

# Teaching Truth in Transitional Justice: A Collaborative Approach to Supporting Colombian Educators

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## Abstract

The pursuit and acknowledgment of the truth of past atrocities and human rights abuses are critical processes in transitional societies. While truth commissions have become a central part of achieving these goals, there has historically been minimal attention to the role of teachers and students in this work. Critical and thoughtful teaching about the past conflict, however, may help prevent the reoccurrence of atrocities, promote acknowledgment and accountability of the past (which, in turn, fosters psychosocial healing), and support the construction of a peaceful society. In this paper, I detail a research collaboration with Colombia's truth commission to aid its pedagogical efforts to develop effective resources and support Colombian educators' instruction about the truth of past atrocities. I first draw on the literature to demonstrate the potential for education—and, specifically, teachers—to support the goals of truth commissions. Then, I describe the Colombian context and this specific collaboration. Finally, I end by presenting preliminary findings from surveys of teachers across Colombia and detailing future directions.

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Competing interests: None declared.

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## Introduction

In the aftermath of widespread human rights abuses, transitioning nations face multifaceted challenges. Healing must occur at and across various levels—individuals, groups, and society—by addressing the past while upholding psychosocial health, structural reform, and human rights. Education systems, often themselves complicit in past conflict, have increasingly been considered a critical part of transitional justice, including in the prevention of renewed violence. Schools, and the implicit and explicit curricula in them, hold potential for promoting truth and accountability for past atrocities while laying the groundwork for young people's involvement in building a society that respects the rights of all and prevents renewed atrocities.<sup>1</sup> The absence of effective education about the past can increase the risk of collective forgetting, truncated psychosocial healing processes, and backsliding into conflict.<sup>2</sup> Policy and programming in transitional societies, however, tends to overlook how mental health and psychosocial healing is woven into the fabric of education and into the roles that educators play as mediators, healers, and community members.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I detail a research initiative to better understand Colombian teachers' perspectives and positionality. This project—a collaboration between the Colombian truth commission, a Colombian nonprofit foundation, and myself—explores not only the potential for education to prevent further atrocities but also some mental health concerns linked to transitional processes. The Colombian context offers a prime opportunity to consider teachers' unique role in managing the psychosocial implications of past atrocities, preventing future ones, and coping with their own experiences.

A primary goal of this project is to contribute to the development of effective teaching resources and supports for Colombian educators to instruct about the truth of past atrocities. Generally, it also has the potential to aid in collective psychosocial healing and affirmation of human rights after violence and widespread violations. Many students, teachers, and their families have been impacted

by the conflict, which is linked to high rates of posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and other challenges.<sup>4</sup> The individual and collective processes of healing inevitably enter schools, with teachers playing a mediating role. For this reason, the collaborators have come together to better understand Colombian teachers' thinking, processing, and psychosocial well-being. Below, I first draw on the literature to discuss education and educators in relation to the goals of truth commissions, mental health, and the prevention of future atrocities. Then, I describe the Colombian context and this specific collaboration. Finally, I end by presenting findings from a pilot survey of teachers across Colombia and detailing future directions.

## The focus on transitional

I present a theoretical-based argument for focusing on teachers and their perspectives and then offer preliminary findings from the first step in a collaborative research project. This work is integrally intertwined with the recent context in Colombia: an involved peace process, an institutionalized and multipronged initiative to uncover and clarify the past, and political wrangling over related peacebuilding efforts. The lessons from this work can inform other contexts, including societies with eras and histories of past violence, injustice, and human rights abuses without official transitional justice processes. Still, it is important to acknowledge the differences and explain why I focus on transitional processes in this paper. Based on a collaborative foundation, this project is rooted in understanding the role of educators and their perspectives in relation to institutionally driven processes of constructing and teaching historical memory. Transitional justice implies a state-led effort to engage, through established institutions, with narratives and legacies of the past.<sup>5</sup> While lessons can be learned from one context to another, transitional contexts cannot be conflated with contexts where national institutions are not engaged in processes of constructing historical memory or invested in bridging the gaps between this official work and the orientations and positionalities of educators. The

current project is driven by a broad question rooted in these dynamics: *How do educators understand the work of truth commissions, as well as their role and positionality in educating about past injustices?* The ultimate goal is to inform the pedagogical work of the Colombian truth commission, even though there are broader implications, which are addressed in the final section.

