DOI: 10.14712/23363177.2026.8

Orbis scholae

EMPIRICAL STUDY

Learning Amid Violence: The Educational Impact of the Colombian Armed Conflict

Alexandra Novozhenina[1], Vanessa Sánchez[1]

1 Universidad Católica Luis Amigó, Education and Humanities Faculty

CORRESPONDENCE
alexandra.novozheninano@amigo.edu.co

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received: 31 December 2025
Accepted: 14 July 2026

Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of four teachers and a school principal regarding working in secondary schools in rural zones of Colombia affected by the armed conflict. Using the phenomenological approach, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the five participants, who worked in different regions of the country, and were later analysed through the lens of Education in Emergencies (EiE) theory. The analysis revealed that the participants' schools often served as the sole, yet fragile, state presence, frequently having to adjust to the rules of illegal armed groups. Findings also indicated that the conflict severely disrupted student academic continuity and emotional stability. Furthermore, constant staffing shortages forced educators to assume multiple roles, including providing psychological support, which led to emotional burdens for the participants. The study concluded that a number of crucial factors established by EiE theory did not function well in these territorial realities.

Keywords

Colombian armed conflict, Education in Emergencies, EiE, secondary education

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0).

According to the Single Registry of Victims (Unidad para las Víctimas, 2023), more than 10 million Colombians have been affected by the Colombian conflict, including more than 2 million people who have lost their lives because of it. In fact, the Humanitarian Trends and Impact Report of 2025 (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2025) ranked Colombia third in the world in terms of the number of internally displaced persons due to the conflict. To understand its full impact on the country, it is first necessary to know its history.

1 Background

The early roots of the conflict can be tracked down to the beginning of the 20th century, when the Colombian state was scarcely present in rural zones, politics was dominated by the elites, and some groups of workers began expressing their protest against unfair working conditions. However, most historians identify the decades of the 1940s–1950s as the formal beginning of the Colombian armed conflict, naming that time period "La Violencia" (The Violence). It was during those years that organized armed groups started emerging in the country, triggered by the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a prominent Colombian politician who was the leader of the Liberal Party. Gaitán openly criticized the conservative government that ordered the killing of workers of the United Fruit Company which took place in 1928 and was later called the Banana Massacre; in addition, he tried to promote democratic reforms in the country, which were opposed by the conservative elites. As a result, his assassination sparked violence throughout the country and especially in Bogotá, the capital of Colombia.

Consequently, by the 1960s–1970s, there emerged several armed groups, such as FARC – the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, in Spanish), ELN – National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional), and EPL – Popular Liberation Army (Ejército Popular de Liberación). They managed to establish control over many rural zones due to their poverty and political exclusion. Subsequently, by the 1980–1990s, those guerrilla groups expanded and consolidated drug-based economies that financed their activities. Unfortunately, this resulted in Colombia becoming one of the countries with the highest number of internally displaced people in the world by the end of the 20th century. As a response to that, the Colombian and U.S. governments came up with "Plan Colombia" which aimed at reducing the cultivation of the coca plant. Although the achievement of that objective was debatable, Plan Colombia managed to strengthen Colombian military forces and weaken the guerrilla groups.

A historical moment in the timeline of the conflict was 2016, when the Peace Agreement was signed between FARC and the Colombian government, hoping to put an end to decades of hostilities. Nevertheless, a car bomb attack in Bogotá in 2019, which was officially admitted by the ELN group, resulted in the cessation of the peace talks. Two years later, in 2021, the Investigation and Accusation Unit of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace reported that the internal armed conflict had reactivated in at least 12 different areas of the country, with the highest levels of massacres, displacement, and hostilities since the peace agreement.

In 2025, the year when the present article was written, there were a number of events which, unfortunately, evidenced the complex situation surrounding the conflict. At the beginning of the year, the Catatumbo region in the northeast of Colombia witnessed clashes between the ELN and FARC groups, leading to violence, casualties, and displacement. Furthermore, the Valle del Cauca region in the west of the country and its main city, Cali, suffered several bomb and explosive attacks which resulted in casualties among civilians, police, and military forces. It is also important to mention U.S. President Donald Trump's accusations against the Colombian government and President Gustavo Petro, in which he stated that efforts against guerrilla groups were insufficient and ineffective. As a consequence, in December 2025, the ELN group declared an armed strike in response to President Trump's rhetoric and his actions in the Caribbean Sea.

The above summary of the main events of the Colombian armed conflict shows its long history in the country. Without a doubt, it has affected the lives of many people in the most profound ways, and the Colombian government has tried multiple strategies to cope with it. A number of those strategies have been aimed at preventing the further escalation of the conflict and supporting the peacebuilding process, and one of the main tools in this respect is education. Although education often becomes secondary or even irrelevant in the face of the adversities that people have to face amidst the armed conflict, it plays an important role in shaping new generations and, consequently, the future of the country, and thus cannot be overlooked.

