

Colombia's Children at Risk of Recruitment into Armed Groups: Exploring a Community-Based, Psychosocial Pedagogy

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The protracted violent conflict in Colombia has resulted in the internal displacement of over 4.3 million people (IDMC, 2008) and the enlistment of 11,000 to 14,000 children into one of the guerrilla or paramilitary groups. At least 30 percent of the combatants in Colombia's armed groups are children, and over tens of thousands more child soldiers exist in the world. Children in rural and marginalized areas of Colombia are often targeted by armed groups for recruitment or social cleansing, which is the killing of youth for not abiding by imposed community rules (WatchList, February 2004). Based on research conducted in an illegal, paramilitary controlled territory in Colombia, this article offers insights into how education may increase protection of displaced, violence-affected children by addressing their layers of risk factors through a community-based, psychosocial pedagogy.

Keywords: *Child Recruitment; Education in Conflict; Psychosocial Pedagogy; Community Education; Educational Development*

During the past 15 years, an increasing number of children in Colombia have been recruited to actively participate in the violent, ongoing conflict. Children now compose up to 30 percent of all members of armed groups in Colombia, although over 60 percent of those in urban militias are believed to be children (Human Rights Watch, 2003; Ramirez, 2005). In the midst of conflict, education systems often break down. However, education can help to reduce conflict and restore society, including preventing the recruitment of children into armed groups (Vargas-Barón & Alarcón, 2005). Too often, though, prevention programs do not offer violence-affected communities enough support to protect children from joining armed groups, in part because a deeper understanding of the interaction of the various risk factors leading to the recruitment of children is needed (McConnan & Uppard, 2001).

This paper is based on qualitative research conducted in a marginalized, illegal, paramilitary-controlled zone in the south of Bogotá, Colombia. Research findings are based on participant observation of twelve at risk children in the marginalized community of *La Comuna 4* in Soacha, Colombia. In addition, data was collected through interviews with these children, their families, representatives from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), a formal school, and the Colombian government.¹ In this article, I argue that a community-based, psychosocial pedagogy is critical for addressing the numerous risk factors violence-affected children face and to offer them alternatives for their future.²

1 In this article, my research focused on two key education programs: the CID nonformal education program, and the IE formal school.

2 The term 'psychosocial' refers to the interaction of the psychological and sociological aspects of a child's well-being. The psychological refers to behavior, cognitive development, as well as a child's "capacity to perceive, analyze, learn and experience emotion" (Arntson & Knudsen, 2001, p. 4). Sociological aspects refer to a child's ability to develop and maintain relationships with peers, family and others in their social sphere. It also refers to a child's ability to learn social codes and norms within their

Effects of Conflict in Colombia

Displacement of the civilian population is one of the primary effects of war and is prominent in Colombia, where in the past 20 years over four million people are believed to have been forced to flee their homes as a result of the violence (IDMC³, n.d.). Internal displacement has become one of the top humanitarian crises in Colombia, where internally displaced persons (IDPs) come from 87 percent of the country's national territory (Bernal, Convers, & Paz, 2004). As a result of being displaced, IDPs tend to have limited access to basic services including nutrition, health, education, and water, even as they suffer limited opportunities for employment (Bernal, Convers, & Paz, 2004). Of those who are displaced, 44 percent are under the age of 18 and 48 percent are women, who often become heads of household due to the death of their partner or his recruitment into an armed group (Bello, 2004). Due to the increased challenges, limited basic services, increased poverty and other factors, displacement also increases the risk of a child being recruited into armed groups.

Colombia's protracted conflict has led to the recruitment of 11,000 to 14,000 children into the various armed groups involved in the violence (WatchList, 2004), which is one of the highest rates of child soldiering globally (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2004). In 1996, a published Colombian Government report stated that up to 30 percent of the members of some armed groups were children (Human Rights Watch, 2003). The use of child soldiers has been a growing concern in Colombia, as they have been actively engaged in Colombia's armed conflict through guerrilla or paramilitary groups or the military itself in increasing numbers since 1990. Children as young as eight have been deployed (Singer, 2005).

Globally, children are believed to be actively engaged in 17 conflicts, which is an improvement since 2004; however, in 86 countries children are recruited and involved in some way with armed groups (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008). Children may serve as informants, cooks, servants, mail carriers, and combatants. Although most child soldiers are estimated to be between 14 and 18 years old, a number of them are also under 10. The availability of light weapons, such as assault rifles, AK-47s and hand grenades has facilitated the use of children in armed conflict (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2004; Machel, 2001). A large percentage of children also voluntarily join groups involved in violent conflict (Cohn & Goodwin-Gill, 1994; Singer, 2005). According to Singer (2005), "Roughly two of every three child soldiers have some sort of initiative in their own recruitment" (p. 61). The situation in Colombia is no different. In surveys of children in armed groups in Colombia, around 60 percent of children were recruited voluntarily (Singer, 2005).

