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The right to education in protracted conflict: teachers' experiences in non-formal education in Colombia

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ABSTRACT
The challenges of ensuring the right to education are numerous, especially when working with marginalised populations in fragile contexts. Despite having the legislation, strong constitutional support, and even educational innovations designed to guarantee the right to education, a major gap exists in Colombia between political intentions and the reality in flexible non-formal educational models designed for children affected by conflict. This article highlights the experiences of teachers working in this context amidst limitations in the programme design and, often, inadequate training and support. This article explores the prospects of and challenges to guaranteeing the right to education amidst fragility.

Since the Second World War, international agreements have increasingly framed education in terms of human rights. The right to education has various conceptualisations and justifications, and requires local integration in distinct settings, particularly those that are 'fragile'. Fragile contexts are those characterised by political, economic, and/or social instability and, often, violent conflict (Koons 2013). Thus, the challenges of ensuring the right to education, and to an education that is of high quality, are numerous: lack of security, organised violence, corruption, exclusion, and low capacity are some of the fragility factors that impede the right to education (Miller-Grandvaux 2009); these factors aptly describe the situation in Colombia. In fact, the 2014 report of the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) includes Colombia as one of the 30 countries with a significant pattern of attacks to education between 2009 and 2013.

While schools have been discussed as becoming community resource centres and restoring a sense of normalcy to children in conflict settings, teachers are central to such discussions because of their role as mentors both academically and personally to children who seek to make sense of situations of instability (Miller-Grandvaux 2009; Gay 2010). Colombia's right to education laws, and efforts to apply them to victims of armed conflict and displacement, provide an opportune case from which to draw lessons for the fields of education and conflict, international and comparative education, and human rights and education. Thus, the purpose of this article is to explore teachers' experiences and challenges in one unique programme tailored to the Colombian context (i.e., Círculos de Aprendizaje (CA)/learning circles) to offer micro-level perspectives on the everyday experiences of education in fragile contexts.

The article situates the right to education in global policy frameworks and discourse on conflict and education to subsequently address the Colombian case in terms of the country's efforts to restore the right to education of marginalised populations, such as internally displaced children. The article

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draws from 11 months of fieldwork in Colombia from 2012 to 2013 by the principal author, and ongoing follow-up research, as part of a larger study that sought to examine student and teacher experiences in the CA programme. This article utilises data from Colombia to discuss the limits and possibilities of flexible educational models that seek to ensure the right to education in fragile contexts.

The right to education from a global perspective

The conceptualisation of education as a fundamental human right was most notably documented in the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). During the drafting of the UDHR, and in the heated debates and negotiations in finalising the international document, Latin American countries were the strongest advocates of economic and social rights, such as the right to education, drawing on the 1948 Bogotá Conference's Pan-American Declaration of Rights (Grant and Gibson 2013). Further international documents have framed education as a human right – such as the 1976 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – but the Education for All Summits (1990 and 2000) offered the most comprehensive shift in international discourse for education to be expanded to all children and youth (and adults in some international documents) (McCowan 2013; Bajaj 2014).

In global frameworks, a central component of the right to education is related to national integration and social cohesion, particularly relevant for conflict settings. Such rationales build on arguments of decades past related to schools as sites for political socialisation and the development of a civic or national identity (Torney-Purta 2000; Torney-Purta et al. 2001). In more recent years, scholars have noted that education can lead to the greater exercise of freedom and might be a path towards democracy (Bergström 2010). At its best, schooling in fragile contexts can mitigate the root causes of conflict, such as corruption or exclusion; can promote stability; and can improve governance (Miller-Grandvaux 2009). At a more individual rather than societal level, but still pertaining to the cultivation of skills related to the effective functioning of a participatory and democratic society, McCowan (2013) argues that education is central to fostering two human traits: agency, which 'involves the freedom of individuals to pursue their life goals' (63) and understanding, which refers 'to [the] curiosity about and interest in the world, making possible the pursuit of an ever deeper grasp of the nature of things' (63). Thus, while education is consistently tied in international frameworks and scholarship to the results and outcomes of it, the right to education at its fundamental and most basic level is an end in itself, not a means to an end (McCowan 2010, 2013; Bajaj 2014).

Despite these potential benefits, education in conflict also has the capacity to exacerbate underlying tensions and inequalities, reinforcing the state of fragility. School practices, especially teachers' practices, are a potential source of marginalisation because they may reproduce societal differences, and shape students' identities and experiences (Bush and Saltarelli 2000; Davies 2003; Riele 2006; Simmons, Lewis, and Larson 2011). Thus, in all, but especially conflict, settings, it becomes imperative to shift 'from competitive and divisive schooling to one which builds social capital, cohesion and security' (Davies 2011, 107). In her discussion of youth at risk, Riele (2006) points out that students feel further marginalisation when they have to behave as passive learners. According to Mosselson, Wheaton, and Frisoli (2009), education in fragile contexts must not only address rights-based imperatives but also the needs of specific populations (i.e., marginalised groups). Such realities necessitate flexible educational models that offer alternative forms of schooling to specific populations or, as Rogers (2005) identifies, different, targeted processes of non-formal education (NFE). NFE seeks to address the needs of marginalised populations through 'an expanded provision of educational/learning opportunities' (250).