Understanding the power of education, the Colombian government has implemented a number of policies in the educational sector. For example, the "Classrooms in Peace" initiative focuses on teaching second-to fifth-grade students' socio-emotional skills as well as working with families and communities (García Duque, 2016). Similarly, in 2014, the "Chair for Peace" was established as a mandatory subject in schools where students can learn about human rights, non-violence, and historical memory (García-Noguera et al., 2025). Apart from educating children, the government has also drawn its attention to the youth who were directly or indirectly affected by the conflict and created the "Tools for Peace" program aimed at teaching them the skills of traditional trades and crafts (OECD, 2024). Additionally, the "Teach for Colombia" project (Enseña por Colombia, n.d.), which is part of the Teach for All network and was developed together with UNICEF, is targeted at teachers of both private and public schools who work in certain municipalities in 19 departments of Colombia which were prioritized by territorial development programs. The project offers online training that will allow the participants to learn about the final report of the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition and to align it with their classroom practices. Eventually, it intends to build peace in Colombia through classrooms.

However, despite the attempts of the government and non-governmental organizations to mitigate the influence of the conflict with the help of the education system, the situation remains complex. In a post-peace-agreement article, Moreno Trujillo (2017) reveals the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the "Chair for Peace" initiative due to a lack of preparation and improvisation. Instead of being given autonomy to engage in peacebuilding processes, they are seen only as the implementers of policies. Apart from that, the author highlights big differences in resources and support related to the initiative that

educational institutions receive in the public and private sectors. Furthermore, the efforts of government institutions may also be overshadowed by similar "initiatives" of the armed groups that use schools for the propaganda of their ideas (Galvis Céspedes, 2021).

In a more recent documentary review by Aristizábal and Ávila (2025), which analysed 40 articles between 1996 and 2020, the authors also focused their attention on exploring how educational institutions have contributed to peace promotion and social reconstruction. They highlighted the efforts undertaken in this regard and emphasized the effort of community initiatives and policies that intend to create a peaceful and fair future for the country. Nevertheless, they also revealed that significant human rights violations against teachers have taken place in Colombia. According to the authors, education plays an important role in the transformation of society and the promotion of peace, and therefore the impact of the conflict on teachers – the main actors of the education system – cannot be underestimated.

Based on the aforementioned points, this research placed teachers who work in rural zones at the centre of its inquiry. As explained earlier, the armed groups have been mostly present in rural areas due to their remoteness and state abandonment, hence the focus on those zones. Overall, we aimed to explore what teachers experienced almost a decade after the Peace Agreement was signed and amidst the partial reactivation of the conflict. To analyse their lived experiences, we adopted a transcendental phenomenological approach. We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021) with five participants from different departments of the country who were recruited using purposive sampling (Etikan et al., 2016) to ensure diverse representation and generate meaningful insights. We recorded and transcribed the interviews, analysed the five accounts, identified recurring patterns and themes inductively, and then interpreted them through the lens of Education in Emergencies (EiE) theory, which generated important insights. The data showed that the participants experienced the conflict through three main domains: isolation, helplessness, and burdens. Moreover, we revealed that educational realities often did not consider the factors suggested by EiE theory regarding providing a safe environment, socio-emotional support, and continuity of educational processes.

2 Theoretical Framework and Literature

The theoretical framework of this article contains three sections, namely Armed conflict, Challenges for achieving quality education in contexts of armed conflict, and Education in emergencies, the latter serving as the theoretical lens of the present study.

2.1 Armed Conflict

Current approaches suggest that conflict should not automatically be understood as violence. Instead, it is viewed as the result of competing interests and unresolved inequalities within society. Conflicts must be interpreted according to the historical and structural conditions in which they emerge, especially in contexts where states are unable to respond adequately to social needs (Navarro, 2013). In Colombia, the armed conflict has historically been connected to factors such as rural marginalization, unequal land distribution, polit-

ical exclusion, and insufficient state intervention in remote regions. These circumstances favoured the emergence of guerrilla organizations, paramilitary groups, and illegal economies related to activities such as drug trafficking and illegal mining (Cifuentes, 2015).

For this study, armed conflict is understood as a complex social phenomenon involving prolonged disputes among armed groups, state forces, and illegal economies. Its consequences extend beyond military confrontation and deeply affect the educational, emotional, and social realities of rural communities. This perspective is essential for understanding how the Colombian armed conflict has influenced secondary education processes in rural schools, particularly regarding students' learning experiences, teachers' work, and institutional dynamics.

2.2 Challenges for Achieving Quality Education in Contexts of Armed Conflict

Education has the potential to become a transformative tool for peacebuilding and social reconstruction in contexts affected by armed conflict. When educational opportunities provide children and adolescents with life skills, critical thinking abilities, and pathways toward dignified and productive futures, education can reduce the attractiveness of armed groups by offering alternative life projects and opportunities for social mobility (Tarricone et al., 2021). In this sense, schools may function as protective spaces that promote hope, agency, and resilience among young people living in violent environments.

However, education does not always fulfil this transformative role. When educational systems reproduce exclusion, inequality, and limited opportunities, they may contribute to the persistence of social tensions and violence. In many rural communities affected by conflict, young people perceive schooling as disconnected from their realities and future aspirations. Rural students become discouraged from continuing their studies because they believe education will not improve their living conditions, while limited access to higher education and insufficient teacher guidance reinforce feelings of hopelessness and marginalization (Barrera, 2024).

Despite these barriers, efforts to sustain schooling during emergencies are grounded in the understanding that education provides much more than academic instruction. Schools in crisis contexts help to restore a sense of normalcy and stability, create spaces for social interaction and emotional support, strengthen coping mechanisms, and foster hope for the future (Winthrop & Mendenhall, 2006). The implementation of educational responses in conflict-affected settings also depends heavily on local realities and community participation. Consequently, ongoing discussions on fragile states and humanitarian-development linkages continue to reinforce the importance of guaranteeing equitable and quality education as both an immediate response and a long-term strategy for sustainable peace.