When speaking of children's voluntary recruitment, the term 'voluntary' is questionable. Deciding to join an armed group is usually a consequence of economic, cultural, social or political pressures children experience (Machel, 2001; McConnan & Uppard, 2001). Factors that may influence a child's decision to join an armed group include poverty, the need to meet their basic needs, family pressures, lack of education, unemployment and others (Brett & Specht, 2004; Singer, 2005; Wessells, 2005). Most children in Colombia join due to poverty, lack of opportunities for education or economic advancement, to escape domestic abuse, or in response to family influence, amongst other reasons. They may also view members of armed groups as role models, having grown up in their midst (Human Rights Watch, 2003). A large number of these children come from rural communities where armed groups maintain a strong presence and control.

culture and environment (Arntson & Knudsen, 2001; Duncan & Arntson, 2004; McCallin, 2001; Shah, Graidage & Valencia, 2005).

³ IDMC, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, is the primary international organization tracking statistics and information related internally displacements populations globally.

Education within conflict settings has been recognized as a protective and risk factor for at risk children. Although children in an education program are believed to be less vulnerable to recruitment, they have also been known to be involved with an armed group. Education can protect children by focusing on developing values and ideals related to peace. Community events are often held in schools adding to the protection of children and families, and creating a greater sense of community. However, armed groups also have a presence around schools and turn schools into venues for recruitment. Teachers often do not address this issue in the classroom due to fear of being threatened by an armed group (CID teacher focus group, personal communication, October 3, 2007; Coalición Contra la Vinculación de Niños, Niñas y Jóvenes al Conflicto Armado en Colombia, 2003).

A Case Study in Colombia: La Comuna 4, Soacha

La Comuna 4 of Soacha, Colombia, located to the south of Bogotá, has become a haven for displaced persons throughout Colombia. Over 70 percent of the 66,000 inhabitants are believed to have been displaced directly or indirectly due to the violent conflict. La Comuna 4 is also neighbor to Ciudad Bolívar in Bogotá, a neighborhood composed of between one and two million inhabitants, a large percentage of which have been displaced. Between 1999 and 2005 over 275,000 displaced persons inhabited Soacha and Bogotá, primarily in these marginalized areas of la Comuna 4 and Ciudad Bolívar.

Forced and voluntary recruitment of children into armed groups was a prominent feature of la Comuna 4. Children involved in the armed groups were often children not involved in any education program, according to children, teachers, government officials, as well as a former young paramilitary member. Out-of-school children, who spent most of their time on the streets, did not attend an education program, and went home at night to their families or lived alone, were most vulnerable to recruitment, as well as to becoming involved in drugs or violence. Children participating in an education program, however, were also vulnerable to recruitment. When children in an education program were recruited, the odds of dropping out of school varied depending on their role. If, for example, the child's role was to be an informant or to store arms, they could remain in the education program. If they were hired as combatants or assassins, they were more likely to drop out since these roles involved travel for long durations of time.

In addition to recruitment into armed groups, other critical risk factors present in the community included poverty, violence, limited access to basic education and health services, limited employment opportunities and domestic violence.

Based on my research, three critical components of an education program and one overarching education strategy seemed to foster the resilience of violence-affected children in la Comuna 4 and increase their protection. The components include: (1) partnerships between formal and nonformal education programs; (2) fostering the teacher-student relationship; and (3) balancing participatory and authoritative teaching styles. The key strategy is: promoting a community-based, psychosocial pedagogy.

Formal and Nonformal Education: A Collaboration

The protection of children and their resilience could be strengthened if both formal schools and NFE programs capitalized on each other's strengths. Doing so could also offer greater sustainability and credibility to the education programs targeting violence-affected children in the community.

Considering that violent settings often have limited access to education, as in the case of *la Comuna 4*, creating a direct partnership or a close relationship between a formal and nonformal education program would be an effective approach to increase a child's access to education, as well as to offer an education program relevant to the context of the children and address their psychosocial needs. For example, the CID and IE programs offered different approaches for working with students. In reviewing the strengths of each program, one can note that the programs were complementary to each other and, by working together, could increase children's protection and better foster their resilience and coping mechanisms. Table I illustrates the strengths of each program.

