



# A Grain of Sand: Youth Education and Peace-building in Colombia

## Gabriel Velez

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**Since the end of Colombia's civil conflict, the process of turning the country's youth into effective peacebuilders has been the focus of several government and civil society initiatives.**

**“ “If you begin to sow these seeds, this grain of sand—just like what happened with us—people are going to begin to care. And if they care, they will change how they act. We have the ability to have a more open mind, to see more possibilities than older generations. For this reason, I think it is in our hands. It's in the hands of our generation and the generation that is coming. The change is in us.” ”**

**— *Seventeen year old female in Bogota, Colombia***

In November 2016, the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (the FARC) signed peace accords that ended over five decades of internal warfare between the two groups. The accords marked the culmination of over 4 years of negotiations, and a critical step toward ending a

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period in Colombian history that included over 220,000 deaths and more than 6 million displaced because of violence. Armed combat between these two sides was and is only one piece of the puzzle, and the government and civil society have drawn on this peace process to more broadly promote peace and stability across Colombian society.

One particular focus has been young people. At a forum with college scholarship recipients in February, 2016, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos exemplified this perspective and the rationale behind its approach, [stating that](#), “Youth will lead the construction of peace, and their education will give them the tools to do it.” This initiative is based in a wealth of research and theory that demonstrates the importance of young generations in the success of peace processes; these individuals are still in formation as citizens and their personal development may correlate with economic, social, and political issues tied to peace processes like that in Colombia.

### **Colombia’s youth as peacebuilders**

The push to form young Colombians into peacebuilders has taken shape through an extensive array of peace programs and certificates (from [online programs](#) to a [national program to pedagogical museums](#)), as well as a 2015 peace education law. The latter mandates that all educational institutions, from preschools through universities, incorporate two of twelve broad themes into their curriculum. These topics range from “Justice and Human Rights” to “Social Impact Projects” to “Protection of Natural and Cultural Riches of the Nation.”

Amid these policies and programs, there is a critical question being left unanswered: what do young people in Colombia think about peace, the peace

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process, and their own roles in it? Their voices—like that of the female participant in a research study quoted at the beginning—demonstrate the ways that they are making sense and responding to attempts to change the narrative of violence in Colombia and there have been calls for them to “lead the construction of peace.” Even if the numerous initiatives by the government and civil society can provide Colombia’s youth with needed tools, the thoughts and attitudes of the youth themselves are critical to how they receive and use these skills.

After talking with adolescents across the country, it becomes clear that they are as divided on issues as the country is as a whole. Indeed, last October, Colombians voted against a plebiscite on the peace accords by a narrow 50.2% to 49.8% margin demonstrating the divisions in the country. Across socioeconomic, geographical, gender divides and based on personal experience of the conflict, these young Colombians express desires for a different future. Though they may disagree with the details of the peace process, they see the end of this conflict as a chance to invest in education, provide relief and tranquillity to those who have suffered, and more generally for a different Colombia. These adolescents also hold balanced and critical positions of the peace process. They describe the importance of ending the conflict and the positive impact for victims, but also disagree with concrete aspects of it.

Though the political processes of the accords and their implementation remain remote for most of these adolescents, the majority assert that peace is more than just a piece of paper and in fact begins with each individual. From a state of internal peace, each person—including themselves—has the ability to contribute to peace through giving their own *granito de arena* or grain of sand.

## **The power of the individual**

Even as young people in Colombia speak about trying to be an active participant in peacebuilding, they also mention how difficult it is to find reliable information on the practice. Many seem dependent on the initiatives and attitudes of teachers in Social Studies, Ethics, or Philosophy. Adolescents who do not have these adults to help guide them in being critical and open-minded often flounder in a lack of trust in the prominent newspapers and television channels and an overwhelming array of internet sources. Similarly, many have not had direct contact with victims or perpetrators in the conflict, and they struggle to understand who these fellow Colombians actually are and what their desires for peace are. Others have directly experienced the conflict through their family or local communities and these young people tend to embrace the possibility for change through the peace process.

After conducting more than 300 interviews with adolescents across more than 40 schools in Colombia, I have come to believe that it is important to consider a deeper question: what lessons can we glean about the possibility of a stable, peaceful future there? Acknowledging the diversity of opinions and perspectives they hold, these adolescents, overall, are telling us that they believe peace is built locally and that they can imagine their role in these local, intimate processes. They support a more peaceful future, and see it as built through small, interpersonal actions.

These adolescents believed that they could contribute to peacebuilding in Colombia and in their communities by treating others with respect and tolerance, helping manage the inevitable tension that arises between people, and staying informed and informing others about the peace process. At the same time, to them, environments in the family, school, and community do

matter; many respondents noted that while they can contribute to peace building more generally, the challenge is more difficult in a local context marked by gangs or within a family dealing with troubling discord.

On the whole, these young Colombians often express a belief in the power of the individual when it comes to peace building. Colombia is a society where the state has historically been absent from large areas of the country or has even been involved in the perpetuation of violence, and yet this general optimism and focus on the potential of each individual seems to provide youth with a foundation to develop as active citizens and peacebuilders. The question then becomes: how can these attitudes and the connected identities develop as Colombia pushes forth into a “post-conflict” era?

It is critical that the government and civil society organisations not only take action, follow through on the accords, and play their part, but are also attentive to the perspectives of these younger individuals upon which so much emphasis is placed. Such initiatives can take various forms: symbolic elections or votes for those under 18, providing greater detail to the Peace Education Law as well as follow-up implementation analysis, and surveying youth to gather their perspectives on key issues related to citizenship, peace, and the country’s future. Empirical research has shown that school contexts and youth engagement are critical, but currently, the government and civil society in Colombia are putting in the effort to set in motion the programming without truly investing in its implementation or understanding its impact

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Image credit: [Juan Cristobal Zulueta/Flickr](#).

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**Gabriel Velez is a PhD candidate in Comparative Human Development. The research for this article was supported by the Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflicts and the Pozen Family Center for Human Rights. His research focuses on adolescent development and the formation of ideas about citizenship, human rights, and peace amid conflict and post-conflict contexts. He is interested in supporting understandings of how diverse groups of youth process and respond to lived experiences as they form personal and social identities. He is a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow and on the Steering Committee for Division 48's 2018 Psychology and Peace Conference. He received a master's degree from the University of Chicago and an AB in History and Literature from Harvard University.**

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Unit 503  
101 Clerkenwell Road London  
EC1R 5BX  
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