2.3 Education in Emergencies

Education in Emergencies (EiE) refers to educational responses developed in contexts where crises interrupt or threaten access to education. These responses seek not only to guarantee continuity of learning, but also to provide protection, emotional support, and stability for affected populations. In Colombia, EiE is defined as a process that includes prevention and risk management, emergency response, and post-emergency phases (Repúbli-

ca de Colombia, 2011). From this perspective, EiE is framed within the right to education and establishes that the state must ensure the accessibility and adaptability of educational services, especially for vulnerable populations. This implies maintaining or restoring educational services as quickly as possible, guaranteeing equitable access without discrimination.

Modern emergencies are often prolonged and chronic; therefore, EiE does not only involve temporary educational actions, but also the establishment of formal educational processes during ongoing crises (Triplehorn, 2001). In this sense, education may occur through formal schooling, non-formal educational initiatives, or informal learning experiences rooted in community, family, and cultural practices. Historically, education was not initially considered a central component of humanitarian assistance. Only in recent decades have governments and international organizations begun to recognize education as a fundamental pillar of humanitarian action (Bessler, 2019).

Within the framework of the present study, EiE provides an essential lens for understanding how the Colombian armed conflict affects secondary education in rural areas. This perspective allows schools to be analysed not only as academic institutions, but also as spaces of protection, emotional support, resilience, and social reconstruction in contexts marked by violence, displacement, and instability. Colombia still faces important limitations in guaranteeing a quality educational system capable of responding effectively to emergency situations and complying with public policies designed to overcome humanitarian crises (Mora-García, 2019).

2.4 Previous Studies

For this article, we reviewed previous studies that were conducted in the last fifteen years. This period includes six years before the Peace Agreement was signed and nine years after it, up to the year this article was written, both periods being covered by six studies. Table 1 shows the authors, years, and key points of the studies.

First, one of the dimensions studied in relation to the education sector and the armed conflict is *students' academic performance*. As can be seen from Table 1, the topic has attracted greater scholarly attention after the Peace Agreement was signed. Some researchers, for example Ortiz-Correa (2014), have focused on specific subjects, such as Mathematics and Languages. However, most studies have used standardized state tests to measure how living amidst the armed conflict affects students' test results. Unfortunately, both pre- and post-peace-agreement papers present quite similar findings: the Colombian armed conflict leads to lower test scores. The study by Ortiz-Correa (2014) mentioned above discovered statistically significant differences in the test scores of students in 5th and 9th grades, with those living in conflict zones showing worse results. The author highlighted that the test scores of 11th-grade students did not show the same pattern but also noted that lower enrolment rates in higher grades might have influenced the results. Several post-peace-agreement studies also demonstrated that the conflict had a direct negative impact on students' performance (Ariza & Saldarriaga, 2023; Rojas Bahamón et al., 2017). Additionally, Arbona et al. (2022) focused particularly on analysing the connection between the number of deaths registered in municipalities and the educational efficiency of their institutions and revealed a significant correlation not only with mortality rates in the same municipality

Table 1 Previous Studies on Armed Conflict and Education in Colombia

Year	Author(s)	Topic(s)
2010	Novelli	violations to teachers' human rights
2012	Rodríguez & Sánchez	school drop-out and child labour
2013	Romero Medina	violation of the right to education of children and teenagers
2014	Ortiz-Correa	impact of conflict on math and language test grades
2016	Osorio González	impact of conflict on students' families and teachers'; students' stories of life
		2016 – Peace Agreement
2017	Gómez Soler	influence of involvement in the conflict on students' performance – relation between conflict intensity and final test results
2021	Galvis Céspedes	various ways conflict affects schools
2022	Arbona et al.	impact of the conflict on educational efficiency
2023	Ariza & Saldarriaga	effect of the conflict on students' academic performance
2025	Cabra-Torres et al.	rural school principal's experiences and rural school management

but also with those in neighbouring municipalities. Finally, Gómez Soler (2017) concluded that more research should be conducted on students' academic performance in conflict zones, because the relationship between those two concepts is more complex than it seems.

Another dimension we have identified is the *focus on the human rights* of those living in conflict zones. As might be expected, the situation in this dimension is also concerning. Two studies conducted before the Peace Agreement explored the violations of teachers' and students' human rights. The former examined how educators became caught in the complex scenarios of schools located in conflict zones and revealed that their human rights tended to be severely violated (Novelli, 2010). The latter focused on students, children, and teenagers, and concluded that their right to education was not guaranteed because of the armed conflict (Medina, 2013). A related finding was shared by Rodríguez and Sánchez (2012), who stated that students often had to drop out of school because they were forced to work, which also directly affected their right to education. Although we did not identify studies that analysed human rights directly after the Peace Agreement, Galvis Céspedes (2021) conducted research which aimed to reveal the effects of the armed conflict in rural Colombia, and one such effect was the violation of children's right to education. This shows that, unfortunately, the situation concerning human rights has not changed significantly for students living in the areas affected by the conflict.