## Defining truth and the role of truth commissions

Within transitional justice, the definition of truth is much debated and raises many issues.<sup>6</sup> Broadly identified as a fundamental first step in reconciliation and healing, truth in transitional societies can generally be understood as referring to a process of gathering and recording various actors' experiences and interpretations of past events.<sup>7</sup> Generally, truth commissions—state-sponsored mechanisms for collecting information about human rights abuses and victims and perpetrators' stories—have been recognized as important official processes for promoting accountability and reestablishing human rights because they “break the silence about widely known but unspoken truths.”<sup>8</sup>

Efforts to compile and disseminate truth can contribute to individual and collective healing. The collection and validation of survivors' stories recognizes their dignity, reaffirms their shared humanity, and creates a space for agency by highlighting resistance and resilience.<sup>9</sup> These steps may contribute to addressing victims' emotional and mental health challenges; this recognition of their experiences and affirmation of their human rights can support psychosocial recovery.<sup>10</sup> There may also be benefits in terms of reconciliation and the prevention of renewed conflict.<sup>11</sup>

Truth commissions, however, do not uniformly or in isolation advance healing across multiple levels.<sup>12</sup> Other contributing factors include cultural, systemic (such as strength of democracy), structural (such as economic reforms), and individual (such as experience of conflict and psychological predispositions) elements.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, truth-telling may have negative impacts: there is evidence that truth

commissions without other transitional justice mechanisms can harm human rights, and public truth sharing may have detrimental individual-level psychosocial consequences.<sup>14</sup> Finally, peacebuilding and the postconflict era are long-term processes, which means that beyond commissions' truth-seeking work, there are challenges in truth-telling: implementing recommendations, creating lasting and significant memorials, and constructing historical memory across generations.<sup>15</sup>

## Truth and education: Healing, mental health, and accountability

Truth-telling challenges are integrally tied to schools in transitional societies. Importantly, schools can be spaces for the perpetuation of violence and for socializing young people into problematic social attitudes and norms while reifying inequities and injustices.<sup>16</sup> Many transitional and postconflict societies are plagued by structural obstacles that inhibit critical, careful reform of educating about the past; and often, a lack of consensus on how to teach a nation's history leads to the privileging of civics or human rights education instead.<sup>17</sup> Schools are also often in flux politically and socially, with changing priorities and resources that may complicate the stable building of historical narratives and education about the past.<sup>18</sup> Still, education offers a potentially fruitful opportunity to support the work of truth commissions.

An explicit curriculum can offer a direct point of intervention for truth commissions in their postconflict reconstruction work. First, the teaching of the past—of a nuanced and critical truth emerging from a multiplicity of perspectives—can contribute to preventing future abuses.<sup>19</sup> A commission's work can be carried on through opportunities in schools to talk about truth reports. This integration not only brings these issues to future generations but also promotes public discourse about causes, consequences, and healing processes.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, teaching about diverse individuals' experiences of past conflict can affirm their human rights. The voices solicited and the ways they are presented can address instruments such as the Convention on

the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict.<sup>21</sup> Building on these possibilities, education and educators have both forward- and backward-facing roles.<sup>22</sup>

As part of the forward-facing role, education can contribute both to conflict and to peacebuilding through socialization, teaching and explicit instruction, and reifying or contesting social inequities. Both “overt” and “hidden” curricula—that is, explicit material and instruction, as well as school culture and interactions—convey norms and lessons to students.<sup>23</sup> From these experiences, children and adolescents form understandings of who is valued in society, how to relate to others, and in-group/out-group designations and relations.<sup>24</sup> Schools are critical spaces for promoting change and healing precisely because they are intertwined with the roots of conflict and the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and norms.<sup>25</sup> Minors spend much of their time in schools, which serve for many as the first and primary interaction with social systems and the state.<sup>26</sup> These experiences have the potential to promote values, civic engagement, and actions that challenge injustice and promote healing.<sup>27</sup>