Table I: Strengths of the CID Program and the IE School

Strengths of the CID nonformal education program	Strengths of the IE formal school
Offered psychosocial activities in order to meet the needs of children.	Offered students a state recognized education leading to a diploma.
Fostered the teacher-student relationship.	Offered children a safe and enclosed space to study.
Actively promoted the link between home and school, primarily through home visits and workshops for parents.	Added classrooms to work towards offering students an opportunity to finish secondary school.
Offered students opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities.	Offered students opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities.
Offered students two meals each day.	Had plans to offer students free lunch upon finalizing the kitchen and cafeteria.
Provided students with medical care.	

An analysis of the strengths of the programs illustrates how the CID and IE education programs are complementary. Students at the NFE program may benefit from increased safety for studying and participating in recreational activities through the formal school when space allowed CID students to study at the IE; parents could join the IE parent boards. Those at the formal school could benefit from the CID's promotion of fostering the student-teacher relationship; home visits and encouragement for parents to become involved in their children's education; and the psychosocial component, which included individual and group therapy for students in greatest need in order to address issues of aggression, thoughts of violence, conflict resolution, and adapting to a new environment.

One of the greatest benefits of formalizing the nonformal education programs would be an increase in access to formal education. In the case of *la Comuna 4*, with 30 percent of school-age children out of school, in part due to limited access or high school fees, a partnership between the NFE and formal school would increase children's opportunities to complete their primary and secondary education, and increase children's alternatives for their future. The majority of employment options in Colombia required employees to have at least a primary education and many required a secondary education. Since formalizing an NFE program takes much time and requires negotiations with the Ministry of Education, NFE organizations could take a more feasible approach and partner with a public school, where NFE students enroll in the formal school and study at the NFE.⁴ Once students are ready to transition into the formal school, this partnership could facilitate the process. Also, if

⁴ The Escuela Nueva Foundation established such an approach in 2002 with the Learning Circles program targeting at-risk, displaced children. Additional information is available at: <http://www.escuelanueva.org>.

students do not transition into the formal classroom, but pass the national education exams at the formal school, students could receive their diploma.

Fostering the Teacher-Student Relationship

When children experienced violence and other hardships in the home, the teacher's role, especially as a mentor, seemed to become more important. Teachers and other staff from both the formal and NFE programs stressed the importance of being affectionate with children and learning more about them. Doing so allowed teachers to develop a relationship with students where the teacher also acts as a confidant or mentor, which increased children's protection. Such support can be critical for children in *la Comuna 4*, considering the high rates of domestic abuse and often limited support and affection in the home in addition to other community risk factors. Although both programs discussed the need to foster a positive relationship with the students, there were stark differences in doing so.

Within the formal education program, although teachers and other school staff reiterated the importance of fostering a relationship with the students, I did not observe interactions that would lead to such bonds between teachers and students. For example, teachers often did not know their students' names. While in class, teachers referred to students as *joven* (young person), *niño* (boy), or *niña* (girl). In my observations in the classroom and school, I noticed a division between the students and teachers. During recess, students at times played with no supervision. When students worked on assignments in the classrooms, the teachers often left the room or sat at the desk until the assignment was completed. A teacher from the primary school explained that in lower grades teachers were able to develop closer relationships with students than in the upper grades, mostly since in secondary school, teachers teach one subject to a large student body as opposed to only working with a small group of students throughout the entire day (IE teacher, personal communication, February 15, 2007).

Historically, teachers in Soacha felt that they were being punished if sent to a formal school in *la Comuna 4*. Teachers' desires to transfer out of schools in this area could also strain relationships with students. Teacher turnover at the IE school had previously been high. After changing teachers in August 2006, the new school principal held a meeting with the parents and stressed that the teachers in the school were committed to remain at the school for several years. The parents cheered when they heard the principal speak of minimizing teacher turnover (observation, August 28, 2006). Throughout the 2007 school year, the same teachers remained at the IE school.

In IE school classrooms, teachers often yelled at students to behave and pay attention. Students in my focal group reported feeling unmotivated by the constant yelling; they preferred teachers who spoke firmly. The students preferred the teacher who, according to my observations, tended to speak firmly, offered clear instructions, and had a good sense of humor (fieldnotes, February 2007). IE teachers did not build close relationships with their students and rarely discussed issues beyond schooling; the teachers also did not know much about the children's lives outside of school, and did not conduct home visits (IE teacher focus group, personal communication, October 4, 2007).