However, the studies that were of particular interest for us were the ones related to the *experiential domain of those in conflict zones*. The first one, already mentioned above, was conducted by Mario Novelli in 2010, and it used a series of cases to show the relationship between Colombian education and the armed conflict. It was a longitudinal study which started in 2005 and included field visits across the country. It revealed that teachers, as well as rural schools, turned into prisoners of the conflict and called for an interdisciplinary and critical analysis of the factors contributing to the conflict in Colombia. The second study centred its attention on the impact of the conflict on students' families (Osorio Gon-

zalez, 2016). The author emphasized the importance of memory as a powerful force for peacebuilding and highlighted the crucial role of rural schools that are responsible for preparing future generations for peace and forgiveness. Finally, the third study was performed after the Peace Agreement, and its goal was to explore the lived experiences of rural school principals and the way their management had changed due to the conflict (Cabra-Torres et al., 2025). The authors found that their participants redefined the impact of the conflict from the perspective of the sensitive memory. Additionally, they concluded that rural school principals directed their institutions towards peace-building strategies and restorative justice.

As can be seen from this review of the previous studies in Colombia, the impact of the armed conflict on the educational sector has been researched from different angles. Nevertheless, the researchers identified an important gap based on several factors. First, most of the studies have focused on students, and some studies have centred their attention on other educational actors like principals and families, while teachers have been somewhat overlooked. Second, the study that did focus on teachers and their human rights violations was conducted in 2010, and the political situation as well as conditions in rural areas have considerably changed in the country since then. Third, while the research on statistical aspects of education, such as test scores, is very important, the qualitative components, such as people's perceptions and lived experiences, are no less valuable in this context as they provide the foundation for the understanding of *why* and *how* the armed conflict affects education in the country. As a result, the identified gap concerned exploring the recent lived experiences of Colombian teachers working in the affected zones. Therefore, the present study attempts to fill this gap by analysing the experiences of secondary school teachers who work in conflict-affected areas almost ten years after the Peace Agreement was signed and amidst the partial reactivation of the conflict.

The research question that emerged was: How do teachers experience the Colombian armed conflict in rural secondary schools in the post-peace-agreement period? The focus on secondary education stems from the fact that, according to the literature, the conflict mostly affects teenagers (Rodriguez & Sanchez, 2012). Furthermore, the specific questions that guided this study were as follows: (a) What perceptions of the impact of the conflict on the teaching-learning process do the teachers have? (b) What effects of the conflict on the teachers' role have the participants experienced? (c) How do teachers perceive the role of their institutions in particular and the state in general in the context of the conflict? These questions attempted to provide an overview of the current landscape of secondary education in relation to the armed conflict in Colombia through the eyes of schoolteachers who act as intermediaries between students, school staff, and communities in rural contexts.

3 Method

This study followed the transcendental phenomenological approach to examine the lived experience of rural secondary school educators who work in areas affected by the Colombian armed conflict. Transcendental phenomenology, initially developed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl, aims to understand human experiences (Moustakas, 1994). It is essentially descriptive and is based on individuals' accounts of the phenomenon stud-

ied (Derakhshan & MacIntyre, 2025). During the research process, the researchers practiced reflexive bracketing by consistently analyzing their own assumptions, experiences, and positions to reduce their impact on how they interpreted the participants' narratives.

To follow the framework of a transcendental phenomenology, the researchers first conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with the participants. During the interviews, we asked participants about the contexts of their schools, their teaching experiences, and the learning experiences of their students to make them reflect on these experiences. We also asked follow-up questions to allow the educators to develop their ideas. After that, we explored and described their experiences with the help of reflexive bracketing to reduce the researcher bias. Next, we analyzed the five accounts inductively to uncover recurring meaning structures associated with the primary phenomenon of teaching in environments impacted by the armed conflict. Finally, we provided a descriptive report showing the participants' lived experiences regarding their work in schools and the armed conflict, and interpreting them through the framework of Education in Emergencies.

3.1 Data Collection

To collect the data, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021) with the participants. Four of them were done with the help of Google Meet, while the fifth one was conducted through a WhatsApp call due to low connectivity in the participant's region. The former tool facilitated data organization as it allowed us to use the automatic transcription option and thus provided us with an organized transcript. This also allowed both researchers to focus on the conversation without the need to take notes. However, the interview conducted through the WhatsApp call required us to make a slight modification to the procedure, in which the first author conducted the conversation, while the second author focused completely on taking notes by typing. The notes were initially taken by cutting words and omitting functional elements (such as articles and prepositions) to avoid missing any information and were later revised and developed into coherent text.

Before conducting the interviews, the first author held a phone call with each of the participants to explain what the topic of the study was, what kind of questions would be asked, and how the logistics of the interview would work. Afterwards, each participant filled out a short questionnaire via Google Forms that collected their demographic data. All the interviews were scheduled according to the availability of the participants to make the process as convenient for them as possible. Four out of five participants preferred to do the interview over the weekend, when they were not in the villages where they worked and hence could speak freely. At the beginning of each interview, we introduced ourselves and briefly told the participants about our academic backgrounds to break the ice and let them know a little more about their interviewers. All the interviews were conducted in Spanish, the native language of the participants.

3.2 Data Analysis

To analyse the collected data from the perspective of transcendental phenomenology, the authors agreed to perform the analysis individually and then to hold meetings to compare the results, discuss the differences, and adjust the interpretations. Throughout this process, we maintained a reflexive awareness of our own assumptions and positionality, recognizing that complete suspension of prior knowledge is impossible, but that continual reflection can help reduce its influence on interpretation.

