School-Based Violence in Colombia: Links to State-Level Armed Conflict, Educational Effects and Challenges

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2010

This paper was commissioned by the Education for All Global Monitoring Report as background information to assist in drafting the 2011 report. It has not been edited by the team. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and should not be attributed to the EFA Global Monitoring Report or to UNESCO. The papers can be cited with the following reference: “Paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2011, The hidden crisis: Armed conflict and education” For further information, please contact efareport@unesco.org
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July 2010, draft

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* Disclaimer: The views presented in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI or UNESCO.

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Executive summary

Countries experiencing or emerging from violent conflict often exhibit higher levels of violence in schools, because of the normalisation of violence in society and also because conflict increases the vulnerability of those already at risk of being targeted.

In exploring school-based violence in the context of armed conflict between the government and guerrilla organisations in Colombia, this case study finds that:

- State-level armed conflict particularly affects Colombia’s most vulnerable children, mainly children living in rural areas.
- Although inequality and exclusion are key contributing factors in school-based violence, political violence, quality of public education and insecurity also play a crucial role.
- The problem of violence in schools is recognised by governments and violence prevention programmes engage both communities and schools. Many violence prevention programs for schools are focused on creating citizenship competencies and values for children.
- In programmes based on community engagement and building citizenship values, more systematisation and analysis is needed to understand how each factor actually works.
- The limited nature of evaluation in the Colombian context means that it is difficult to establish whether or not preventive programmes are more cost effective. There is still insufficient knowledge on effectiveness and how programmes can be part of more strategic long-term planning to stop violence in schools.
- Civil society engagement in the development of proposals and follow-up of educational policies is crucial to the policy agenda on school-based violence.
1. Introduction

School-based violence – corporal punishment, bullying and gender-based violence – has extremely negative effects on educational access and attainment. This case study looks at school-based violence in contemporary Colombia in the context of armed conflict between the government and several guerrilla organisations.

Countries experiencing or emerging from violent conflict often exhibit higher levels of violence in schools, due to the normalisation of violence in society and also because conflict increases the vulnerability of those already at risk of being targeted. Research has shown that exposure to violence in the community increases the risk of children developing aggressive behaviours, mainly because of the effects on cognitive and socio-emotional processes (Chaux, 2009).

2. Background

The conflict

Although Colombia is one of the longstanding democracies in Latin America and has enjoyed sustained economic growth and development, it has suffered almost 50 years of conflict and the existence of powerful drug cartels. The largest and oldest guerrilla force is the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC-EP) with the National Liberation Army (ELN) comprising the second largest. Several illegal armed groups were demobilised under the transitional justice process but new groups have emerged. According to UN Security Council (2009), armed groups and criminal gangs are more prominent in coca cultivation areas and in strategic corridors, with children often involved in exploitative labour, coca harvesting.

Conflict, education and children

Children have suffered variously from the internal conflict. All children, particularly those from vulnerable (e.g. indigenous) populations, are highly exposed to recruitment by armed groups with almost 90% of child recruitment happening in rural areas (e.g. Llorente and Rivas, 2004). Some are forced to join, whereas others are lured by money and adventure and by the power associated with carrying weapons and being part of feared armed groups.

FARC-EP recruitment campaigns are known to have taken place in schools, in spite of formal commitments by these groups not to recruit children. Other illegal armed groups are also recruiting children. Meanwhile, the armed forces have ignored Ministry of Defence directives prohibiting the use of children for intelligence purposes. The average age of forced child recruitment decreased from 13.8 in 2002 to 12.8 in 2006, and the number of children participating in illegal armed groups is estimated at between 8,000 and 11,000 (UN Security Council, 2009). Overall, Colombia ranks third in the world in terms of the number of young people involved with armed groups in conflict (Save the Children UK, 2005).

In many cases, displacement is the only way parents can protect children from forced recruitment. Colombia has the second largest population of internally displaced persons in the world, after Sudan (UN Security Council, 2009), caused also by massacres, murder, threats, anti-personnel

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1 The National Armed Forces have also used children for intelligence purposes ignoring three directives issued by the Ministry of Defence prohibiting all members of the national armed forces from this practice.