The backward-facing charge of education and educators involves the legacies and histories of the past. To be effective, transitional justice processes must support individual healing and reconciliation, as well as collective processes with groups and communities.<sup>28</sup> Schools are a microcosm of these broader processes: students, teachers, and administrators carry their past experiences with them and hold identities that are inherently based on the group dynamics often linked to atrocities and their psychosocial impacts. Yet the recognition of trauma and need for support is missing in much of the discourse about how education can inform the construction of peaceful futures.<sup>29</sup> Much of the work of addressing the mental health needs of students—who may be victims, perpetrators, or family of either category—falls to teachers, who themselves also carry their own traumas and mental health needs.<sup>30</sup> The importance of these educators has

been highlighted in theoretical literature but is often overlooked in policies, programming, and empirical studies.<sup>31</sup>

### *The role of teachers*

As conveyers of both overt and hidden curricula, teachers are key actors in the socialization of future generations and are mediators between societal processes of transitional justice and young people’s psychosocial development.<sup>32</sup> Supporting teachers as potential promoters of truth involves acknowledging the complexity and nuance of their positionality. In transitional societies, there is often considerable pressure on teachers. They may be expected to serve as educators while also being expected to take on other emotionally demanding roles they have not been trained for, such as psychologists, guidance counselors, and conflict mediators. Having lived through violence and operating in potentially unstable presents, teachers may worry about safety in teaching official narratives or be coping with their own experiences.<sup>33</sup> Possible psychological challenges include a feeling of discomfort as leading agents of change, doubt about their abilities to change attitudes or understandings, and biases or predispositions.<sup>34</sup>

The need to consider the positionality and mental health of teachers in transitional settings plays out in the scant literature focused on their perspectives. Studies have shown that history teachers in South Africa experience intense emotional burdens as they consider touching on difficult topics about apartheid. Some teachers described these lessons as too painful, possibly harmful for themselves or their students, or as eliciting in them personal feelings of guilt.<sup>35</sup> One teacher asked, “We worry about learners, but we should be worrying about ourselves. What is teaching doing to us?”<sup>36</sup> In the Balkans, a study on teachers highlighted other anxieties and emotional burdens experienced by teachers, who expressed feeling unsafe discussing the past in the classroom and finding a balance between their own emotional connection to the past and what they had to teach.<sup>37</sup>

Historically, truth commissions have seldom explicitly and proactively engaged with schools or

considered the mental health of students and teachers in relation to educating about past atrocities. Recently, however, some truth commissions are engaging with the educational sector, though the nature of these collaborations varies considerably and seldom involves mandates to produce materials and provide psychosocial supports for teachers.<sup>38</sup>

The Colombian truth commission was given a mandate to support pedagogy about the past, reconciliation, and the prevention of future atrocities. While the commission is not explicitly focused on the mental health of teachers or their role in supporting that of their students, these issues emerge from a consideration of teachers' perspectives on this pedagogy.

## Colombian context

Colombia's history is marked by multiple and interconnected forms of violence and human rights abuses. The modern era of violence is often cited as beginning in 1948 with the assassination of a populist presidential candidate, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. This act sparked *La Violencia*, a period of heightened violence between the Conservative and Liberal political parties. *La Violencia* ended in 1958 with a power-sharing agreement that alienated other political actors. Along with other social and geopolitical dynamics, this pact factored into the emergence of several armed leftist revolutionary groups. Violent political conflict has remained constant, though the forms, dynamics, actors, and drivers of violence have varied. Across these decades, human rights violations have been committed extensively and systematically by various actors.<sup>39</sup>

Since the 1980s, different presidential administrations have held multiple negotiations with armed groups, and these processes have included smaller commissions to investigate specific acts of violence.<sup>40</sup> From 2012 to 2016, the government of then-president Juan Manuel Santos held negotiations with the oldest and most prominent armed group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The resulting accords included a mandate to establish *La Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de*