In conflict settings, NFE provides the opportunity to achieve equity, 'led by the demands of the learners and the contexts rather than the supply of the providers' (ADEA 1999, 4). Exploring the

Colombian response to guarantee the right to education through a government-civil society partnership and address the needs of marginalised populations elucidates the limits and possibilities of NFE processes in fragile contexts.

Conflict and education in Colombia

Colombia has suffered more than 50 years of war characterised by a variety of internal conflicts caused by armed groups, which have been exacerbated by the impact of drug trafficking (UNHCHR 2010). (At the time of this writing, peace talks had been underway since 2012 between the Colombian government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerilla group in Havana, Cuba with no agreement yet reached.) Colombia's history of violence has resulted in a large number of victims as well as a precarious situation in terms of human rights. According to the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH/National Center for Historical Memory), between 1958 and 2012 an estimated 220,000 people have been killed in Colombia as a result of its internal armed conflict, 81% of them being civilians (2013). Currently, and based on the GINI index, Colombia is ranked as one of the 10 most unequal countries in the world, and approximately 12% of its population has suffered internal displacement (IDMC 2015). The complexity of Colombia's conflict, the oldest armed conflict in Latin America, is a blend of political ideals, reaction to abuses and social inequalities, state incapacity to mediate/resolve the conflict, and varied international alliances that provide financial support for different sides.[1] As a result, the vectors of conflict are indeed complex and multi-directional more than five decades after the start of the armed conflict and frame the context in which teaching and learning take place (World Bank 2015).

The impact of the ongoing conflict on education has been significant as schools have been primary and secondary sites of violence. In Colombia, schools have been used by armed groups as recruiting centres for child soldiers, or as covert military bases, meaning that armed groups use schools to hide their arms or themselves (UNDP 2003; UNHCHR 2010). There are also high dropout rates due to displacement or schools being forced to close due to violence (GCPEA 2014), as well as attacks on students and teachers (Tomaševski 2004).

While direct forms of violence are one reason that children do not attend or leave school, various structures of violence and inequality are also embedded in Colombian schooling. Former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Katarina Tomaševski, conducted a fact-finding mission in Colombia and identified various critical issues impeding the right to education (Novelli 2009, 2010; GCPEA 2014). According to her report, in addition to the use of schools by armed groups, barriers to education included practices of discrimination and exclusion by gender, income, and ethnicity, as well as unsafe conditions for teachers and especially for children from vulnerable populations (i.e., poor, displaced, and working children as well as those from Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups). Colombia's regional, ethnic, and cultural diversity have produced deep stratification that is reflected in an unequal education system. In light of this, Colombian educational policy has identified the need for an inclusive and flexible educational system that allows heterogeneity and guarantees contextually appropriate education for all Colombians regardless of race, gender, age, and region.

Colombia's 1991 Political Constitution posits that education is an essential element of human dignity as well as an inherent responsibility of the state (Cajiao 2004), what scholars Mosselson, Wheaton, and Frisoli (2009) term, 'education as a rights-based imperative'. Restrepo (2009) explains that the 1991 Constitution marked a new direction for education in Colombia because it brought to the fore marginalisation and the needs of at-risk populations. In this sense, the document is strongly rooted in ideas of diversity and provides an acknowledgment of social inequalities, ethnic pluralism, gender, and vulnerability (Restrepo 2009). From Restrepo's (2009) perspective, the Constitution of 1991 is an acknowledgment of and a response to Colombia's asymmetries in resources and access, and the marginalisation of vast sectors of its population.

Within this context, since 1991 there have been important governmental efforts that strengthen what Pineda (1997) identifies as core issues to improve social cohesion through education, instead of reinforcing and perpetuating marginalisation. These include decentralising education governance; education equity vis-à-vis resources and opportunities; and overcoming discrimination in the access to and quality of schooling. Nevertheless, despite the Constitutional mandates and corresponding regulatory laws that exist, reports such as Katarina Tomaševski's have described Colombian education as still deeply unequal; further, the Constitutional Court of Colombia has determined an unconstitutional state of affairs regarding internally displaced persons, including violations of their right to education (Colenso 2011).