2 In February 2008, the national police used a 12-year-old boy as an informant. Later, the boy received death threats from FARC-EP. He was eventually killed by an unidentified assailant in December 2008.
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mines and sexual violence and abuse against children, especially girls, perpetrated by the illegal armed forces and, to a lesser extent, individuals of the national armed forces. This latter is mostly invisible and/or underreported (ibid). Forced displacement disproportionately affects certain population groups, including women and children. According to various sources, up to 50% of all displaced persons are under 18, and according to UNICEF (United Nations 2003) seven out of 10 displaced children do not return to school.

Moreover, almost all children have been exposed to violence in their family or community or by means of the media, including witnessing or hearing about combat, shootings, bombs or kidnappings. The more common, domestic, urban and gang- and crime-related forms of violence also greatly affect children (Llorente et al., 2005), with a strong relationship present between crime-related violence (especially that originating in drug trafficking) and illegal armed groups.

Attacks on schools by illegal armed groups are frequent in Colombia. At times, schools may be attacked by such groups in retaliation for previous occupation by, or perceived collaboration with, the Colombian armed forces. Anti-personnel mines and explosive ordnance are often left behind in and around schools and teachers are also targeted. Clashes between illegal armed groups and the armed forces also restrict humanitarian access and the supply of essential goods, including for children. In many cases, local schools are forced to close.

Thus the armed conflict has deeply affected education in Colombia. Key education indicators have an interactive relationship with the violent context at the community and/or societal level. For example, higher levels of armed violence are negatively associated with enrolment growth (Meade and Gershberg, 2008). Many children and adolescents do not attend school, for multiple conflict-related reasons, including: destruction of schools; recruitment to guerrilla groups; teachers being killed; teachers and children being displaced; and public education budgets being diverted towards military expenses. In particular, according to Save the Children UK (2008), 74.5% of displaced children do not have access to education.

Many stakeholders attribute the growing dropout rate and the expanding number of over age students at least in part to the disruptive effects of armed conflict, forced displacement and economic hardship (Coalición Colombiana, 2004). The lowest dropout rate for children aged 12-17 is to be found in the 438 municipalities with no presence of conflict and the highest is in the 211 municipalities where paramilitary and guerrilla groups are active simultaneously (UN, 2003). Although high dropouts may also be related to higher levels of inequality and poor life quality, both of which may also be exacerbated by the armed conflict.

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3 According to the Presidential Senior Adviser for Social Action of Colombia, from 1997 to December 2008, 2,935,832 persons were internally displaced, more than 1 million of them children. In 2008 alone, 243,343 persons were registered as internally displaced, approximately 30% of whom were children.

4 Armed groups attacked over 100 schools in Colombia during 2002 (Coalición Colombiana, 2004).

5 Anti-personnel mines and unexploded ordnance have had serious consequences on the civilian population, including children. According to the Landmine Monitor Report of 2007, the number of casualties resulting from explosive remnants of war in Colombia was the highest in the world from 2005 to 2007. The Presidential Program for Integrated Mine Action reports a cumulative total of 7,515 victims from 1990 to 2008, including 722 children.

6 Around 50% of civilian casualties are children. The lack of knowledge about landmines is the main reason for these deaths, especially in the case of rural children who play with landmines like they were toys, adornments or for stopping doors. It is estimated that there are around 70,000 landmines, killing two people per day. In March 2002, the United States Department estimated 130,000 landmines disseminated in 400 municipalities in 28 of the 31 regions (Informe de Desarrollo Humano de Colombia, 2003: 124).

7 15 educators were killed in 2008. In June 2008, four teachers accused of being informants were kidnapped and subsequently killed by FARC-EP (UN Security Council, 2009).

8 In July 2008, humanitarian access to 4,000 indigenous persons was obstructed in Chocó, with reports of 10 children dead owing to the crisis aggravated by food shortages (UN Security Council, 2009).
3. **School-based violence in a context of armed conflict**

**Effects of violent context on children**

Several studies – some of them conducted in Colombia – show that a violent context leads to a higher risk of children developing aggressive behaviours, particularly as a result of the effects of violence on cognitive and socio-emotional processes (Chaux, 2009).

Using a database of more than 1 million students from all regions of Colombia, Torrente and Kanayet (2007) found higher levels of aggression among children and adolescents living in municipalities with high levels of violent conflict and homicides. Exposure to community violence can lead to the belief that it is acceptable to use aggression to get what you want: ‘One has to fight so that others won’t think you are a coward’; ‘Sometimes you have to threaten others to get what you want’; ‘You play me, you pay me’ (a spirit of revenge if you feel mocked) (ibid). Such beliefs can facilitate the use of aggression in interactions with others.

