The armed conflict intensifies forms of structural violence where difference is harshly punished. Forms of self-expression suggesting non-conforming identities or attitudes are dangerous. In this context, the library allows and welcomes difference, which children and young people experience as both safety and affirmation of their process of personal discovery. This experience is not limited to young people; adults, too, find spaces of belonging and expression within the library.

### **In the library, peace takes on dynamic and situated meanings**

The concept of peace resists a single definition and poses problems both on a theoretical and political level (see also Akgün and Araz 2014; Harris 2004; Richmond 2006, 2010, 2014). At the same time, it allows for creative and context-specific interpretations at the local level. A volunteer shares her views on the library' role in peacebuilding, revealing layered and situated meanings of peace:

I think that (the library) is a place of peace, because it's a space where one can receive and share opinions and ideas about anything. A necessary element for peace is dialogue, and the library creates spaces of dialogue through various means: books, film clubs, conversations, spaces for photography and memory. There are various ways in which the library can generate those spaces of dialogue, but it's not just about a peaceful coexistence in the moment. One gets some elements, and one has a more reflective and critical thinking about reality ... You get other perspectives; you are no longer blind. We still need to work with indigenous and afro communities and create more spaces to include them. (Leidy, volunteer)

Thus, a dynamic notion of peace is connected to people's voice. Where safe spaces are available, children, young people and adults find the courage to engage in dialogue, which leads to action – praxis (Freire 2017). For instance, film forums work as a strategy where carefully curated films promote conversations and understandings of peace amongst young and adult audiences (Toksöz 2024). Dialogue is

rehearsed and maintained through initiatives that link forms of learning to life experience. Only then can horizontal conversations emerge, mediated by trust rather than fear. An element that presupposes such interactions is the recognition of the other – the interlocutor – as an equally human (Taylor 1990). Humanity is a shared experience, contrary to what war imposes – a dehumanised other-. It is here where children and young people engage in authentic learning experiences where nobody liberates anyone; on the contrary, everybody's experience offers new possibilities when thinking about peace. Here, too, a volunteer offers an account of a meaningful encounter with children reflecting on the meaning of peace:

I was amazed by children and their knowledge of the conflict, especially those living in distant villages. They spoke eloquently about what was happening, using language that revealed just how deeply they understood the situation. (...) Children' opinions are incredible. It really amazes me to hear their ideas. One day, for example—during an activity—a boy created a bin for peace. He said we could throw violence and negative things into bin and keep peace. Another girl said she would create a peace mic for people to express their views, especially those who aren't usually heard. (Dana)

Peacebuilding initiatives are varied, and children engage creatively. Play is an exciting element used in activities that invite children to rethink their views on violence easily present in games and language; or otherwise put, play offers a symbolic dimension that allows for critical thinking and change. The librarian's recollection is particularly significant in illustrating this point:

We did an activity in the park to encourage children to give up their toy weapons and play instead. The children who went had to take their toy weapon with them and put into a bag before they passed through a tunnel made out of 'fique'—natural fibre—bags. They would give up their toy and we waited for them at the end of the tunnel with a round of applause, a drink, rice pudding, and then we played with them. That was our process and from that moment onwards we had the radio programme in which we told parents to give their children something that did not fuel conflict. (2019)

This moment offers a revealing glimpse into the symbolic dimension of play; by 'laying down their toy guns', children accept an invitation to imagine new forms of play and create alternatives images of themselves and others. There is a conscious decision to display new strategies in the playground that prefigure forms of sociality informed by non-violence. there is, nonetheless, a parallel process taking place here: adults accompany the process not as mere spectators; they engage in the 'rite of passage.' where both children and adults participate in a symbolic transition to imagination where violence is excluded.

Such a process, however, is ongoing and should not be mistaken for a finished product. It should be understood as the opening of worlds which we have glimpsed but not seen yet. It is a process of gradual (re)construction on a cultural, physical, and ontological level (Bush and Saltarelli 2000) operating on both directions. Both children and adults have the task to make sense of the challenges posed by peacebuilding and think of ways to maintain their commitments. This is not to say frictions and disagreements are not to be present; quite the contrary, the expectation is that both children and adults will integrate them without resorting to violence.

## In the library, after the story

As the librarian recalled her determination to reject violence, it became clear that this radical stance would come to shape the ethos of the library's initiatives. Library members have articulated strategies addressing the need to oppose war-like logics imposed by the armed conflict and persistent structural violence. Such a process poses challenges and frictions and, at the same time, nurtures from interactions and emerging issues in the community. It is here where children and adults engage in transformative practices. Rather than offering fixed notions of peace or identity, this ethnography reflects on how peace takes shape in collective action giving birth new forms of sociality, self-expression and non-violence. Peace here is not an end point, but a set of relations going through fluctuations. The fragility of peace is counterbalanced by the power of imagination, meaningful encounters, and the rehearsal of better conflicts (Zuleta 2011). This ethnographic journey leaves other questions to be explored, fundamentally in relation to children themselves and their own specific views. Perhaps, too, this can be another encounter making sense of peace.

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