At the CID program, teacher-student relationships often seemed stronger than those developed at the IE school. CID students would often hug teachers as they arrived to school. In the older grades, teachers and students greeted with a kiss on the cheek, as is the custom in Colombia when meeting someone you know. This was not the case in the formal school at the secondary level. In contrast to the IE, CID teachers knew the children's names. During an interview, one of the CID teachers stated that knowing the child's name, as well as asking how they were doing, was a fundamental responsibility of the teacher (CID teacher, personal communication, February 28, 2007).

Although students in the CID program had different teachers during the day, they were able to develop close relationships with them, in part, due to the time spent walking to and from the cafeteria, eating breakfast and lunch with teachers, and during recess or other program activities. Teachers showed concern for students and offered support. For example, when a student ran away from home, CID staff assisted in searching for the student. When a student's father was arrested on charges of harboring weapons, teachers and students supported the child emotionally by speaking with him individually and continuing to follow his father's case. When one student's father threatened to hit him or when he had trouble at home, the student would seek refuge in one of the teacher's homes. Examples of the affection and support CID staff offered students are extensive. Relationships between teachers and students were strengthened, allowing CID staff to better deal with the needs of students, such as addressing domestic abuse, absenteeism, among other issues. In addition, a number of students enjoyed participating in the CID program, arriving early to class and becoming involved in after school activities.

As a result of developing a close relationship with teachers, students at the CID often sought support from teachers when facing difficulties. When one boy's father stole money to buy clothes, the student spoke with his teacher about how he felt. When he had another problem at home, he asked me for advice. When another student had difficulties with her mother and sister, she discussed the problems with two CID teachers. A third student often referred to one of her teachers as her father and spoke with him about family, her father in particular, and other topics. In another case, a student discussed personal issues with one of her teachers regarding her pregnancy and relationship. On numerous occasions, students depended on teachers for advice and support. These points support the importance of fostering relationships between education staff and students within education programs for at risk children.

By strengthening this relationship, education programs fostered children's resilience and coping mechanisms and improved the program's ability to address the children's psychosocial needs. For example, home visits led to a better understanding of the children's home situation and informed teachers of issues that may affect student learning. Meeting with parents also led to additional insights into the students' lives. In addition, teachers acted as mentors for the students and helped them address sensitive and difficult challenges.

Balancing Participatory and Authoritative Teaching Styles

Formal and nonformal education programs had difficulties with class discipline and in utilizing different teaching styles, namely participatory, authoritative and authoritarian styles. In a participatory approach, the teacher acts as a facilitator of activities and discussions. Students are more actively engaged in the learning process and may learn through different activities including group work, skits, and role playing to name a few. An authoritative approach places teachers in a more central position in the classroom; the teacher maintains greater discipline and control of the students. This approach is not to be confused with an authoritarian approach in which teachers hold a more dictatorial position. An authoritative style gives teachers a stronger command in the classroom, while also offering students some freedom.

Within the context of *la Comuna 4*, where teachers from both the CID and IE programs worked with children having a similar background, staff from these programs stressed the importance of utilizing a participatory and an authoritative approach with the students (CID teacher focus group, personal communication, October 3, 2007; IE teacher focus group, personal communication, October 4,

2007). Although education approaches were designed with the children and the context in mind, the CID and IE programs had difficulties balancing their teaching styles with the children.

The IE program used an authoritarian style and rote learning, where teachers often wrote on the board and the children copied. Teachers had difficulties working with students as they sometimes walked around or did not pay attention. IE teachers occasionally incorporated participatory methods, usually by having students work in groups. According to the IE principal, an authoritarian approach was necessary to work with the children and maintain control in the classroom due to high levels of aggression. At the same time, the IE school participated in an NGO program that utilized participatory teaching methods for primary students. Teachers discussed the importance of mixing different styles depending on how children responded. When students entered the school overly active, did not pay attention, and were aggressive, the teachers became more authoritarian; when children paid attention, teachers tried to use more participatory and authoritative styles (IE teacher focus group, personal communication, October 4, 2007).

The CID program had similar challenges in balancing teaching styles. In theory, teachers utilized a participatory approach in line with contemporary educational doxa and the guidelines for emergency education, which stresses the need to involve students in their education (INEE, 2004). Participatory approaches were also exemplified during class observations at the CID. I often noticed teachers working with students in a circle, doing group work, asking questions, and encouraging students to participate. However, I also noticed CID teachers who preferred placing students in rows and using more authoritative styles (which bordered on authoritarianism) in order to maintain better control of the students. Although CID teachers engaged students in the learning process, participatory approaches were not consistently implemented. This was due in part to the high levels of aggression in students. Teachers needed “to have a space of control to maintain discipline” (CID teacher, personal communication, October 3, 2007). Similar to the IE teachers, CID teachers discussed the importance of using different teaching styles in the classroom due to the high level of students’ aggression.