Reaching the most marginalised, particularly in fragile contexts, requires a transformational approach (Corte Constitucional 2004) to uphold children's dignity (Sayed et al. 2007), to address issues of social justice (Rodido 2002), and to restore the right to education in cases where children have been impeded from attending or have been 'pushed out' of schools (Dyer 2010). The importance of a pedagogical approach rooted in ideas of flexibility and collaboration has been noted as essential in addition to content and teaching-learning processes that incorporate students' realities into the classroom (Restrepo 1999; UNESCO 2010). Additionally, effective teachers are vital when working with marginalised populations (see e.g., Spring 2000; Ames 2006; Kadivar, Nejad, and Emamzade 2007; McEwan 2008; UNESCO 2010). Teachers play a central role in the life of students: they must understand the complexities of students' situations and be sensitive, reflexive, and creative enough in order to develop appropriate activities and create nurturing classroom environments (Simmons, Lewis, and Larson 2011). All of these demands require teachers to be well-prepared and sufficiently trained for working in fragile contexts.

This article builds upon previous scholarship that zooms in on the dynamic of teaching and learning amidst fragility (e.g., culturally responsive caring, Gay 2010; equality of opportunity, Karmel 2008; and well-being and education in violent contexts, Burgess 2008). In the sections that follow, we explore the experiences and challenges of teachers in a flexible educational programme designed to restore the right to education of marginalised children in Colombia.

The CA programme

CA is an adaptation of the Escuela Nueva/New School programme, a multi-grade model originally implemented in Colombia in the 1970s that has been internationally commended and replicated in many countries of Latin America, Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa (see e.g., Farrell and Hartwell 2008; Colbert 2009; UNESCO 2010).

The CA programme's general purpose is to reintegrate marginalised children (i.e., displaced and otherwise vulnerable children) into the educational system. Thus, it is often envisioned as a bridge for children to go from the streets to schools. The programme seeks to re-establish learning conditions as well as social and emotional stability for children who have been out of the educational system as a consequence of their conditions of vulnerability. It is a flexible programme that adjusts itself to students' circumstances instead of demanding that students adjust to rigid programme mandates (MEN 2006).

CA aims to create an active and collaborative learning environment through multi-grade classrooms, flexible timings, and learner-centred pedagogy. The programme uses self-directed learning guides as the main pedagogical tool along with other classroom tools and strategies designed to promote cooperation, participation, and autonomy. Figure 1 summarises the programme's components.

CA classrooms are located in the neighbourhoods where students live by renting rooms from local organisations or businesses to increase accessibility. The programme operates on a year-to-year basis, which means that students stay in the programme for one academic year. When the academic year finishes, students are supposed to continue their studies at a regular government-run school. Some NFE programmes operate parallel to government schooling as an alternative;
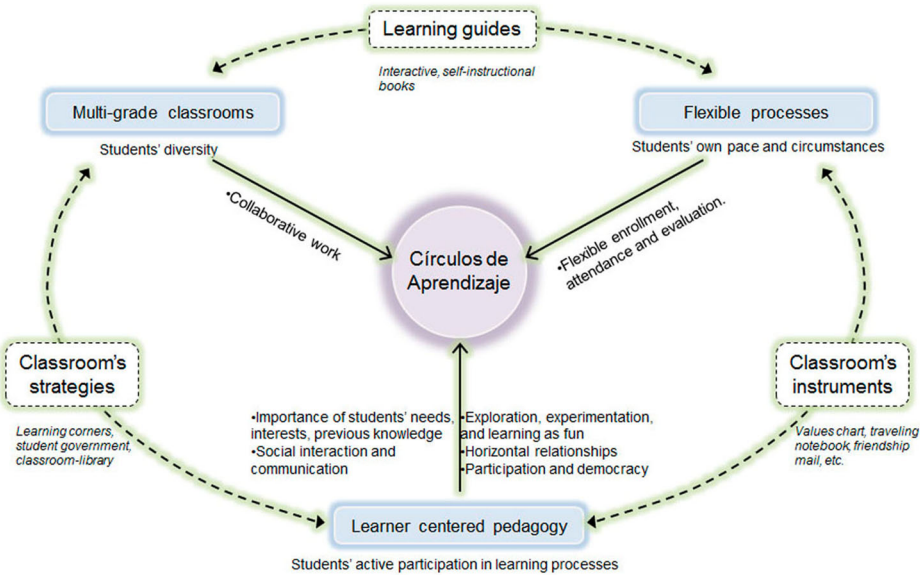
Figure 1. The CA programme.

CA operates as a non-formal pathway or 'bridge' to formal education for children who have been out-of-school or whose schooling has been interrupted by displacement, conflict, or extreme poverty.

The CA programme began in 2005 as a pilot project and was scaled to a national level in 2007. CA's only formal evaluation was undertaken in 2005 with sufficiently positive results to encourage the Ministry of Education to finance its expansion throughout the country (MEN 2006). Currently, CA is overseen by the Ministry of Education but it is implemented by private contractors, called programme operators, which are selected through a public bidding system. Programme operators are responsible for delivering the programme through regional teams who run the day-to-day operations of the programme. These teams include teachers and other staff members such as coordinators as well as pedagogical and psychosocial advisors.