Chaux and Velásquez (2009) also find an association between exposure to community violence in Colombia and children’s aggression, mediated not only by beliefs supporting aggression but also by empathy levels, anger management and assertiveness. Although this study was not conducted in an area of high political violence, it provides further evidence of the effects that exposure to violence can have on children and how these can help explain why children in such contexts are at a higher risk of developing aggressive behaviours. Guerra et al. (2003) also suggest that witnessing community violence has an effect on children’s aggressive behaviour through both imitation of violence and the development of associated cognitions as children get older.

**Relationship between violent context and school-based violence in Colombia**

School-based violence in Colombia can be seen to be related to community/societal violence and the validation of aggressive behaviours as an effective way to ‘get what you want’.

In 2006, a study carried out by students themselves, **Inventudes**, applied 20,000 questionnaires to students between 2006 and 2007, with survey analysis supported by professionals. Students decided on the questions related to the most important problems at schools, according to students’ perceptions. Problems mentioned were interpersonal relationships (33.6% mentioned rivalry and 13.4% violence), school environment and drug use. Power disputes and competition for popularity were associated with the possession of money, drugs and weapons.

Chaux et al. (2009) review for Colombia several research studies on the relationship between bullying and larger contextual factors, although there is still much to understand in this respect. Higher levels of school bullying are related to: the presence of more males in schools; lower levels of empathy; more authoritarian and violent families; higher levels of community violence; better socioeconomic conditions; hostile prejudices such as racism and sexism; and a greater belief in the efficacy of violent behaviour. Physical and verbal aggression seems more common among boys and exclusion, gossip or other relational and indirect forms of aggression among girls (although also common among boys). Differences between private and public schools or between rural and urban schools have been poorly studied.

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9 Learning process – knowledge, comprehension, thinking, judging and problem solving- explaining the hypothesized link between violence exposure and aggression.

10 Attacks by paramilitary and guerrilla groups on teachers, education workers, students and schools, and the recruitment of children by armed forces, are considered part of the armed conflict context not as a form of school-based violence.

11 In Jones et al. (2008).

12 This may be related to more reporting in schools with better socioeconomic conditions.
There seems to be a positive correlation between poverty levels and vulnerability to violence in schools. The school environment is also seen as a key factor (UNESCO, 2008). Educational environment includes infrastructure, delivery of basic services, availability of books, access to computers, relationships with teachers, pedagogical capacity and teaching methods, among others. In Colombia, 26.59% of schools have no access to water, 45.59% do not have enough bathrooms, 42.76% do not have a library and 46.46% do not have a computer room. In general, these percentages are above the regional average (Bogotá Chamber of Commerce 2008).

However, although some studies have found higher levels of bullying among children living in poor socioeconomic conditions, others have found no relationship. But it has been suggested that bullying could be critically related to differences in access to resources. In other words, socioeconomic inequality – and the power differentials associated with this – could be more related to bullying (and violence) than poverty itself (see Chaux et al., 2009), although this has not been explored by specific studies on bullying. Insufficient attention to diversity and socioeconomic inequalities within the student community may be an additional factor exacerbating violence in schools. However, it seems to be clear that exposure to urban community violence leads children to learn that aggression – including bullying – is a legitimate way to reach personal goals.

**Armed conflict and school-based violence in Colombia**

In relation to school-based violence and the armed conflict in particular, Chaux et al. (2009) conducted a nationwide analysis of more than 50,000 students and found higher levels of school bullying in municipalities with higher levels of armed conflict.

Within this study, among 5th graders 29.1% reported having been bullied by classmates, 21.9% reported bullying classmates and 49.9% reported observing bullying among classmates during the previous two months. Among 9th graders, these statistics were at 14.7%, 19.6% and 56.6%, respectively. In 5th grade, bullying is significantly higher in all-boy and co-ed schools than in all-girl schools. In 9th grade, bullying is highest in all-boy schools and lowest in all-girl schools, with co-ed schools in between. Furthermore, in 9th grade, bullying is significantly higher in private and urban schools than in public and rural schools.