*la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición* (the Commission for Truth, Coexistence, and Nonrepetition) to investigate acts of violence, the causes and systematic factors that have fostered human rights violations, the human and social impact of the conflict, and the collective responsibility of all actors. This commission, formed in December 2018, was directed to focus on vulnerable groups (such as Afro-Colombians, Indigenous peoples, and women) and develop pedagogical materials and programming.<sup>41</sup> Importantly, civil society and government entities have also taken on the task of uncovering and constructing truth. One of the most comprehensive accounts of the extent and experiences of violence is *Basta Ya* (roughly, "Enough is Enough"), a report released in 2013 by the National Center for Historical Memory that cited 220,000 casualties and over 6 million displaced people.<sup>42</sup>

Experiences with violence have been linked to a host of emotional and psychological struggles in Colombia, and broadly, rates of mental health problems are high.<sup>43</sup> Among children and adolescents, government reports indicate elevated rates of trauma and needs for mental health counseling.<sup>44</sup> While there have been no systematic analyses of emotional well-being among Colombian teachers, they have been identified by the United Nations and others as targets of violence.<sup>45</sup> Though no direct connection has been drawn, these experiences likely factor into educators' increasing levels of stress, depression, and other mental health issues.<sup>46</sup>

## Teaching truth in Colombia

### *Nature of the collaboration*

In 2019, the truth commission began to gather stories and analyze the armed conflict, while also developing a strategy to educate teachers about its work and create materials to support teaching about the armed conflict. This focus motivated a collaboration between the commission, *Fundación Compartir* (a Colombian nonprofit organization with a mission to build a more equitable society), and myself. Our goals were to better understand educators' current knowledge of the truth commission, the challenges of teaching about truth, and



how best to support teachers—both in terms of educational resources and psychosocial support—in this work.

Planning meetings included discussions of the truth commission's efforts to inform Colombians about its activities; networks and possible school partners; and research questions and methodological approaches. The different perspectives coalesced around the commission's primary short-term goal: to open spaces for educators at all levels to discuss and think about the challenge of incorporating the final report into their curricula. This aim drew on practical political ends, as well as key issues identified in previous literature (for example, extolling the importance of integrating and carrying forth truth commissions' work through education, the mediating role of teachers, and the mental health challenges that educators face in transitional societies).

A multistep, mixed-methods process was designed in line with the commission's workplan schedule. The collaborators decided to prioritize understanding teachers' perspectives and the unique challenges faced by teachers as intermediaries between national transitional processes, students' psychosocial health and development, and their own mental health in working with questions of conflict, victimization, and truth. Systemic factors underscored the importance of attentiveness to local dynamics. While national mandates must be officially followed by schools, each school decides how it will comply.<sup>47</sup> Administrators and teachers have previously resisted curricula and resources developed by the Ministry of Education or institutions in the capital, which may not be attuned to local contexts. This disconnect is not only about content, material, and power.<sup>48</sup> Younger generations' understandings and experiences of the conflict is tied to local factors (for example, in their community or specific teachers) and social positioning (such as socioeconomic status and gender).<sup>49</sup> Depending on where they live, some adolescents are more likely to be or know direct victims or still encounter other armed actors operating with impunity.<sup>50</sup>

The diverse contexts complicate how national mandates or curricular resources may be received

or implemented at the local level. One cautionary example comes from a 2015 peace education law that was implemented through a centrally imposed process that marginalized teachers' voices and perspectives.<sup>51</sup> Considering these cases, we decided jointly to prioritize understanding Colombian teachers' perspectives on truth, the commission, and the teaching of its work.

### *An iterative, multi-step process*

The final process we developed collaboratively involves multiple steps over time to engage with teachers' thinking about these topics. Centralizing teachers and their psychological processes is an emerging area of attention in transitional societies. This collaboration offers an experience of deeply engaging and committing to incorporating the voices of educators into national mechanisms. Still, our work is in progress. Below I detail the three phases of the project and then present the findings from the first phase (the one that has been completed to date) to demonstrate the utility of this approach and lessons learned.