More than 37,000 children have participated in the programme across 30 of Colombia's 32 departments (similar to provinces); the Colombian government and donor partners have spent over US$25 million on its implementation. The larger study from which the data in this article are drawn is one of the only scholarly studies on the CA programme to date (Vega-Chaparro 2014).

Research methods

Design and site selection

In order to better understand the complexity of CA teachers' experiences, the research was designed as a qualitative case study (Stake 2006). To capture the heterogeneity of sociocultural contexts in Colombia, a maximum variation criteria sampling was utilised (Maxwell 2005). Four implementation sites of the CA programme were selected that were overseen by distinct programme operators, in the regions of Florencia, Tumaco, Sincelejo, and Leticia. These regions offer a glimpse into Colombia's diversity in terms of their population and cultural characteristics. For instance, Florencia, the capital city of Caquetá, has a population comprising almost entirely of *mestizos* (individuals of mixed indigenous and Spanish descent). Although the region has vast areas of Amazon rainforest, only 1.6% of its population is indigenous due to the historical annihilation of these groups. This

region has been a site of violent conflict between the Colombian army and guerrilla groups (Sánchez 2009). It was also the place in which the first attempt at peace negotiations occurred between the government and the guerillas from the FARC from 1999 to 2002, given their ongoing and strong presence in the region.

Tumaco is a port city by the Pacific Ocean located in the department of Nariño and 89% of its population is Afro-Colombian. Tumaco has one of the highest murder rates in the country with more than 100 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants (Neira 2012); it is also the epicentre of a war between guerrillas, paramilitary groups, and criminal bands (Isacson 2011). Along with violence, usually linked to drug trafficking, Tumaco also has high levels of corruption (Molinares and Reyes 2012).

The inhabitants of Sincelejo, the capital city of Sucre, are mainly mestizos (73%), and a small portion of the population has indigenous (11%) or Afro-Colombian ancestry (16%). This region has a history of strong links between right-wing paramilitary groups and politicians. As a result of paramilitary activity, the region has suffered widespread mass killings (Álvaro 2007). Currently, there are high levels of corruption and insecurity associated with drug trafficking and paramilitary groups who wield considerable political influence (Laverde 2013).

Leticia is the capital city of the Amazonas department or region. Its entire territory is Amazon rainforest, and 43% of the population is indigenous. Between the mid-1970s and 1980s, the region was overrun with drug trafficking; however, in the 1990s, it was heavily militarized and, since the start of the 2000s, has experienced a major increase in the tourism industry (Martínez 2013). Currently, illegal activities include drug micro trafficking (i.e., quantities not exceeding 30 kilograms per shipment) and illegal gold mining (Riaño Umabrila 2009).

In addition to enriching the case study by providing vastly different cultural and socio-political contexts, these regions were prime examples of the various types of fragility in Colombia, exemplifying realities that exist at the intersections of marginalisation, violence, and poverty.

Sample

The sample for this study included 12 teachers, 14 parents, 10 members of regional teams, and 4 members of national teams. Table 1 presents a general description of the sample per region.

Teachers generally came from the same regions in which they taught since these NFE programmes drew from students currently in teacher education programmes or recent graduates. Most teachers, with a few exceptions, were in their 20s and 30s, with many whose first teaching job was in the CA programme.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork was divided into three main phases according to the location where data were collected and the specific stage of the programme's implementation.[2] Table 2 summarises the fieldwork phases and data collection methods (DCMs).

Table 1. General description of sample per region.

Region	Regional staff					Students			Parents		
	Teachers	Coord.	Ped. Adv.	Ps. Adv.	Total	♀	♂	Total	♀	♂	Total
Florencia	4	1	1	1	7	72	76	148	4	2	6
Tumaco	3	1	0	0	4	54	92	146	3	0	3
Sincelejo	3	1	1	1	6	60	76	136	3	1	4
Leticia	2	1	1	1	5	19	23	42	0	1	1
Totals	12	4	3	3	22	205	267	472	10	4	14

Table 2. Phases of fieldwork.

Phase	Description	Location	DCM
1. National level	Data collection in Bogotá with programme operators	Bogotá	Interviews
2. Regional visits	Intensive data collection in the regions; visits to the regions lasted a month each	Florencia, Leticia, Sincelejo, and Tumaco	Observations Focus groups Interviews
3. Follow-up	Follow-up with CA alumni after they transitioned to a traditional school; visits to the regions lasted a week each	Florencia, Leticia, Sincelejo, and Tumaco	Interviews

Data collection methods

Qualitative data were gathered through interviews, focus groups, and observations. In total, 12 interviews with teachers were conducted. Observations and focus groups were conducted in order to triangulate self-reported data about teachers' role in their classrooms. Observations were conducted in 22 classrooms with an average of 21 students. Each teacher was observed for a total of 40 hours during a one-month period. Focus groups helped to gather information about student and parent perceptions regarding the programme in general, and their perceptions of teachers in particular. In total, 26 focus groups were conducted. Fourteen additional interviews with programme staff members at the local and national levels were conducted in order to collect data about the role of teachers in the CA programme.