Bivariate correlations in Chaux et al. (2009) indicate that schools with higher levels of bullying are those where students: have lower levels of empathy, anger management and trust; have more beliefs supporting aggression; have more prejudices; come from less ‘democratic’ families (where not all members are heard or take part in decision making); and have better family socioeconomic conditions. As suggested above, a higher percentage of girls is a significant predictor of less bullying, for both 5th and 9th grades.

Meanwhile, schools located in more violent neighbourhoods, with more exposure to neighbourhood violence, tend to have higher levels of bullying. This includes armed conflict: school bullying is associated with greater presence of armed conflict for 5th graders in particular. The lower levels of empathy, anger management and trust and the exacerbated presence of prejudices and beliefs supporting aggression, mentioned above, are often an outcome of armed conflict presence in an area, and this forms a link between armed conflict and school-based violence.

In addition, children who attend school may suffer from stress, depression and inability to concentrate as a result of the conflict. Linkages between the exercise of violence at the macro and micro levels are fed by feelings of frustration, impotence and fear in children. Child recruitment contributes not only to a general environment of fear and insecurity but also to the legitimisation of violence in all spaces, including school-based violence (Watch List 2004).

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13 Better socioeconomic conditions could also indicate more reporting of bullying.
However, whilst violence is more apparent in violent neighbourhoods there is also evidence of variance within neighbourhoods (Chaux et al. (2009)), possibly indicating that change is within reach of schools. The fact that bullying levels seem to differ greatly between schools sharing similar larger contextual conditions suggests that schools should be able to have an impact on variables accounting for these large differences.

4. Initiatives to confront school-based violence in Colombia

In Latin America, debates on violence in school settings have been framed mostly in relation to addressing social exclusion (especially on the basis of gender, and ethnicity/race) and in relation to the promotion of a culture of peace and democracy (including to a lesser extent as a human/children’s rights issue, especially in for e.g. Colombia and Peru, which have faced or are still facing internal conflicts) (Avalos, 2003). Issues of educational quality have featured less.

Solutions have focused on the cultivation of non-violent negotiation skills, conflict management and promoting a culture of citizenship, respect for common rules and a holistic approach to the roots of violence (Jones et al., 2008). A few projects are intended to detect students who are victims of violence. Some programmes have been integrated into the school curricula and others involve not only children but also other members of the community (especially parents).

Despite the growing and rich variety of regional actions intended to combat the wide ranging manifestations of violence (from internal political conflicts to social conflict and domestic violence), the empirical base of knowledge regarding ‘what works’ is very weak. In the prevention area, the most cost-effective actions to stop violence in all settings include: municipal citizen surveillance programmes; programmes for youth, such as peaceful resolution, conflict resolution techniques, reintegration of children at risk or street children, work with children in conflict with the law; early childhood development; control of alcohol, drugs and gun sales; and situational prevention (Buvinic, 2008).

In Colombia many of the strategies, programmes and interventions share this regional approach, focusing on developing social and negotiation skills and building citizenship values at school level (see de Roux, 2001). The wider context supporting prevention in Colombia includes firstly The Colombian Constitution and the laws and institutions which are in place to realise it. The constitution recognises the priority of children’s rights and includes the Code (Law) on Children and Adolescents, which entered into force in May 2007. This embraces the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and defines responsibilities for the protection of children at both national and local levels. The government has established a robust public policy framework for the inclusion of child rights in municipal and departmental development plans, including in the area of protection. To guarantee the integrated protection of children, the National System for Family Welfare brings together all governmental institutions with responsibilities related to children and families, coordinated by the Colombian Family Welfare Institute. The Public Ministry has assumed a key role in making visible the impact of conflict on children’s rights.

Secondly the focus on citizenship values is reflected in the National Programme of Citizenship Competencies launched in 2004, by the Colombian Ministry of Education. This targets students and school managers/authorities from preschool to universities. The programme seeks to provide guidelines and information for the education system to promote quality citizenship education, which can be related to all types of violence. At its core is a set of standards that make explicit what the ministry expects students to be capable of doing with respect to citizenship in various grades. These are organised into three groups: 1) coexistence and peace; 2) democratic participation; and 3) diversity and respect for differences.
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These national codes, systems and programmes frame up action on prevention. However, in Colombia the educational system is highly decentralised. Schools can design their own curricula and choose their own pedagogical practices. The Code of Minors, for example, establishes that schools cannot impose sanctions that may be harmful or humiliating to children. Nevertheless, corporal punishment to discipline children is socially acceptable and the education law does not mention corporal punishment, disciplinary methods or sanctions against children. Standards which prohibit violence within disciplinary codes are therefore not imposed on schools.