The first phase—a pilot online survey that was completed in 2019 and 2020—is described in detail below and informs future steps. As a second phase, the team will select a subset of schools serving diverse populations. Visits to these schools will include interviews with teachers who participated in the online surveys of the first phase to further probe their thinking about truth and education, as well as to engage in conversations about preliminary analyses of the online surveys. These discussions will add to the project's ecological validity, as well as help clarify needs and obstacles identified by teachers through the online survey.<sup>52</sup> Visits will also incorporate students' voices; focus groups will be conducted with a random sample from each school to explore how students understand truth, as well as how they have experienced and formed understandings of the past conflict and its reverberations in the present.

The project's final phase will center on the creation and implementation of pedagogical materials. The online surveys, interviews, and focus groups described above will inform the commission's de-

velopment of materials, as well as complementary workshops, online activities and resources, and other supports for teachers. When these materials are released, we will return to the teachers and schools that previously participated, while also striving to include other voices. This final activity will involve reassessing teachers' needs and obstacles to teaching about truth and studying how students process and respond to these discourses.

Each step has been purposefully designed to more effectively promote the integration of education into the complexities and nuances of truth in transitional justice. The online survey built connections with teachers and a preliminary understanding of conceptions of truth and the obstacles to teaching about it. It will be complemented by in-depth interviews and student perspectives to create a fuller picture of current thinking, the psychosocial well-being of educators and adolescents, and needed supports. Lastly, the return to these participants during implementation underscores an iterative evaluation that will inform the truth commission's pedagogical strategies. Overall, we designed this research to be in line with the evolving dynamics of the Colombian context and the truth commission's work.<sup>53</sup>

#### *Our pilot project: Surveying teacher perceptions*

Our research began in 2019 with an online survey of teachers across Colombia. Existing networks were used to engage a broad range of educators, with a final sample of 122 teachers from over 50 schools. The schools included institutions in all 10 of the truth commission's regional areas, with the greatest representation from Antioquia, Cordoba, and "coffee country" (21%); the Caribbean region (13%); and the central region of Boyacá, Cundinamarca, Tolima, and Huila (13%). The sample was 53% female. The majority (54%) identified as mestizo (of mixed Spanish and Indigenous descent), while 7% stated they were Afro-Colombian, and about 5% stated that they were mestizo and Afro-Colombian. About three-quarters of the sample reported that the communities served by their school were deeply affected by the conflict; however, teachers were not asked to self-report if they were victims.

The survey questions were developed collaboratively to provide insights for the truth commission's efforts to support pedagogy and prevent the repetition of atrocities, as well as to offer preliminary insights into teachers' psychological processing and feelings about teaching about the armed conflict. The survey consisted of three sections: demographics, a set of 12 close-ended questions with five-point Likert scale response options, and a set of seven open-ended questions. Close-ended items were designed collaboratively to assess broad patterns in respondents' understandings of the commission's work, efficacy related to teaching about peace and truth, and beliefs about student and community attitudes concerning these topics. Items included the following: "I feel informed about the work of the Truth Commission," "In my class, I feel that I can incorporate themes of historical memory and armed conflict in Colombia," and "My students have become indifferent to the issues of the armed conflict." Open-ended questions probed the armed conflict's impact on participants and their schools, their understandings of truth and the commission, and what they felt they needed to teach about Colombia's conflict. Mental health was not directly asked about because of the commission's concern about alienating participants. Still, there were related topics, such as possible challenges in teaching about the armed conflict. The interviews—a more intimate format where I will be able to build trust with teachers—will also more explicitly address mental health by exploring educators' thinking about their roles in teaching about the past.