All interviews and focus groups were conducted in Spanish and audio recorded with the explicit consent of participants. Each classroom was observed for 20 hours; however, teachers were observed twice that time because they taught in the morning and in the afternoon. Attendance was highly irregular; as a result, not every student was observed for the same amount of time and the focus groups were conducted with those children present. All observations were non-participant.

Teachers' experiences in the CA programme

Teachers in the CA programme were central to its functioning; they shaped the experience of students and impacted their academic and social progress. In addition to instruction, teachers were required to recruit students to the programme, attend to the material conditions of their lives (e.g., poverty, hunger, violence), and faced all sorts of personal and academic challenges vis-à-vis offering quality instruction to children who had been out of school sometimes for many years. Through observations and interviews, it was evident that teachers were *the* key component of the programme.

During the time of the study, all of the CA students in the four sites observed were school dropouts or had never attended a school before. As a result of their academic history, students had considerable problems with numeracy and basic literacy skills and were, with very few exceptions, over-age.[3] During the interviews and observations, respondents repeatedly noted their conditions of poverty (e.g., all students lived below the national poverty line and several students worked after the school-day was over), instability (i.e., around half of the students were classified as 'floating' due to displacement and residence in make-shift housing), low parental engagement (i.e., around one-third of parents were physically or emotionally absent), violence (e.g., at least a half of the students were victims of conflict, whether they were displaced or not), among other issues that affected children's behaviour and their performance in the classroom.

Given the challenges of working with conflict-affected children and families, teachers engaged situational and differing strategies for coping with the difficulties presented in their classrooms and learning spaces. Teachers, overall, saw their work with marginalised children as part of a 'saviour' approach where they were tasked with rescuing children from their lives. While some literature on the 'teachers as saviours' dynamic finds such an attitude paternalistic (Matta Colorado 2013), in this study, perhaps since teachers came from nearby communities and similar

backgrounds, it was found to mostly result in caring behaviours towards the students and genuine concern for their well-being (Joseph and Burnaford 2000). The everyday strategies for coping with challenges, however, reflected their pragmatic desire to advance learning in circumstances that were extremely constrained by the structure of a one-year bridge programme as well as the physical, material, and psychological impacts of conflict and violence on children's lives.

The data that follow can be grouped into three categories and respond to the strategies employed by teachers in working with marginalised children in order to ensure their right to education: (1) dealing with the complexities of students' backgrounds and current conditions of instability and poverty; (2) overcoming the challenges of programme design and the lack of teacher training and professional development for working with marginalised children; and (3) innovating in order to create a culture of care and belonging in order to support student retention and achievement. While students' backgrounds could not be easily changed, teacher professional development and preparation to teach in such contexts, as well as exposure to innovative strategies, could be addressed by programme design and policy, as will be further elaborated in the discussion section at the end of this article.

Students' backgrounds as impediments to learning

Having witnessed and experienced violence, students came to the classroom with a variety of learned behaviours and responses to difficulties. A majority of teachers in the CA programme stated that the most difficult of the students' characteristics was the aggressive behaviour many of them exhibited. Children were surrounded by violence that offered multiple opportunities to assimilate the use of threats and intimidation as part of their own learned responses in challenging situations. As Amelia,[4] a teacher in Sincelejo, described: 'any school instrument becomes a weapon … [Children] abuse each other so much, everything is about violence' (personal interview, September 10, 2012). Students' physical and verbal aggression often turned out to be overwhelming; teachers repeatedly stressed how difficult, frustrating, and exhausting this problem was in their classrooms. The focus was often on behaviour management which limited time for quality instruction in the condensed programme that was meant to prepare students in a very short period of time to re-enter conventional government schools.

To transform students' perceptions about their future was also an ongoing struggle for teachers; they were trying to facilitate students' envisioning of different possibilities for themselves in the midst of adverse circumstances. In addition to living in an environment that did not nurture ideas of personal progress through education, teachers found it especially challenging to promote ideas of effort and perseverance in the short amount of time students stayed in the programme. Some students reported having been messengers or look-outs for drug dealers during their time out of school and the exposure to quick and hefty financial reward also sometimes limited their belief in the long-term benefits of the hard work involved in educational endeavours.

Finally, teachers faced multiple challenges in working with illiterate students; they felt they did not have the necessary resources or training to teach their students how to read and write in a short amount of time. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that the programme utilised written learning guides and did not include special resources for illiterate children. Thus, the challenges presented in CA classrooms were immense, compounded by teachers' limited experience in dealing with classroom contexts (most were still training to become fully certified teachers), much less situations of extreme hardship given students' backgrounds. The issue of uncertified and relatively inexperienced teachers serving the most marginalised children is one that plagues educational contexts the world over, not just in non-formal educational settings in Colombia.