Working with students in the classroom seemed to be a challenge for teachers in both programs. In some cases, when children demonstrated aggressive behavior, teachers became authoritarian and were able to control the class. In other cases, authoritarian and participatory approaches did not seem to be effective as students continued talking, walking around, and not paying attention. In observing interactions between teachers and students, it seemed that a more directive yet engaging teaching approach, as discussed by Bartlett (2005) and Horton and Freire (1990), could be more effective. Within the context of *la Comuna 4*, it may be necessary to explore authoritative approaches that include participatory aspects in working with students, as opposed to a primarily participatory teaching style. In doing so, teachers may be able to better work with students and foster their resilience and coping mechanisms.

These three education components should form part of the overarching education strategy of promoting a community-based, psychosocial pedagogy designed to decrease risk factors influencing violence-affected children, increase their protection, and offer viable alternatives for their future.

Promoting a Community-Based, Psychosocial Pedagogy

When generations of people live within the context of violent conflict, trauma and fear become aspects of everyday life. As a result, the ideology and values based in a context of violent conflict are then passed on to future generations (Gampel, 2000; Lykes, 2000). It therefore becomes necessary to work with entire groups as opposed to offering individual therapy (Martín-Baró, 1994). In the case of

children, a psychosocial approach entails examining how children interact within their community, with their family, friends and others, and how resilient they are in these unstable conditions.

Findings from this study suggest that education within a conflict setting may benefit from a community-based, psychosocial pedagogy, which entails teaching that focuses on addressing the needs of children and families through a holistic approach that considers the child's individual and social needs. In addition, this approach requires the implementation of culturally appropriate instructional methods that derive psychosocial themes from the community.

Implementing a psychosocial pedagogy requires the inclusion of several key components. Within the IASC Task Force Guidelines, a few critical aspects of education include: a safe space for schooling, the participation of different stakeholders in its development and implementation, and ensuring formal and nonformal education initiatives are relevant.⁵ In addition, linking the IASC action sheets on education with those on community mobilization are critical, especially in regards to outreach to the most vulnerable children who often remain outside the system (IASC Task Force, 2007). In addition to the participation of the community in program development, the community should also be fully immersed and control the steps in the process promoting community ownership of the program.

A community based approach where community members take on leadership roles in the program allows for a stronger foundation and also contributes to the psychosocial well-being of the participants. Becoming involved in the program is one strategy for increasing participation of children and families not only in education but in the community as a whole. A school building that provides the education program the space for classroom teaching, as well as an area for recreation can also be used for community events, such as festivals, meetings, workshops, and more. In doing so, the school becomes a safe haven from the violence and offers the community a space for gathering and discussion (including sensitive topics such as recruitment into armed groups and child labor), while at the same time providing children a safe place to learn. In essence, the community begins to rebuild its social fabric through education.

As part of community building and promoting an inclusive education program, leaders within the program should reach out to all members and welcome new arrivals to the area. When displaced families arrive to a new setting, they may experience shock or depression (CID parent focal group, personal communication, October 3, 2007). Adapting from a rural to a more urban setting also takes time and requires learning new skills. In addition, newly arrived IDPs need to learn how to survive in the new community, including learning about the armed groups and their methods of control, and meeting other community leaders, such as those in education. In Colombia, the majority of displacement occurs in small numbers (*gota a gota*, which literally translates to drop by drop) as opposed to mass displacements. Therefore, there is a continual flow of new families arriving in IDP areas such as *la Comuna 4*. Reaching out to those new families and incorporating them into the community provides immediate support, may reduce suspicion regarding who is involved in the armed groups, continues to strengthen the community, and builds the bonds of trust.

Through a community-based approach, the focus of the inhabitants may change from an isolated fear of the armed groups to one in which protection is increased through the strength of the community.

⁵ The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) is composed of UN, NGO and other partners and is the primary vehicle coordinating humanitarian assistance across agencies (IASC, n.d.). Further information is available at: <http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/default.asp>

The psychosocial well-being of the children and their families may benefit from support systems created within the community (Bello et al., 2000). A school or NFE program may provide a central venue that allows for community building. By creating activities and workshops based on the needs and interests of the community (which includes the children and their families), the psychosocial healing process is fostered.

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