Citizenship and anti-violence initiatives

Promoted under the national programme of citizenship, is the Classrooms in Peace initiative, evaluated as broadly successful. This programme is a multi-component programme for the promotion of peaceful relationships and the prevention of aggression by developing citizenship competencies. It was initiated by a research team from the Universidad de los Andes and combines universal and targeted components to reach all students, although it seeks to make a larger impact on those with greater needs.

The universal component is a classroom-based curriculum for 2nd to 5th grade students, implemented in a citizenship competencies class (24 lessons a year) and a language class (16 lessons a year). The main topics are aggression (2nd grade), conflicts (3rd and 5th grade) and bullying (4th grade). The curriculum focuses on eight crucial competencies from the national standards: empathy; anger management; perspective taking; creative generation of alternatives; considering consequences; active listening; assertiveness; and critical questioning of beliefs (Chaux et al., 2009). A great part is focused on the role bystanders can play to diffuse and mediate conflicts among peers or to assertively defend victims of aggression and bullying.

The targeted component is focused on the top 10% of students with the highest aggression scores according to teacher or peer surveys. Parents are also reached, by both universal and targeted components. Parents are offered four workshops a year, which promote the same competencies that their children are learning. However, as in many programmes around the world, those parents who could benefit from these workshops the most are the least likely to attend. Therefore, parents of the top 10% children are visited four times per year. Phone calls are made every two or three weeks in order to remind them of the next workshop and home visit and to seek current specific information about family dynamics.

Classrooms in Peace is putting a much greater emphasis than other programmes on competencies for all students, and especially for bystanders. Hopefully, this can help improve the poor record currently being shown by existing programmes (Chaux et al., 2009). The first evaluation of Classrooms in Peace showed impressive results. The programme was able to reduce the frequency of aggressive behaviour observed in the classroom and playground to one-fifth (Ramos et al., 2007). There has also been a substantial increase in pro-social behaviours, in adherence to rules and in friendship networks among students. Combining a universal and a focused intervention also seems to be quite effective in contexts of violence. The programme is currently being introduced in areas of Colombia with high levels of violent political conflict.

The Red Cross implements some other strategies in Colombia, including school brigades. For more than 30 years, the Red Cross has been working with children and adolescents and developing services for their communities. Currently, there are around 850 groups around the country, including the Programme for Peace, Action and Coexistence (PACO), in place since 1993. Developing and supporting youth associations has gained in popularity as a way to address the

14 There is a proposal to reform the Code of Minors in order to forbid all kinds of humiliating sanctions, including physical and psychological maltreatment, this would be part of the new Law of Children and Adolescents. Source: Ministry of National Education website
15 See www.preal.org/
roots of school violence. School brigades support extracurricular activities and also promote tolerance, dialogue, conflict resolution and negotiation, and social and community networking.

Similarly, the Mayor of Bogotá put in place Bogotá Without Indifference for 2004-2008, a social commitment against poverty and exclusion with an action plan for reconciliation and peace, and has also enacted Decree 482, containing the Public Policy for Youth 2006-2016. This latter emphasises the participation of young people, including in programmes to disseminate awareness of child rights and address the needs of victims of school violence.

The Education Secretary of Bogotá supports anti-bullying initiatives such as Programme School–City–School, to provide companionship to students outside of school time, and Schools for Forgiveness and Reconciliation, based on promotion and respect of human rights. These work with Pacts of Coexistence to set common rules for communities. The Education Secretary has signed an agreement with the Chamber of Commerce to allow students to be trained on conciliation methods in 137 schools. As a result of this, there are Local Conciliation Committees in the schools of 20 districts.

Public Policy for Youth, School–City–School and Schools for Forgiveness and Reconciliation have also been promoting ‘Care Ethics’ as opposed to the ‘Ethics of Sanction and Penalty’. This involves collaboration between the education and health sectors to create a Care and Wellbeing Group in each school. These groups seek to teach mediation skills and harmonise school rules with UNCRC principles.