Teachers' limited preparation for the CA context

Teachers' challenges in the classroom also included issues related to their professional and personal skills, resourcefulness, and dealing effectively with frustration. Ariana, a teacher in Tumaco, stated:

'the biggest challenge you have to face here is to overcome disappointment, sadness and exhaustion, and to go to the classroom and create new things every day' (personal interview, August 16, 2012).

Because of these challenges in the classroom and teachers' limited preparation for dealing with them, compounded by the short duration of the CA programme, academic progress was often difficult to achieve. Yet, academic indicators were often the *only* measures that government officials sought in assessing the outcomes of the CA programme. Teachers asserted that students were making some academic progress and students said they enjoyed the fact they were able to write their names, do some math calculations, or read basic sentences. These, however, fell short of the ambitious academic goals set forth in the programme's design. Observations in the classrooms showed that by the last trimester of the academic year, students were far from achieving the basic academic goals of CA that would allow them to smoothly transition into a traditional primary school. During follow-up visits with students, their teachers at the government-run primary school they joined after completing the CA programme stressed that the children had serious literacy problems and concluded that they were promoted without having attained the necessary academic level.

Education for marginalised populations requires well-trained teachers who are able to not only foster a strong interpersonal ethic of caring, but also to advance academic achievement (Noddings 1992). In the case of CA, teachers did not receive special training before their participation in the programme, or ongoing professional development and support during their time teaching in CA, to effectively and simultaneously advance these two goals. Despite coming from similar regions, teachers seemed lost when facing these multiple challenges in the classroom. Teachers, as the following section shows, were able to achieve important progress in promoting the well-being of children and creating a classroom community despite the many challenges present; progress vis-à-vis students' academic performance was much more elusive and frustrating for teachers given that this was the primary metric of evaluation.

Teachers as innovators in marginalised contexts

Teachers in the CA programme drew heavily on their personal resources, creativity, and some aspects of their training to promote the well-being and inclusion of children in their classrooms. In order to highlight the ways teachers coped with the difficult conditions amidst severe limitations in the programme design and complex situations of poverty and violence in students' lives, this section explores how teachers were agents in creating strong, reciprocal bonds with students to offer meaning and value to their educational experiences. The data that follow highlight how even if academic gains were harder to achieve, flexible, and innovative approaches to ensuring the right to education for marginalised students offered value and meaning in situations of conflict.

One way of promoting a sense of well-being was to offer students a connection to the classroom community, particularly when violence and displacement had broken their sense of belonging. A couple of teachers gave special responsibilities to difficult students (i.e., restless, lively children) as a way of coping with their unruliness in the classroom. For example, Daniel, a teacher in Caquetá, made one student his assistant to keep track of absent students so that he used some of his energy asking about his classmates' well-being, keeping records (i.e., phone numbers and addresses), and so forth.

Fun incentives were widely used by teachers in order to motivate children to do schoolwork. Olivia, a teacher in Caquetá, purchased nice erasers and pencils that students could win as prizes when completing a task. Andrea, from Tumaco, rewarded her students with dancing time or allowed them to take down almonds from a nearby tree. Other teachers, such as Daniel, Olivia, David, and María, gave incentives for participation by creating an accountability system for students based on discussion and reflection; the rigor of implementation of this system, however, varied across these teachers' classrooms in the different regions. While some of these ideas required teachers to put in their own personal funds for purchasing small incentives, other initiatives did not require any financial inputs.

All teachers stated that they talked to their students and opened up conversational spaces to share issues and concerns. Most of the time teachers did the talking rather than the listening, to

intentionally address certain issues or to promote skills. For example, Amelia, in Sincelejo, invited her students to take the perspective of others and to imagine their feelings and thoughts in conflict situations in an attempt to foster empathy. Ariana, Andrea, Isabella, and David talked about their own lives to students, their sacrifices and past experiences, to invite students to envision short- and medium-term goals for their own lives. María, Daniel, and Amelia also used these spaces to work on anticipating consequences when discussing issues like teenage pregnancy.

Another strategy widely used by teachers was to present the classroom as a second home, or to compare it with a family or a close group of friends. Even though sometimes the family idea became a platform for lecturing students, teachers actively promoted empathy, perspective-taking, critical thinking and problem-solving skills around this idea as well. Considering the classroom as a family or a close group of friends was linked to the idea of fostering caring relationships (Gay 2010). A few teachers also organised simple caring routines based on the idea of sharing some kindness or courtesy with each other. For instance, in Daniel's classroom, students took turns organising the snack break; this included cleaning the tables before and after the snacks and handing them out to the class. As part of the Escuela Nueva model that had influenced the setup of the CA classrooms, students also had little mailboxes where they could write encouraging notes to one another as a form of demonstrating caring and building interpersonal bonds in the classroom community (Vega-Chaparro 2014).

