

TRACES OF THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF PEACE

Carlos G. Gómez Restrepo, F.S.C.
Lasallian District of Bogotá
carlos.gomez@lasalle.edu.co

SUMMARY

From the background of the Colombian reality, and the Latin American reality in general, this article considers the possible dimensions of an education committed to the construction of peace as fundamental. The author proposes: to enrich the minimum concepts necessary to understand not only the history and evolution of conflicts, but also the current reality; respect educational spaces, so that peace can impact the school curriculum; educate with a respect for ecology and the care of the common home; and, finally, strengthen the social responsibility of schools and universities in the face of peace processes.

Keywords: education, peacebuilding, reconciliation, liberal democracy, institutionalization, conceptual enrichment, educational spaces, ecology, common home, social responsibility, public or armed forces, transitional justice, impunity, curriculum.

Talking about Education and Peacebuilding is a topic which is always of the utmost importance. Any observer attentive to the reality of the world can easily notice that all around are traces of generalized violence, terrorism, of exacerbation of conflicts, not necessarily of external wars (there are dangers, and real wars too) but of internal conflicts which can easily escalate. I write these notes against the backdrop of the Colombian case and more from life and experience than from books, but in the same way, there are the socio-political situations of several of the Latin American countries which are experiencing moments of tension, despotic governments, and of quasi-civil wars.

I think that universities and schools have not always assumed in all seriousness that these sensitive issues are demanded in our countries and that the problems within these institutions, the behavioral problems, the issues of certification, quality and administration, have focused more the internal institutional concerns, losing the critical view of the context in which education is a fundamental actor, not the only one of course, but from which society expects a guiding word. These contributions intend, in short, to understand part of the responsibility in the role which formal education can play in our contexts, and in which some of these issues should be established, especially in these years of capital importance for the history of many of our countries.

Yes, peace happens to turn it into a common purpose, of societies and, of course, of educators. Peace is neither liberal nor conservative, neither of the left nor of the right, neither of the rich nor of the poor, neither of the old nor of the young, nor depends only on the goodwill of the protagonists of the conflicts. Peace is for everyone, it is a public good like education, it is the whole society which has to understand and act accordingly because we are all actors and protagonists in the processes of peace building. For example, peace will not be possible if the spirits are not disarmed, if one does not work consciously in the places and instances in which each citizen lives to achieve it. Peace is needed within families, peace in our neighborhoods and with neighbors, peace in the workplace, peace in schools, an end to violence against women or those who think and live differently, an end to domestic violence, peace in our attitude, and peace in our relationships.

With this context I think it is important, thinking about the education sector, to have some clear ideas which, as axioms, can help us to understand the education-construction relationship of peace:

1. Education - and its transformational capacity - is a powerful and irreplaceable instance in the formation of criteria and the construction of a social fabric.
2. It is imperative to believe in the capacity of citizens, and especially of young people and children, to walk paths of reconciliation and, hopefully, forgiveness.
3. The consolidation of peace happens, among other things, for the construction of more equitable societies, like this:
 - a. The intentional and joint search for equity.
 - b. The strengthening or credibility of judicial systems
4. It is necessary to defend the liberal democracy which implies the division of powers, the independence and interdependence of them among themselves, respect for the Social State of law, and the defense of freedom.
5. Education is a unique space of institutionalization which allows us to comprehend, understand and defend institutions as guarantors of democracy and necessary instruments for the organization of social life.

Thus, with this background of convictions, I believe that, among others, the following aspects are fundamental to be considered in the current moment of the world, knowing, of course, that national realities vary and cultural factors play a preponderant role. In fact, conflicts are not of the same nature. There are some in which the central factor is an ethnic problem, others are given by political positions which exclude each other, there are religious issues, others because of border problems, many are based in the potential mining or commercial wealth of the territories. However, education, indistinctly the origin and core of the conflict, can help significantly. One could point out four dimensions to consider and which have an important support in education:

1. Regarding the conceptual enrichment or minimum knowledge that should be provided by curricula and academic activities to understand the history and evolution of conflicts and the current state of the situation. Peace has to impact the curriculum.
2. Regarding educational spaces which go beyond the curriculum: the expanded curriculum.
3. Regarding integral Ecology and the Care of our "Common Home".
4. Regarding the Social Responsibility of schools and universities.