Plan International is also working in a seven-year old project entitled Young Peace Builders, which facilitates the education of children on citizenship and provides an opportunity for children to cooperate and learn about conflict resolution, peace building and shared planning activities. In this ‘youth-to-youth methodology’, participant students are encouraged to undertake activities that ‘foster self-expression, active participation and decision-making’.16

Finally programme Hermes was launched in January 2001 as a private initiative of the Chamber of Commerce in Bogotá to manage conflicts in school settings. It is based on a methodology of mediation between peers and is currently working in 225 schools of 19 districts and 10 municipalities in the department of Cundinamarca (where the capital city is located). It has been designed for 12-17 year olds with violent backgrounds either at home or in school. It promotes dialogue and tolerance by training school leaders, exchanging knowledge with the whole educational community (teachers, school authorities, parents) for periods of 18 months and training students and teachers who are being certified as school negotiators. Up to 2007, the programme sensitised 667,943 people, trained 20,828 and enabled more than 21,203 to use the Network for Negotiators and Managers of School Conflict in Latin America, also supported by the Bogotá Chamber of Commerce.17

Thus as the examples above indicate the issue of conflict, violence and resolution is taken seriously as an issue to be addressed in school settings by government. Unfortunately as mentioned above, there is little evaluation of the cost effectiveness of these programmes although the ones discussed above are judged to be among the most effective.

5. Implications for policy

Evaluations conducted in industrialised countries show that preventive programmes can be cost effective by reducing violence in comparison with the costs of dealing with the effects of violence.

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16 See http://plan-international.org/where-we-work/americas/colombia.
17 www.cepal.org/dds/Innovacionesocial/e/proyectos/co/hermes.
Prevention includes a wide range of programmes from those aimed at increasing years of education in secondary schools through provision of scholarships and other incentives; to programmes using school facilities to offer leisure activities during spare time; or, more recently, early child development and home visits to mothers with children in high-risk families (see Buvinic, 2008). Incentives to keep children in schools for more years include reducing the direct costs of education and offering additional services, in particular those which may improve the relationship between children and schools and also increase a sense of ownership and safety for students.

Latin America has a limited culture of prevention of school based violence, perhaps because of the overwhelming demands for other essential services. Meanwhile, there are not many evaluations of the impact of prevention of violence programmes for children in developing countries (although this is beginning to change).

Colombia, Peru and Brazil have however, explicitly established national policies, laws and a diverse set of initiatives intended to confront school-based violence by promoting peace-building values and better coexistence. In 2001, Colombia introduced the Policy on Education with Coexistence, which whilst not explicitly having a preventive approach to violence was nevertheless oriented towards the creation of individual competencies and the promotion of values for more peaceful coexistence.

The issue of school violence faces some contradictions in policies, for example while Colombia is attempting to build bridges to facilitate the reintegration of former combatants (including children) into civil life (and school), the state is concurrently caught between protecting children according to the UNCRC and national laws whilst also having to comply with national legislation that considers these children to have broken the law (Ministry of Social Protection 2004).

Despite difficulties, however, as Jones et. al. point out, promoting school ‘connectedness’ and social inclusion in educational environments has been identified as a key protective factor against youth involvement in violence.

6. Conclusions

State-level armed conflict has affected Colombia’s most vulnerable children: The conflict has exacerbated problems in the education sector, particularly for vulnerable children in rural areas. Schools have been a target of illegal armed groups and also settings for violent confrontations.

Societal level violence contributes to school-based violence: Although inequality and exclusion are key contributing factors to violence in schools, societal violence and insecurity also play a crucial role.

There is insufficient evidence of sustainability and success: Several programmes are based on community engagement and attempt to build citizenship values in students and provide them with life and social skills on mediation and conflict resolution. However, more systematisation and analysis is needed to understand how each factor actually works.

More research into the cost effectiveness of prevention is necessary: Limited evaluations and public knowledge of the actual costs of existing programmes do not allow for establishing whether or not preventive programmes are more cost effective, as they do appear to be in other contexts.

A culture of evaluation is needed to learn from past experiences: Many initiatives have been implemented over a long period of time but there is still insufficient knowledge on effectiveness and how programmes can be part of more strategic long-term planning to stop violence in schools.
Civil society engagement in the development of proposals and follow-up of educational policies is crucial to the policy agenda on school-based violence: In Colombia, a key ally could be the Platform of Public Policies (UNESCO and PREALC 2007).

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