Teachers' efforts to create a positive and caring environment were highly appreciated by their students. Children referred to their teachers as respectful and patient with them and also as caring, loving, kind, and attentive. In general, they said that teachers were good to them. For example, Iris stated that, 'the teacher is really kind and doesn't punish us like a teacher I used to have. [That teacher] grabbed me and pulled me by the ear [saying to me] "go to your chair"' (personal interview, September 14, 2012). Such negative experiences with teachers in previous formal school contexts may be one reason that marginalised children drop out (or are pushed out) of school in the first place.

Appreciation for teachers was not only related to their kindness but also to their teaching; children said teachers taught them well, meaning that they spent time explaining the activities to them and helped them understand what the topic or the task was all about. In fact, this was something children missed when they transitioned to a traditional school with larger classes.

Observations showed a close interaction among students and teachers; teachers were openly loving and protecting towards their students, and the children were affectionate and constantly sought closeness or physical contact with their teachers. Teachers' caring efforts went beyond the classroom. In observations, for example, it was noted that teachers collected or bought clothes and shoes for their students, brought food to their homes, or allowed them to shower in the classroom's bathroom given that many students lacked indoor plumbing or running water in their homes, which were sometimes make-shift shacks. For their part, students gave small gifts to their teachers such as drawings, flowers, or offered to share a little piece of their meal with them.

As a result of the classroom environment, and the interaction between teachers and students, without exception all participants reported meaningful progress in students' social skills and overall well-being. According to teachers, progress included the development of various social skills such as communication or sharing skills, a change in students' self-perception, a capacity to envision a better future, as well as the development of responsibility and self-care habits.

Teachers also noted several measures of progress in terms of students' social and emotional development. Teachers often described how students were able to communicate better: 'they talk now … at the beginning it was like they wanted to be invisible' (Benjamín, personal interview, September 10, 2012). Another teacher noted, 'kids are happy in the classroom, because they have each other; they're not best friends … but they learn to coexist with [their] differences' (Daniel, personal interview, July 8, 2012). Also, they stated children recognised their value, '[students] felt important in the classroom,' (David, personal interview, July 16, 2012), and highlighted they were able to take better care of themselves, '[now they] always ask where the

water that we give them comes from and say "we won't drink water from the tap, that's not drinkable water, just give us water from the water filter"' (Alexa, personal interview, September 7, 2012). Finally, students' accounts showed they envisioned a different, better future; for example, some students stated they liked CA because it would allow them 'to be somebody' (Emilia, personal interview, August 22, 2012), and 'achieve many things in life' (Martín, personal interview, July 23, 2012).

Teachers seemed to be addressing students' emotional and social needs through the CA programme according to the data presented. Staff members' reports as well as students' accounts thoroughly described how students' lives changed during their experience in CA; nonetheless, it is worth noticing that their strategies were based mostly on ideas shared by colleagues or their own initiative, not what they received in their very limited training to be teachers in the CA programme (or their teacher education courses which did not always address the needs of marginalised students). With very few exceptions, it was not clear that the programme design, or the training they received, included any of the effective strategies teachers discussed utilising for managing their classrooms and creating a caring environment. Overall, observations showed teachers were working mostly alone. In fact, teachers unanimously stated that their supervisors were solely focused on students' attendance and performance; interactions with supervisors primarily consisted of reprimands and ultimatums and rarely did they receive advice or additional resources to tackle challenges in their classrooms.

Data showed that teachers were deeply committed to the welfare and future of their students and, in spite of their frustration and lack of resources, they were able to create activities that promoted a wide range of social skills among the students. In general, the experience of teachers and students was intensely emotional and transformative. Many teachers shared a special connection with their students: they were not only part of the same community but also often came from the same backgrounds of poverty and violence as their students. This connection cannot be underestimated in that it was the root of their commitment towards the children. In this sense, students' emotional and social needs resulting from negligence, violence, and instability seemed fulfilled by the teachers, beyond their professional limitations, and because of their caring interactions. While the main goal of the CA programme was to ensure the right to education for marginalised children and enable their transition to a regular, government school through academic preparation, the actual gains of the programme related to students' psychosocial well-being were important yet somewhat unintended outcomes.

Discussion

The data presented show various limitations to teachers' work in conflict settings with marginalised students; some of these challenges relate to the impact of conflict and violence on children's lives, while others could be addressed through better programme design, training, and ongoing professional development and support. Teachers who cared about their students attempted, as individuals, to make up for structural flaws in the programme design and the systemic barriers to quality education for marginalised youth.

CA teachers demonstrated agency in creating caring and meaningful interactions with students despite the hardships they faced; they were the catalyst of important changes in their students' lives by fostering caring behaviours, communication skills, and positive ideas about their future. Students' socio-emotional achievements illustrate that NFE processes are promising when working with marginalised populations in fragile contexts characterised by violence and poverty. The ideas and approaches the teachers engaged in offer insights to educators in conflict settings on ways to prioritise the healing and psychosocial component of educational spaces.