First Aspect: Conceptual enrichment

I am sure that universities and schools cannot take for granted that their students have conceptual clarity about the thrust of the socio-political processes and the related ones of the origin, history, milestones, myths, development which sustain conflicts and violence. The existence of a minimum sociopolitical education and comparative history is required, which allows us, on the one hand, to be critical in the face of the ideological and often manipulative processes and, on the other hand, is an important *acquis* to form the criterion and build a necessary argumentative framework which is solid enough for a student who claims to be an informed citizen. It is necessary, of course, to try to approach with a critical spirit the ideas which sustain the different factions or actors of the conflicts and why they generate an escalation of violence.

This list could become endless because it includes, from the outset, the very definition of politics, of electoral and participatory processes, of governmental systems, and of democracy: the minimums of basic civic education, increasingly absent in formal education. But I want to focus on some aspects which seem fundamental to me and which produce all kinds of disorientation and petty manipulation where vested interests prevail and not the common good.

- a. *Institutionality and society*. A success has been made, especially in Latin America, out of the idea that the way to transform society is to destroy or weaken state institutions. While it is true that institutions need reforms, updates and transformations, these must be done from the institutional framework itself. Certainly the branches of power are being seriously questioned: there is distrust of the administration of justice, corruption seems untouchable, Parliaments or Congresses seem not to capture the needs of the population in the best way, nor emanate from it the best solutions to the most sensitive issues for the majority of citizens. A good part of the population thinks that parliamentarians legislate less for the common good and more to favor benefits for certain groups.

Governments, at their different levels, have to undertake with decisiveness the implementation of public policies to firmly and quickly overcome situations which will always be a good breeding ground for new violence: inequality, land problems, the situation of the countryside, the quasi-monarchical power of some groups of power, the dismay of education which should put people on equal terms with respect to opportunities, among others; and, it will also demand that we all help strengthen institutionality as a

guarantee for peace. Undoubtedly, it will demand political control of citizens and participation in accountability.

- b. *Strengthened democracy*: This will also be the litmus test of democracy in Latin America: inclusion and equity or, on the contrary, the prolongation of injustice will be the preamble and trigger of any political adventure which ends in dictatorships disguised as plebiscite democracies where the road will be reality for democracy to turn against itself. However, the strengthening of democracy goes far beyond electoral participation - important, of course, but insufficient in the joint and solidary construction of society. Quality education for all: a well-educated society with a well-informed people is the guarantee for effective, solid and inclusive democracies.
- c. *The Public Force or Navy - Military and Police Forces* - as guarantors of the Social Pact and the construction of peace. It is urgent in our educational institutions to teach the role of the Public Forces in a society which experiences or tries to emerge from a conflict but which has external and internal threats, and which will not be resolved automatically in a negotiation. The processes of transition to new ways of managing social conflict, institutionalization, the reconstruction of the social fabric, the coexistence of citizens, the consolidation of territories, among other aspects, demand a new understanding of the meaning of the monopoly of force, of the fundamental role of the Military and Police as prevention forces, as vehicles to get to consolidate the State in the secularly forgotten territories, and as guarantors of peace.

In fact, the entire society must understand that the Armed Forces have fundamental tasks which cannot mean their dismantling or weakening at any time. In the Latin American case, there are other dimensions which gravitate in the problems of violence which cannot be ignored, such as the threats of drug trafficking, contraband, illegal mining, the economic-political interests of the world powers, among others, which very possibly will continue to coexist while distorting social, economic and political processes and generating violence.

However, it is also important that, if the internal dynamics of the country are to be transformed, it will demand from the Armed Forces new outlines of its profiles as long as the institutional normalization is established. The Military Forces focused more on their constitutional work and their own nature of the responsibility for the borders and external threats, and the Police Forces oriented towards the prevention of crime, citizen security and the propitiation of internal order.