I first analyzed the data and then shared preliminary findings with the commission and Fundación Compartir for discussion, further development, and ecological validity. Close-ended questions were used to provide general background information about respondents and their perspectives, and so only descriptive statistics were considered. Though demographic information was collected, location was determined using the truth commission's territorial classifications. These broad categories encompass distinctively different local contexts (varying by rural/urban, socioeconomic status, and so forth) that prevented detailed

subgroup analyses. Nonetheless, this information will be considered when choosing follow-up sites through maximum variation sampling.<sup>54</sup> Open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis with NVivo software.<sup>55</sup> In detailing the key takeaways across these analytic processes, my aim is not just to present empirical data but to demonstrate the connection between our preliminary findings and next steps.

## Findings

The analysis was divided into four areas: understanding of truth, knowledge about the truth commission, participants' understanding of their roles as educators, and their thoughts on teaching about truth (including challenges and desired resources).

### *Definitions of truth*

The teachers we surveyed defined truth predominantly as facts articulating what happened in the past. Some participants succinctly and clearly presented this perspective. For example, one wrote, "It's a statement of facts." Others added more nuance, stating that there were clear parameters but that truth could be contested. For example, one respondent defined truth as "a position on an event that is not put into doubt by other versions or beliefs. Even though some people say that truth in some cases is relative or that there isn't an absolute truth, there are certain indisputable criteria in most situations." Facts were part of a broader pattern of defining truth as objective. Some respondents directly made this link, such as one who stated, "knowledge of the facts as they happened in an objective manner." Objectivity was not always explicitly mentioned, sometimes arising implicitly in respondents' emphasis on accuracy: "It is historical memory of past events exactly as they happened."

Another theme was the importance of truth in society and its potential positive impacts, with no participants explicitly noting negative effects or contesting truth's importance. Positive impacts were at both broader societal levels and for individuals. Exemplifying the former, one teacher wrote

that truth was "a necessity for any society," while another responded that it "makes things right for humankind and for society." For the latter, one teacher answered that truth "presents the information that victims yearn for about the death or disappearance of their loved ones." Others explicitly referred to the importance of truth for victims' mental health because it recognizes and clarifies what they experienced. These various perspectives generally pointed toward participants suggesting that the pursuit of truth is beneficial at one or multiple levels in a society, including individuals' psychosocial well-being.

Lastly, a smaller group offered a different perspective on truth, portraying it as a value-laden coherence between attitudes and actions. They did not define truth as a record or process but rather as linking thoughts, actions, and treatment to more abstract orientations. To this end, one teacher stated that "truth is to be coherent in how a person thinks, feels, and expresses themselves about something they have lived through," while another answered, "it is what you do conforming with what you think and believe." The values themselves were not specifically listed; instead, these respondents invoked moral frameworks abstractly. While there was variability in the exact terms used—for example, feelings, values, beliefs—an underlying thread was that truth is more than facts and encompasses coherence between one's attitudes and actions.

### *Knowledge of the commission*

In relation to the truth commission, teachers demonstrated varying levels of knowledge. Only 10% of respondents agreed that they felt informed about the commission, while a third indicated disagreement. In the open-ended responses, the sample was generally split into two relatively even-sized groups (about 40% each): those who had clear and developed understandings and those who stated they knew little or nothing. The first group clearly articulated a purpose for the commission. Some offered paragraph-long, developed descriptions, while others responded more succinctly: "constructing the country's historical memory" or "knowing the causes and consequences about



events of the past.” In the other group, many teachers simply answered “nothing” or “very little,” and others indicated they did not even know where to find this information. Given the online nature of the survey, participants could have researched the commission online while crafting their responses, suggesting that even fewer might have previously been knowledgeable about its work.

### *Roles as educators*

A second aim was to build better understandings of how teachers envisioned their role in teaching about Colombia’s conflict. Respondents generally reported valuing teaching about truth and feeling able to contribute to these efforts. The overwhelming majority (80%) responded that they felt it was important that students know history from diverse points of view. Similarly, a majority agreed that they could incorporate history into the material they teach (60%) and could be a peacebuilder in their schools (70%).