Nevertheless, the CA teachers' experiences also highlight that – despite the compelling personal attributes they possessed that allowed them to relate to the children – greater effort is needed to recruit and train qualified and experienced teachers who could address the programme's dual

goals: academic achievement and social emotional development. As Rogers (2005) describes in detail, one of the major issues in flexible educational models designed to address the challenges of complex contexts is teachers' low levels of training and skills. The Inter-Agency Network on Education in Emergencies (INEE) has facilitated much conversation and compilation of guidance notes on issues of teacher preparation, compensation and professional support; increased engagement by planners, policy-makers and scholars would further centralise and prioritise the important role of educators in securing and sustaining the right to a quality education in conflict contexts.

Observations in the classroom and children's reports showed that students' experiences in the programme were indeed meaningful; however, without sustained academic advancement – and programme design as well as teacher preparation that best supported it – the right to a quality education for marginalised children and their reintegration into the formal educational system were not being met by the CA programme. NFE processes, such as CA, should last more than one year, and certainly as long as needed to be able to transition students to government schools and set them up for success there. Such NFE programmes should also have designated staff members that can track students through this transition to ensure that their right to education is continuously upheld. Fulfilling the right to education requires active engagement so that children and families see schooling as of value – and that education actually *be* of high quality so families continue to opt for it even amidst challenges and competing demands.

Finally, educational programmes in fragile contexts need to be developed with holistic goals in mind in terms of time-frame, resources allotted, and scaffolding for transitions into government programmes that have historically not done well on inclusion for marginalised children affected by conflict. Children that programmes such as CA target are those that conventional education systems in situations of conflict and violence have left behind; as such, traditional measures of academic advancement deny the important function of such spaces in improving the well-being, healing, and integration of children who have often experienced trauma. Programme planners and educators must keep in mind the dual, and perhaps multiple, goals of education for marginalised children in conflict settings when considering learning strategies, classroom management, and the evaluation of outcomes. This implies not only special attention in terms of curriculum and classroom environments, but also special training for teachers *and* programme officials so that the many functions of such educational spaces may be achieved.

Concluding thoughts

Scholars have asked in the face of Education for All mandates, education for *what*? (see e.g., Mundy and Murphy 2001; González 2004; Bajaj 2010). Further, what is it that is meaningful for marginalised children affected by conflict to learn? Is academic attainment the primary goal or is providing a safe and loving space for them to develop social-emotional capacities sufficient? Is the right to education secured if children are unable to further their education beyond basic literacy and numeracy? Might the provision of better training and support for teachers allow for the dual realisation of academic achievement as well as interpersonal and resilience skills for marginalised children? Planners, policy-makers, and educators must consider these questions in order to ensure the right to education for marginalised children is adequately upheld in situations of conflict. While there is an inherent and intrinsic value to education as discussions on the right to education identify, marginalised groups have often been short-changed vis-à-vis adequate funding, well-prepared teachers, and appropriate programme design in education. Further analyses of asymmetries of power amidst unequal experiences of conflict in stratified societies must be centred when discussing the right to education in fragile contexts worldwide.

In Colombia and elsewhere, many lessons and insights emerge from an in-depth glimpse into one initiative that seeks to ensure the right to education. Scholars and practitioners would do well to use such initiatives and programmes as laboratories for examining the limits and possibilities for

realising the vision of the Education for All mandates and the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (United Nations 2015).

Since its first mention in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to education has gone from being defined as mere access to a primary school to being understood more holistically as a series of curricular, pedagogical, and programmatic strategies that must reach even the most marginalised children. When put in global perspective and examined in the context of fragility, as in the case of CA in Colombia, ensuring the right to education requires constant and ongoing attention to the various and complex factors that limit access, quality, and equity in schooling. The promise of human rights is to ensure a basic level of dignity and well-being to every person and community; the right to education is an important bedrock for advancing equity, social justice, and, ultimately, the promise of freedom for all children in every corner of our globe.

Notes

1. For example, the US-funded 'Plan Colombia' increased military capacity to counter leftist guerrillas and drug trafficking (UNDP 2003), but also aggravated internal displacement and created critical situations regarding food and health safety due to fumigations (Ceballos 2003); homicide rates (Barón 2009); and a humanitarian crisis that extended beyond Colombian borders (Montúfar and Whitfield 2003). To date, the results of the Plan Colombia specifically and US foreign aid more broadly, totalling approximately US$7.5 billion between 1996 and 2006, are highly contested (Montúfar and Whitfield 2003).
2. All of the fieldwork was carried out by Laura María Vega-Chaparro as part of her doctoral dissertation. Monisha Bajaj participated in a pre-dissertation pilot phase of the project in Colombia (2011), and offered ongoing advice and guidance throughout the project as the dissertation sponsor.
3. In Colombia, the estimated age range for primary school in a traditional school is from 6 to 10 years of age. In CA, the average age in each grade was approximately 3 years higher than the expected age; for instance, in second grade, students should be around 7 years old; while in the CA programme, the average age was actually 10 years of age.
4. All names used are pseudonyms.

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