First, we carefully read each interview transcript several times to become familiar with the participants' accounts. It is important to mention that we did the initial coding after each interview. As we were doing so, we added comments to the transcript texts and made use of colours to identify patterns more easily at a later stage. We continued this procedure iteratively to code all the data. Before every new interview, we held a meeting to share the identified codes and agree on adjustments. After analysing the fifth interview, we both arrived at the conclusion that data saturation had been reached, as no substantially new experiential meanings emerged from the data. Afterwards, we drafted a preliminary list of emerging themes and then continued working individually to develop the themes, sort them, and look for quotes that would exemplify them. Throughout this stage, we held two more meetings to follow up on the process and a last meeting to define the final list of themes, key ideas, and examples from the data. The themes were developed inductively from participants' narratives and subsequently interpreted using the Education in Emergencies framework. Within this methodological approach, transcendental phenomenology provided the overall research design, thematic analysis facilitated the identification of meaningful patterns, and Education in Emergencies offered the conceptual lens for interpreting teachers' experiences in conflict-affected educational settings.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that we used several strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. First, member checking allowed us to make our findings more objective and credible. We performed it by inviting our participants to read the findings and suggest corrections. Second, we invited an experienced researcher, who holds a PhD in Social Sciences, to review our findings to make sure they were confirmable. Both member checking and the external audit were performed in Spanish. Third, to ensure the transferability, we provided descriptions of the design, participants, data collection, and data analysis process that would allow readers to replicate the study in a different context. Fourth, we analysed the data independently and held meetings to adjust our findings. Finally, regarding positionality, we were both outsiders to our participants as we both live in a different region of the country. Additionally, our region is only slightly affected by the armed conflict and we work in an urban institution, which allowed us to approach the phenomenon with openness. However, as university professors who train future teachers, we believe we are responsible for understanding the reality of the country and preparing our students accordingly.

3.3 Ethical Issues

To ensure that the present study followed the ethical standards of research, we followed the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research published by the British Educational Research Association [BERA] (2024). The guidelines include seven responsibilities that researchers have toward their participants, and all of them are listed below.

1. *Consent*. During the initial phone call that the first author made prior to the data collection, she informed each participant about the purpose of the study and its ethical aspects. After that, they received the informed consent digitally, which allowed them to read and analyse it carefully and ask any questions. Finally, when they informed the researchers that they agreed to participate in the study, we asked them to sign the consent, thus confirming their participation. Only after the consent was signed did we schedule the interview with each participant.

2. *Transparency*. As researchers, we were completely open and honest with our participants at every stage of the study, including its aims, scope, and procedures. The collected data was not meant to be reused to address any new research questions, thus, there was no mention of secondary data analysis in the informed consent. Additionally, there was no information about sponsors, as the research was not sponsored by any organization. Finally, there was no material interest or commercial gain resulting from the present study, because its main goal was to contribute to the body of academic knowledge.

3. *Right to withdraw*. The informed consent stated clearly that the participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage. This was highlighted several times, including at the beginning of each interview, so that the participants could feel free to withdraw from the study or abstain from answering our questions.

4. *Incentives*. We did not offer any incentives to the participants, as we did not want to impact their free decision to join the study. However, all the participants expressed that they were eager to be interviewed and thus contribute to the academic dialogue regarding the armed conflict and education in the country.

5. *Harm arising from participation in research*. As researchers, we were fully aware that, given the topic of our study and its phenomenological nature, some questions of the interview might have been sensitive for the participants or might have evoked difficult memories. This aspect was mentioned as a possible risk in the informed consent and was highlighted in the preliminary conversation. Therefore, as part of their informed consent, the participants were also asked to share emergency contact information that we could use in case they experienced emotional distress during the interview. Additionally, they were informed about the office providing free psychological support available at the university where the researchers worked, which is open to any person, internal or external to the institution. Furthermore, whenever our questions could possibly lead to an emotional reaction, we tried to formulate them in such a way as to avoid making our participants feel obliged to answer.

6. *Privacy and data storage*. We ensured complete anonymity for our participants as we did not use their names or even the names of the institutions where they worked. To refer to them in our paper, we used codes such as Participant 1/P1, Participant 2/P2, etc. Both during the initial phone conversation and in the text of the informed consent, we high-

lighted the fact that the interview would be recorded. However, we emphasized that this would be only done for the purpose of transcribing the interview for further data analysis. Moreover, the collected data was only available to the authors of the present article.

7. *Disclosure*. Given the topic of the study, we understood that confidentiality was of paramount importance for our participants. Therefore, we guaranteed confidentiality both verbally and as part of the informed consent. At no stage of the study did we need to disclose any information to the authorities as there were no illegal or harmful actions resulting from the data collection in particular or the study in general.

3.4 Participants

Figure 1 Geographical Distribution of the Participants



Note. Visualization in R based on administrative boundary data downloaded via the geodata package.