For perceptions of contextual factors, respondents generally indicated that students were open and supportive but that broader dynamics were more complicated. None of the teachers disagreed that students were interested in talking about peace, while only 5% responded that they and their students could not help prevent the repetition of the armed conflict. Participants were more divided on whether their community had become indifferent to issues related to the armed conflict: 33% agreed and 36% disagreed. Additionally, just over a third indicated feeling that teaching about the armed conflict was risky in their local context.

### *Teaching about truth*

The last area of analysis was challenges in teaching about truth and what resources respondents would like to have as support. In terms of resources, participants primarily indicated interest in digital resources and videos, which some described as “engaging”; others noted requiring technological infrastructure (such as projectors). The nature of the content was also mentioned in some responses: testimonies, visits from victims and other actors, and videos of victims’ stories.

Another group of respondents listed accompaniment from the commission or government, requesting a coach, psychologist, or other “human resource” to support them in teaching the commission’s final report. As an example, one participant requested “a trained professional who can initiate the process smoothly and then can accompany the teachers and the educational community in general as they take it over.” This participant was from the Antioquia region and described their local community as deeply affected by the conflict, which was according to them still present in “minds of those who lived it.” Other participants who expressed similar sentiments came from contexts immersed in current violence and crime, as well as other communities that participants described as disconnected and apathetic to the armed conflict.

The mention of interpersonal support by some participants connected to challenges that teachers identified in thinking about teaching the commission’s report. Two themes emerged in this respect: raising awareness was a primary need and difficult task, and forces at various levels prevented the transformation in thinking that is necessary. First, some participants explicitly or implicitly referred to *sensibilización* (awareness or sensitivity). Their role was part of a broader challenge to “disseminate the results of the commission.” Others specifically mentioned raising awareness in their schools, such as “making students aware of the subject and getting them to reflect on it.” Educators expressed that students were interested in learning about these themes both in contexts where teachers described their community as being affected by the conflict and in contexts where they said it was not. An interconnected concern was how to motivate students to want to learn more about this topic. Helping students become aware of the truth commission’s report involves more than simply conveying information within it. One teacher identified a challenge as “trying to teach about this topic dynamically to inspire in students an interest in learning about it,” while another wrote, “getting students interested in the importance of knowing history as a basis for building a better society.” Importantly, both of these teachers, and those who espoused this view

more generally, identified their school contexts as not affected by the armed conflict.

Second, teachers—particularly those who identified conflict as having impacted the communities they serve—emphasized the challenge of enacting the change required to effectively teach about the truth of the conflict. This endeavor entails a different way of educating and thinking for many Colombians. Participants described numerous forces opposing it: political opposition, other armed actors, lack of faith in the government, and inertia in daily life. In terms of teachers themselves, teaching about truth of Colombia's conflict requires intentionality, reflection, and moving beyond usual classroom structures and curriculum. One respondent from a conflict-affected area in the central region of the country wrote of the need for teachers to “re-orient their practice to focus on reflection,” while another from a similar area of Antioquia described the importance of “breaking with set paradigms, educating with an orientation towards forgiveness, respect, and recognizing the perspectives on events from various actors in the conflict.” This attention to a change in mindset among teachers mirrored other respondents who identified more generally the difficulty of changing the mindset of Colombians. This phrase—*cambiar el chip*—was invoked in reference to teachers, students, families, and citizens in general.

### Takeaways

Overall, this analysis provides preliminary insights into how the truth commission should work with teachers in their unique role of supporting psychosocial well-being and preventing the repetition of atrocities. First, the complexity of responses about truth and the challenges that teachers identify demonstrate that teachers are not just conduits for curricula. They are individuals embedded within particular contexts who are actively psychologically processing and responding to their experiences. They demonstrated concern about sociopolitical dynamics and preconceptions about truth that may need to be engaged. Furthermore, some respondents acknowledged that a genuine engagement with these issues would entail reflection on and a

reorientation of the role of teachers. This work is inherently tied to identity, positionality, and mental health, as teachers would have to reconcile not only with the past but with their own understandings of education and their purpose as educators. Other scholars have noted that such changes can impact teacher's emotional health and psychosocial well-being.<sup>56</sup>