The Armed Forces, in the Latin American case, with a complex history of *coups d'état*, dictatorships, partisan political alignments, monopoly - not only of weapons but, in some cases of illegal economic factors, will always play significant roles in peace processes, democracy, violence, respect or disrespect for human rights. It is enough to see the role they play and are playing in Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil, Nicaragua, Cuba, among others; or the proposals of the new Mexican government to move towards a "National Guard" whose constitutional nature and sustenance is unknown.

- d. *Transitional Justice vs. Impunity*. There is a lot of concern about how these concepts have been handled, distorted, and maliciously manipulated. There are few people in educational institutions who clearly handle the meaning, scope, content, and implications of transitional justice; a backbone of conflict processes which involve negotiations between clearly definable factions, and which necessarily lead to transitional processes in justice.

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The history of Latin America is full of examples of impunity, presented today as processes of transitional justice, and even transitions made under the aegis of "forgiveness and forgetting" which have only led to new violence. The problem is that the heart of transitionality is the Truth, which is usually the first sacrifice and that appears little in the previous processes of our history as well as in the discourse of those who see all negotiation as the door to impunity. Nor could this issue be addressed without seeing other processes beyond our borders which illustrate well the practical significance of such a contemporary approach to justice in times of armed conflict and social violence.

The easy discourse to oppose the dialogue negotiations of conflicts is that it is unthinkable that the perpetrators, regardless of the nouns which name them and the adjectives which qualify them, "should rot in jail". Once again, as well as forgiveness and forgetting: jail to prevent the emanation of truth or forgetting, as occurred in the frequent amnesties of the twentieth century and even in the transitional processes of recent decades. Justice is not necessarily synonymous with prison, but it is a consequence and complement of the truth, of reparation, restitution and the guarantee of non-repetition. What can never be sacrificed in a process of conflict resolution is the Truth.

Topics of this tenor should be the object of study, conceptualization, discussion and consolidation in educational processes, whatever their level or nature. Many more should be on the menu, but those mentioned are especially careful.

Second Aspect: The Curriculum and beyond the Curriculum

Class schedules often exhaust the curriculum in many educational institutions. It is enough that the students take a number of years and many subjects to graduate high school or secondary education, or university credits to make them professional. This perspective loses sight of the "integral or comprehensive education" which both our educational projects advertise.

How to bring to our campuses and schools experiences of forgiveness and reconciliation? How to establish spaces of coexistence and search for common projects in our differences? I think we lack creativity, but, above all, we still need to know models and paradigms. We can believe that good readings solve the problems or that the experiences provided surpass real experiences.

I have had the opportunity to visit numerous towns and villages which have been marked by political conflicts, and go to hidden places where violence has been raging for decades. I have been able to meet many people who have suffered in their own flesh dispossession, rape, death of those closest to them and displacement. I have been able to share with young people and adults from

cities where, although there have been conflicts, it has not been permanent or has not left so many disasters in its wake. In this shuffling around, I find a tendency that impacts me: those who have no one to forgive or with whom to reconcile with are the most inclined to ask for extermination, revenge, jail and even the death penalty, and those who know what war means cry for peace, but, although, yes, they demand truth. 80

It is evident that this is the central point where the peace of Colombia will be played out, without a doubt, but also thinking about the coming years of other Latin American countries which are currently experiencing painful processes of unstoppable violence: Truth about what happened, truth about those who have been the victimizers, truth about those who kept silent, truth about those who were not able to be supportive, truth about the indifferent, truth about the opportunists and, even, truth about those who we thought were alien to the conflicts. Thus, the post-conflict will be more painful than the conflict itself and for that we have to prepare ourselves and help prepare the generations which inhabit our colleges and universities.

In Latin America, countries which recognize their Christian roots because they are part of the history and the value framework of our cultures, it is urgent, necessary and principled to know, think, accept and communicate that forgiveness is essential in Christianity; it is a constitutive element, it is the way to love. It questions, yes, that in countries that feel Christian in their inspiration and in their values it ends up being so difficult to speak of forgiveness, a word which is often shameful. Therefore, education has a responsibility to face the truth and an unavoidable challenge in the creation of propitious scenarios for forgiveness and reconciliation. In the case of the Catholic Church, it has a fundamental role to play in these processes. On the other hand, Pope Francis has been very clear when he has touched on these issues during his visits to Latin America; but also continuously in his speeches to Rulers of all the Continents. Thus, reconciliation is not only for those who have been in war. Everyone, the whole society, we have to experience processes of reconciliation and forgiveness.