There were five participants in this study, who were recruited using purposive sampling (Etikan et al., 2016) that ensured diverse representation as well as meaningful insights. Two of the participants worked in the Cauca department, one in Valle del Cauca, one in Nariño, and the other participant was working in the Antioquia department at the moment of the study but had previously worked in Vaupés and Cauca. The geographical distribution of the participants can be seen in Figure 1. It is important to mention that, according to the Humanitarian Trends and Impact Report (OCHA, 2025), Nariño, Cauca, and Valle del Cauca were highlighted as areas of "concentration of impact" (p.1), with high numbers of internally displaced persons and confined populations. The department of Antioquia was marked as a zone of mass displacement in the same report. As for Vaupés, it serves as a gateway for the illegal drug trafficking to Brazil due to the fact that this remote region is the least populated department in Colombia, with only three municipalities and three villages. In addition, Vaupes has been reported as an area where minors are often recruited: as the department is made up of a large river network, the armed groups require local guides, which leads to frequent recruitment of teenagers from indigenous communities (Charles, 2021). Therefore, the selection of the participants for the present study was strategic and intended to include the regions that have been most affected by the armed conflict. Table 2 shows the demographic information about the participants.

Table 2 Participants' Demographic Information

Participant	Age range	Gender	Teaching experience (years)	Educational background	Department
1 (teacher)	31–45	F	12	Bachelor's degree	Cauca
2 (teacher)	31–45	M	10	Master's degree	Nariño
3 (teacher)	46–60	M	15	PhD student	Valle del Cauca
4 (teacher)	31–45	M	9	PhD student	Antioquia, Vaupes, Cauca
5 (principal)	61+	F	46	Bachelor's degree	Cauca

Note: All participants work in rural/public sector.

3.5 Context

All five participants in the study worked in rural public schools in different regions of Colombia. We believed it was important to describe Colombian rurality as its characteristics will be mentioned in the further sections of the article. As Colombian territory lies within the Andean mountain range, access to rural areas is often difficult: there are many unpaved roads, access through which is often subject to weather conditions, or there might

be no roads at all. The rural communities in Colombia are called *veredas*, which are small territorial divisions, and they will be further referred to as villages for ease of understanding. These communities are usually characterized by limited, if not non-existent, access to public services, limited connectivity, as well as poverty and economic inequality. Due to the small number of people living there, schools are often multigrade and teachers might be in charge of more than one subject.

4 Findings

After completing the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, we identified a high number of ways in which the conflict affects education in rural zones. Its influence can be seen among students, teachers, and institutions, and it is described in detail in the present section. Overall, we categorized our participants' experiences into three main domains: isolation, helplessness, and burden. Additionally, we presented the domains in that specific order because we believe that one stemmed from the other: isolation led to helplessness, and helplessness, in turn, resulted in multiple burdens that the teachers had to bear.

4.1 Conflict as Isolation

The only presence of the state there are the schools.
Participant 4

The participants experienced the armed conflict as a state of complete or almost complete isolation. The idea of isolation constantly emerged in their accounts and appeared to manifest itself in nearly all aspects of life. On some occasions, it was referred to as physical or geographical, similar to being cut off from the rest of the world. On other occasions, it was rather related to feeling alone and isolated despite being surrounded by people.

The first manifestation of isolation was related to the geographical characteristics of the participants' contexts, which were described in the Method section. All the participants worked in public rural schools, as it was the focus of the study, and as a result, they described the villages where they worked as very remote and isolated. All of them, except Participants 4 and 5, stayed there during the week, but went to bigger cities over the weekend. They would spend between two and five hours travelling one way every time. Participant 5 had lived all her life in the same village, so she spent all her time there. The highest level of isolation was experienced by Participant 4, who shared that when he worked in the Vaupés department, he felt extremely isolated:

> You can only get there by plane. When you are arriving, you can only see the jungle, and like 5 or 6 buildings. If you are lucky, there is a flight every two weeks; if not, once a month. So you feel like you're in prison. You can clearly see it is abandoned by the state, there is no employment, so you will see traditional things like hunting and fishing. So the only presence of the state there is the school. Or, maybe, you can see its presence when there are elections, when they come because they need votes. (P4)

In the contemporary world, where people are used to being connected all the time, the feeling of isolation creates unease and, in some cases, makes people feel nervous. The geographical remoteness described by the participants was evident as soon as the participants arrived in the villages. Therefore, this feeling of unease started upon their arrival and stayed with them until they departed. The comparison to prison by Participant 4 builds on the concept of isolation, adding the notion of not being free, of being forced to stay there, and of being held hostage.

The second manifestation of isolation that would strike our participants upon arriving at the villages was the isolation from the state, and particularly from state law. The fact that the armed groups had control over those areas allowed them to establish their own laws. Participant 2 stated that those groups made it clear by drawing graffiti or hanging flags with their symbols. When participants were approaching their municipalities, it was common to see a checkpoint where the guerrilla would ask anyone entering or leaving the area to show their documents – something that would typically be done by the police. In some cases, apart from the usual documents, like an ID or a driver's license, they could ask for additional information:

> The first and the most important one is the badge that allows you to transit through the territory. It's a document that is issued by the community board of the village. It allows you to move around the zone, and it has your name, ID number, and the activity you are doing on their territory. (P3)

Apart from that, having documents might not be enough in some zones, as the guerrilla would only allow someone to pass provided that they were accompanied by a person they knew: "Well, you cannot enter without someone they already know. Because if they don't know you, they can shoot you immediately, or kidnap you, or maybe they just won't let you enter." (P4)

On some occasions, the rules imposed by the guerrilla were completely opposite to those established by law. One example that several participants mentioned is the fact that if a person was riding a motorcycle, they could not wear a helmet, because, when the rider was wearing one, the guerrilla could not see their face and thus did not know who they were. Participant 3 even mentioned that they could fine you if you were wearing one. Moreover, three interviewees stated that the armed groups did not tolerate "ordinary" crime in their zones, such as robbery or sexual assault. This was explained by the fact that crimes may attract the police or the army, and their presence was undesired in those areas.

