Peacebuilding in a Troubled Land: Developing a Robust Peace Education Program in Colombia’s Northern Cauca Region

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Summary

Entretejiendo Juventudes was a 10-day peace education camp in which 27 Nasa indigenous Caucan youth participated. Students discussed how violence impacts their lives on different scales and developed friendships and strategies to become stronger peacebuilders in the future. Ideally, students will educate further themselves and others on these topics while denouncing these forms of violence.

Project Description

I decided to address the issues of violence (e.g., economic, gender-based, educational deprivation) and peacebuilding in Caucan youth through a peace education camp that would provide them with urgent new information as well as the space to reimagine their futures based on the reflections sparked during the camp. Our curriculum was informed by several interviews I conducted in March with community leaders and a survey I gave to 35 high schoolers. We settled on a camp format for Entretejiendo Juventudes because youth camps are not common so this would be the first program of this nature in Jambaló. In addition, an uninterrupted 10-day camp with just participants, teachers, and occasional invited speakers, would facilitate an intimate, safe, and inclusive environment to develop meaningful friendships and execute all activities accordingly.

I am from Pitayó, Cauca, and I know first-hand what it feels like to grow up in the shadow of conflict and violence. In fact, high school directors in the northern Cauca region received enthusiastically this initiative because they trusted me, as the coordinator of the project, that the camp was well suited to the realities of the participants. Overall, I chose this host site because from my own life experiences I knew that our project would impact positively the lives of participants given the social complexities of their territory.

The original proposal stipulated that the project would be a two-week camp, where high schoolers, teachers, and community leaders could participate. On one hand, we adjusted the program to last 10 days given that it was unlikely that participants could pause their regular activities for 2 weeks – students tend to work with their parents after school, who are mostly farmers. On the second hand, we limited participation to only students because we considered that while the participation of teachers and community leaders was relevant to support participants after the camp, their presence could restrain how comfortable students could feel throughout the 10 days; in fact, we prioritized the comfort of students since they were the heart of this project. Lastly, the curriculum for the program was adjusted to include a core component of comprehensive sexuality education. The interviews and survey I conducted revealed that young people were facing constant gender-based violence in their families and community.

There is a good chance that Entretejiendo Juventudes can be repeated in the future because we diligently documented the camp’s impact through video as well as a survey where participants ranked the camp as one of the best educational experiences of their lives. We also made sure to invite community leaders who can vouch for the quality of the camp and help us find local funding in the future.

Reflection

Peace, according to my vision, is necessarily a communal project, one that affirms life and interdependency in the face of separation, futurelessness, and death. The years since the signing of the Colombian Peace Agreement taught me that peace is not reached with the stroke of a pen. Certainly, Peace relies on institutional mechanisms and daily individual actions that ensure a non-violent and egalitarian environment for every person to fully develop personally and professionally within their society.
My project contributed to peacebuilding by giving participants tools to identify red flags in relationships of any kind that are abusive and a threat to them. They learned that violence could take many forms. The armed conflict is perhaps the most visible trigger for violent actions in the form of war crimes, yet young people can become victims or witnesses of homophobia, transphobia, classism, racism, and sexism. Certainly, this knowledge in the short term can be utilized by participants to question their social structures to identify realities of violence that have been normalized. In the best scenarios, they will speak up against all forms of violence and undertake their dismantling by educating their friends, family, and larger social circles.

Furthermore, invited speakers, ranging from entrepreneurs to higher education students, connected with students by sharing their experiences and motivating them to see the future these young students have ahead. Currently, three camp teachers and former UWC students, including myself, are mentoring 7 participants in the UWC application process for this year. Certainly, these new connections can take the form of inspiration, further networking, or mentorship that will get students a step closer to achieving their personal and communal goals.

A 10-day camp, facilitated mostly by teachers that do not reside in the Cauca region, compromised a challenge for the intended goals and sustainability of the project. On the one hand, students are from an indigenous community that has been historically eroded by the violence derived from the armed conflict, drug trafficking, and the abandonment of the State. Thence, 10 days of camp seemed to be a limited amount of time to carry out workshops about these complex topics while ensuring that meaningful friendships were taking place. On the second hand, the sustainability of the project banks on the support that students can receive once the camp is finished as well as on the conditions that need to be met for the program to be repeated. From these challenges, I learned that challenges can be maneuvered with thorough planning and adequate expertise from organizers. Our camp teachers’ expertise helped them achieve the execution of successful workshops under a tight schedule – in the course evaluation survey, all students ranked the camp as the best educational experience of their lives. Lastly, we made connections in the community that can assert the quality of the camp, which will help us find funding for the next edition of the program.

Furthermore, a dilemma we encountered repeatedly alluded to the question of how to have conversations that help students to identify historical and current forms of violence (e.g., economic, gender-based, educational deprivation) without downplaying the achievements of the Cauca Regional Indigenous Council, known as CRIC. Indeed, these achievements came after years of resistance at the cost of indigenous lives. It is easy to cheer a neo-liberal discourse, which would blame these forms of violence in Cauca on the material “underdevelopment” under which indigenous communities live. On this matter, I learned that as an indigenous peace educator, I needed to acknowledge that the CRIC’s political, economic, and social agenda represents the best alternative to preserve over time our culture while attacking those nationwide structures that ground to some extent most forms of violence we face as indigenous communities. Throughout the camp, students learned more in-depth about the Cauca indigenous movement, CRIC, through workshops, documentaries, and invited speakers.

*Entretejiendo Juventudes* changed the way I think about Colombian society and where substantial changes can happen to alter our social structures. As a sociology student coming from the indigenous Cauca region, I know that our realities of violence are rooted in mechanisms of exclusion and oppression that have been present since the conception of the Republic of Colombia. For the last six decades, indigenous communities’ social fabric has been constantly fragmented by guerrilla groups, paramilitary death squads, and the government itself. Under these circumstances, I envisioned rigidly the national political arena, the Cauca Regional Indigenous Council (CRIC), other grassroots social organizations, and higher education institutions to be the places where changes to our social structures can be pushed. After this 10-day camp, I realize that much of the change I can hope for banks on what those high schoolers can learn and do today. As adults, we often make decisions for the youth without considering their opinion; that is, we treat them as if they do not have the agency to think, give an opinion or share what they want. This project assured me that these Caucan youth have an open mind, they are willing to listen, learn and unlearn at the same time. Certainly, this project inspired me to promote these educational
programs in the future since I saw the potential for change these young people have when they are heard and receive an education suited to their needs.

**Personal Statement**

“Entretejiendo Juventudes taught participants and teachers that in the face of conflict, violence, and death, we can only hope for a change if an intergenerational channel of communication is at the core of any attempt for social transformation. Certainly, Entretejiendo Juventudes sets a precedent as a successful educational program, where participants felt safe to willingly share their fears, struggles, dreams, and manifest their desire to acquire knowledge, tools, and networking to make their communities less violent.” Cristian A. Fernandez Chaguendo