However, the curriculum is fundamental. Years ago, in Latin America, for example, they stopped teaching and learning history and geography. Under an incomprehensible amalgam, several realities merged in the concept of social sciences which must be studied with intensity, intentionality and clarity. The history, to know the passage of people who still have not finished consolidating into nations and who like to forget their tragedies, to reduce their deeds, and to dilute their identity; and geography, to know and learn to love rich, extensive, varied territories, regional differences which are their greatest wealth, but also, often, an occasion to exacerbate divisions and impoverish common projects.

This is not to speak of the importance of the study of politics, policy and institutionality! It is imposed in the formal curriculum, academic spaces for the study of the Political Constitution, the structure of the State, the Institutions which allow the operation of each country and give the conditions for the social pact to develop. In the same way, schools and universities have to favor the learning and experience of values such as respect, responsibility, tolerance, justice, solidarity, fraternity, honesty, the defense of the public in their daily practices. In short, education has to provide, with respect to ethics and values, sustaining knowledge, supportive environments and generating situations so that new generations of children and young people can learn the ethics of

civil life and responsibility towards the permanent construction of peace, democracy and social life itself.

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In short, how can we not express concern if we have continuously experienced circumstances of students and professionals that would leave any educator deeply worried? It seems that in recent decades the educational processes or the cultural environment favor the acceptance of adulthood coherently with the years and the stages of personal development. It is assumed that people should be gradually aware of their responsibilities and the consequences of their decisions. It is not healthy or convenient for us to always try to keep people who forget their duties and responsibilities to demand rights. Nothing does more harm than not generating the conditions and environments for young people to accept the consequences of their actions and the decisions they have freely taken.

Any decision implies obligations and responsibilities. In recent years I have been observing that under the pretext of supporting, loving and helping young people we have created a generation that hardly reaches adulthood and that remains adolescent for decades, if they ever decide to answer for their decisions and accept adulthood as reality and commitment. That is why we have, in the end, generated an ethical relativism that does not favor the construction of society or acceptance of the responsibilities which emanate from decisions.

Third Aspect: Caring for the Earth and the sustainability of development

The possibilities of schools and universities to be a reference of educational proposals for "ecological citizenship"¹ are enormous. It is not a question here of repeating the challenging educational proposals of *Laudato Si'* which already, from the outset, proposes an education in the context of the realities of a "Common Home" which has been degraded, disrespected, over-exploited, and poorly maintained. But Francis also raises the issue of "civil and political love" which is indispensable to build society, and goes further, to the point of raising an ecological spirituality and a call to deep inner conversion because it is from the bottom of the heart that a change in attitudes, in the criterion to weigh the ecological consequences of personal and political decisions, and that the only Earth we know cries out for respect for humanity, and from humanity for the "common home".

The curriculum, the daily practices, the contents, the study of history and geography, the sustainable models that sustain the economy of the school, the decisions of purchases and consumptions, the knowledge of the geographical spaces, the contemplation of the landscape and many more things find a unique space to grow in Catholic education in awareness of the role we all play in protecting the environment, the intrinsic responsibility of all social and personal decisions, and that every action, however small, may have devastating or constructive effects on the Common Home. Yes, the ecological theme runs through the whole life of the school and the university, its relations, its educational offer, its quality criteria, its contents, and its daily practices.

Francis has been vehement on the role of education in the conception and transmission of a new paradigm, essential to be able to overcome the issues of violence, increase coexistence, create new

¹ Pope Francis. *Laudato Si'*, 211.

imaginaries and new lifestyles and relationships of human beings with their environments, feeling part of the only Earth we have, our "Common Home".