A second thread was these teachers' feeling of efficacy, even while acknowledging the difficulty of their task. Participants noted feeling that students were receptive and that they were able to contribute to peace and teach about history despite the complexity of this challenge. Their work, particularly in conflict-affected contexts, requires raising awareness and making change in the face of significant material and psychological obstacles: lack of adequate infrastructure, attitudes in the community (such as indifference to peace or distrust of government), the need to reconceptualize pedagogical practice, and anxiety over safety. These significant challenges point to the need to better understand and support the mental health of teachers, who are intermediaries in transitional societies: though they may feel able and motivated to teach about the past as part of efforts to prevent future atrocities, this work is mentally and emotionally demanding. Research with teachers in other transitional contexts has also highlighted safety concerns affecting their psychosocial well-being, while investigations of Colombian teachers' mental health has indicated that many already feel overwhelmed in their job.<sup>57</sup>

Building on these dual pressures, some respondents from conflict-affected areas explicitly indicated the need for psychological and personal supports. Taken on the whole, these responses can be understood as demonstrating that these participants were aware of the emotional and mental challenges of teaching about truth, including the lived and possibly traumatic experience of the past and teachers' need for psychosocial and educational accompaniment. Teaching about truth, for many of these teachers, thus encompasses the actual content, “the surrounding reality,” and the psychosocial well-being of students, teachers, and the community.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have described a research collaboration aimed at supporting the Colombian truth commission's school-based pedagogy, as well as our pilot survey of educators. Our project's motivational foundation was acknowledging and attending to teachers' intermediary positions between transitional justice and future generations within a framework of education as a potential space for supporting human rights through healing, accountability, and prevention after mass atrocity. The first phase of research of this collaboration has demonstrated that teachers' positionality and mental health are salient concerns regarding the effective incorporation of the Colombian truth commission's work into the educational sector. Specific challenges include recognizing the uniqueness of local contexts, motivating students, confronting established pedagogical orientations, and understanding broader social dynamics. While teachers are important intermediaries in the work related to truth, education, and human rights in transitional societies, these elements must be addressed in fostering this potential. Identifying and addressing these areas will help the Colombian commission as it moves forward in its efforts to promote healing, foster a harmonious society where human rights are upheld, and ensure that past atrocities are not repeated.

Our findings on teachers' definitions of truth provide fruitful ground for this work in Colombia, with implications for postconflict societies and others that seek to use education to address violence and human rights abuses of the past. While some participants described truth as objective and singular, many espoused more nuanced perspectives that touched both on values and on everyday behaviors and attitudes. These perspectives extend beyond official processes of gathering and accounting diverse experiences about what occurred, which have been much of the focus in relation to truth in postconflict societies.<sup>59</sup> In making the link to pedagogy, there may be opportunities to harness the construction and teaching of truth for a more holistic development of students. As noted by these participants, however, changing the perspectives

and orientations of educators, administrators, and broader communities is difficult. Therefore, a specific point of intervention could be to work with educators on their conceptions of truth and what it means to reimagine their role to encompass the formation of critical, engaged future citizens. Such an opportunity for future development builds on connections between history education and civic development but adds a particular focus on shaping teachers' conceptualizations and orientations.<sup>60</sup>

This work must be attentive to broader contexts and sociopolitical trends as well. As evident in the responses of teachers in our pilot study, educators and schools do not operate in sociopolitical vacuums. Entering 2020, the Colombian president, Iván Duque, was openly against the peace accords, and the numbers of dissident ex-FARC members were growing.<sup>61</sup> These sociopolitical dynamics will have implications for teachers' mental health and ability to support their students, for increased security risks, retraumatization, and new atrocities will add to the substantial load already carried by Colombian teachers. Therefore, one lesson from this work is the need for continual and iterative engagement with educators. Efforts to support the work of truth commissions must evolve in accordance with changing circumstances, political pressures, and resulting impacts on teachers and their educational communities.

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