The most striking demonstration of the guerrilla's control over the territory and the absence of the state there was the fact that illicit plantations were part of the scenery. Our participants affirmed that coca fields, and sometimes cocaine laboratories, were very common, as they were the basis of the guerrilla's economic activity. For instance, Participant 2 shared that when one was approaching the municipality, one could see coca plantations along the road. They did not even care to place them somewhere hidden so that nobody could discover them. On the contrary, it was as if they were showing their power by using the land the way they wanted, regardless of what the state or the law said.

As for the very presence of the official law – the police – the participants' villages either did not have a police presence or only had one formally. For example, Participant 2 shared

that in his village there were policemen and policewomen, but they were "mere decoration". According to him, they only dealt with minor offenses, such as fights between drunk people, but the ones who were really in charge were the armed groups.

These experiences took the participants' feeling of isolation to an even higher level, because it went beyond the geographical remoteness. It was as if they were living in a parallel universe with its own laws that went against what they had always known. Instead, what governed life in those villages was the law of the jungle – the strongest wins; the one with more weapons wins; the one with more influence wins. Moreover, being isolated from the state with its usual way of living, they also felt a lack of support or even abandonment. What would they do if something happened? People normally rely on institutions like the police or the justice system, or at least on the fact that everyone around them follows the same rules, written or not. However, when living in conflict zones, our participants knew that help would not come, and they could only rely on themselves.

The same sense of isolation extended to the participants' professional lives. Despite the numerous strategies implemented by the government in the educational sector and mentioned in the introduction, all of the participants reported little or even no support from the state or any other humanitarian organizations: "I feel like we are abandoned. You know, there are some trainings the Secretary of Education does, but to be honest, those are targeted at teachers in the urban sector. What about our needs?" (P1)

Additionally, when asked if they had received any support from the government or any other organization, all the participants said they had not. Only one of the interviewees mentioned an initiative he had heard of, but it took place in the past:

> Well, my colleagues who have worked here for like 20–30 years told me there was something called the "Godparent Project", which consisted in someone from Europe becoming a "godparent" for a student here. They would send them things, like books, notebooks, or backpacks. But that was a long time ago. (P3)

Another participant stated that he had heard about some projects of that kind, but explained that the problem with them was that they only lasted a few months. In order to achieve a real impact, those programs had to last much longer.

> There are some organizations that do their projects in our school. But to be honest, they only come here for two or three months, fulfil their obligations, and then they leave. You see, if you want to have a real impact, you have to stay for more time, more long-term projects. (P4)

To our participants, the above examples of isolation at the level of employment were equivalent to abandonment. On the one hand, as public school teachers, they went through a long, rigorous selection process organized by the state to prove that they had all the necessary qualifications to obtain those jobs. On the other hand, the entity that hired them abandoned them completely the very moment they arrived at their place of work. The state is the only force capable of countering the guerrilla, but, unfortunately, it leaves its own employees alone in the face of the armed conflict.

A further educational and social consequence of the isolation that the participants had to live through on a daily basis was having to witness their students join the armed groups,

as living under violent conditions would sometimes lead teenagers to take the path of violence. Unfortunately, students lacked interest in their studies and lacked a vision for the future. In the context of isolation from the outside world and their complete lack of life experience, they simply did not see any other options but to earn their living by working for the guerrilla. Their only dream was to join the armed groups. Participant 1 explained that it happened, because students did not have any other opportunities and saw it as the only way to earn money. She added that as they lived in an extremely remote area, they simply did not know anything about the outside world, and they did not understand that there were other opportunities in life. However, Participant 3 had a slightly different explanation:

> Our second biggest problem is the drop-outs. Normally, when students get to the 8th grade, when they are about 14–15 years old, those armed groups know how to seduce them. They are attracted by either money or power, and they fall in love with that lifestyle. So it is very common for you to have a student in the 8th grade, and then next year you see that student wearing their uniform and checking your documents at the entrance to the village. (P3)

Participant 4 also expressed a similar idea, saying that teenagers felt power and respect when they had a gun in their hands, and that is why it was easy to get a young person to join them – it was just a matter of a gun, some money, and a feeling of authority. He added that, sadly, some students had recently started blackmailing their parents. When the latter were strict and demanded good grades at school, their children said they would join the armed groups if their parents did not stop "bothering" them.

In this sense, isolation became teachers' worst enemy that played against them while at the same time becoming the ally of the guerrilla. Isolation led to a situation in which "this reality has become normal for them. Holding a gun or seeing someone hold a gun – it's their daily life" (P2). The armed conflict has become their version of "normal" simply because they do not know anything else. Unfortunately, seeing their own students choose this path could lead teachers to think they might have done something wrong. Was it their fault that their students chose violence? Could they have explained to them that the world is much bigger than the village they had lived in all their lives? That living in a remote area did not necessarily mean being confined to it for the rest of their lives? Sadly, our participants understood that joining the armed groups often meant staying there forever, so witnessing these types of situations was equivalent to losing those students both in an educational and a social sense. When working in schools, both teachers and principals often perceive their students as their own children: they start to truly care about them – especially in small communities. Therefore, seeing them choose violence hurt our participants in the most profound ways.