The Pope told us that "no person can mature in a happy sobriety if he is not at peace with himself. An adequate understanding of spirituality consists in filling out what we mean by peace, which is much more than the absence of war. Inner peace is closely related to care for ecology and for the common good because, lived out authentically, it is reflected in a balanced lifestyle together with a capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of life." (L.S., 225). And goes further and speaks clearly about the role of education:

...if we want to bring about deep change, we need to realize that certain mindsets really do influence our behavior. Education will be ineffective and its efforts will be sterile if it does not also seek to spread a new paradigm about the human being, life, society and the relationship with nature (L.S., 215)

In summary, a School, a University which trains human beings so that they live alternative lifestyles to the logics of domination, of excessive and predatory consumption, of disrespect for life, of ambition and destructive selfishness. Changes which will lead to cultural transformations which generate other social logics, a new beginning as Francis says.

Fourth Aspect: Regarding the social responsibility of our institutions

In line with the above, I like to think that it is not difficult to be creative in Latin America. There is so much to do and so much to create that it is a matter of daring to bet on new proposals. The Universities and the Colleges have to find some projects where they show in the explicit context of the construction of peace efforts of responsibility where there are components that propitiate forgiveness, the generation of proposals that join wills, which allow us to improve the living conditions of the most vulnerable people, the transfer of technologies to improve productions or habitats, in short, many more things.

But, undoubtedly, social responsibility must generate projects based on solidarity, mercy, opportunities, incision and the construction of equity. Universities, without a doubt, have to find means for talent to find opportunities beyond the restrictions which are often imposed by the harsh economic conditions of a large part of society and other factors of exclusion which exist.

In Universities there have been works on the history of violence and very valuable analysis, both to understand the social dynamics of violence and peace, and to unravel the content of public policies and the speeches of rulers, rebel leaders, guerrillas or other groups in confrontation, and shapers of opinion. There are those who have measured the economic impact of the conflict as well as those who have reviewed the historical and cultural trends which would explain the validity and permanence of violence. I think many works have helped us to understand and put into context the difficult history we have experienced. The coming years will also be full of necessary approximations to history and reality in order to never repeat our barbarism and to be able to build, on solid foundations, the new social processes which are needed to acclimate peace and make it sustainable.

However, I think we also have to explore other possibilities which have to do with the generation of methodologies, workshops, therapies, educational projects and other social and community spaces to facilitate the processes of forgiveness and the construction of a new social fabric. It is certainly easier to explain why what happened than to advance in the formulation of thrust and social dynamics that prevent what happens today which I do not want to happen.

I think, for example, of the new methodologies that will be needed in rural education to redo the social fabric. When I walked through Latin American rurality, I discovered that in addition to the terrible tragedies experienced by the peasants due to conflicts, such as displacement, violence, poverty, there is another situation which I believe is the most difficult to overcome in the future. Without a doubt, poverty is a daily violence which hits rural populations enormously and, especially, rural women: frequently very young mothers, a large number of children, absent fathers, etc. Perhaps the worst impact which violence has had on rurality was the loss of confidence in the human groups who endured their relationships in the value of the word, in familiarity, credit and transparency: a dramatic rupture of the social fabric. The arrival of actors of the conflicts ended with these values which are fundamental in every society but which are so dramatic in the field, given the need to trust in our neighbors and support each other.

This is compounded by the reality which shows us the situation of rural education that can only be called a disaster because, far from democratizing children and young people and putting them in a position to compete and in equal conditions compared to the opportunities of higher education, condemns them to a poor education which is a way to perpetuate poverty. How to train teachers for rural education? How to generate conditions for educational quality in the social and geographical depth of our countries? How to make rurality a space for dignity? How to contribute to integral rural development and make it sustainable? How to transfer techniques and technologies for an agricultural and livestock production which generates wealth and which helps to generate conditions of dignity in rural areas?

I mention only the rural, and in its educational aspect, but still there are many national scenarios where it is required that the best of our research is transferable in social innovation. It is a bet for the future and I understand that it is easier to be a historian than a prophet, but here it is necessary to risk, impose to create, we are forced to generate approaches which change many inertias and modify social dynamics, production systems, the same economic models that consider little solidarity as value and associativity as a means.

In short, educational institutions, whatever their nature and level, have to take these issues to the discussion and daily study. There is a lot at stake; it is the construction of a democratic and peaceful society or the perpetuation of war. No Latin American can be alien to this reality and, beyond the position that he assumes in the face of the negotiation of the end of the conflict, at least his position must be informed and coherent. These are exciting times for educators and institutions in which we define the future of Latin America.

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