Nevertheless, on the bright side, it is worth mentioning that Participants 2 and 5 explicitly stated that the majority of their students understood that joining armed groups and their drug economies was not the right way to go. Participant 5 said that the adults in the community made sure they always explained to the youth that it was a bad life choice, while Participant 2 affirmed: "Is it common for them to aspire to join the groups? Oh, no, not at all. That doesn't happen at all." (P2)

This came as a relief for them, because both participants felt that their work was not worthless, and that their efforts had not been lost.

Finally, we noticed another aspect of isolation when some participants shared that when one lived long enough in those villages, one would get to know not-so-obvious facts about life there. For instance, according to Participant 2, whenever students heard a helicopter flying, they always said that "the money has arrived". Participant 3 also mentioned that sometimes there was no cell phone signal, and the students who had lived there for a long time would say that "they shut off the signal". The participant added that it was done to keep people isolated and unable to communicate with the outside world, which was another form of control. Like in any small and isolated community, they had their own myths, and those myths bore the mark of the conflict.

To sum up this section, isolation had spread to every area of life in the conflict zone, including education. "Every man for himself" – it seemed that this would be the slogan of our participants, if they were to describe what they lived through on a daily basis. Far away, disconnected from the world, without the support of the state, alone against the armed groups – these lived experiences of loneliness and abandonment resulted in another important factor we identified in our participants' accounts: helplessness.

4.2 Conflict as Helplessness

– But what about my Sonic?! I have to paint it!
– You can't. Your father was killed, so we have to leave.
Participant 1

Feeling and being isolated led to a second and very strong feeling that permeated the teachers' experiences – helplessness. The participants expressed it, both directly and indirectly, in relation to a number of aspects of their day-to-day labour. The conflict appeared to paralyze them, both from professional and personal perspectives, preventing them from acting or speaking freely both inside the walls of their schools and outside.

For example, a striking experience mentioned by Participant 1, who worked in Cauca, one of the departments most affected by the conflict, happened the very moment she and her colleagues arrived in the village. They had recently been appointed by the state of Colombia as teachers at the village school. However, the first thing that happened when they arrived was being introduced to the local commander of the guerrilla. Remarkably, his decision outweighed the fact that one of those teachers was officially assigned to that school by the state, and he told him to leave:

> We had to be introduced to the commander. I felt like I was in a movie, because they were wearing military uniforms and had guns. I felt that they already knew who we were before we got there, because they did not accept the Math teacher and told him he had 24 hours to leave. They say that he was under investigation for sexual abuse, and that he also consumed drugs, and those people are very strict about those things. (P1)

Arriving at their new place of work, discovering that being officially hired by the state did not guarantee anything, and being placed in front of armed people made them feel helpless, as they immediately realised they were not in control of their own job or, maybe, even their life.

Another relevant aspect of feeling helpless concerned the teaching-learning process, because the armed conflict negatively affected it both in the short and long term. The most common issue mentioned by all the participants was the fact that students' academic process was often interrupted for different periods of time or even left unfinished. The former often resulted from the forced displacement or threats that students' families underwent. When they had to leave their village urgently, their studies would be interrupted sometimes for as long as several months. In some cases, parents managed to find a different school in the new place, but in others, children would simply not attend any educational institution at all.

> Their process is not constant. There are very few kids who stay from the beginning of the year to the end. There are even cases when they leave at the very beginning of the year and then come back at the very end. So, there is no stability. (P1)

Teachers often tried to help by sending practice materials through WhatsApp, but this was further complicated by the fact that parents would sometimes be helpless in educating their children as some of them grew up in remote zones and were illiterate.

Overall, unfinished activities often cause frustration for everyone. Consequently, our participants experienced frustration all the time, as the teaching-learning process was rarely completed. When their students dropped out mid-year, they felt like all their effort was in vain. When they could not find the right tools to support their students while they were away, this made them feel like they were letting their students down. Once again, this contributed to their feeling helpless.

Additionally, our participants noticed that constant interruptions to the teaching-learning process went beyond the academic domain. Participant 1 affirmed that she could clearly see the effect of these interruptions on students' social development. According to her, there was a huge difference between students who attended school regularly and those who did not, which suggested that the school environment was crucial for them. The following example shows that the time students spent away from school because of the conflict was of paramount importance for the development of their social and interpersonal skills.

> I have a student who only attends school for one week per term. She is very responsible, and her mom sends all her homework through WhatsApp, and academically she does very well. But when she attends classes, we can see that it is difficult for her to socialize with her peers, because she is used to only talking to her parents. So, when it is recess time, she only talks to kids from second or third grade, although she is in the sixth grade. (P1)

As a result, apart from the academic concerns that the participants felt about their learners, they were also concerned about their social-emotional growth, which added to the feeling of helplessness as they did not have a way to help those students.

Nevertheless, displacement was not the only reason why students skipped school. Participants 2 and 3 noted that their students, especially those from higher grades, often missed classes because they were either in the fields collecting coca leaves or in laboratories producing cocaine. While Participant 2 said that students would normally lie and say that

they were sick, Participant 3 shared that his students did not even try to hide it; on the contrary, they would show off the money they earned and buy something for their classmates. This, in turn, would encourage their friends to follow their path, creating a vicious cycle. Both interviewees noted that this was also a common reason for students to drop out of school, because easy and fast money made them lose interest in their studies and abandon school altogether.

This type of situation diminished the authority and the role of the participants, as it showed their students that all the things they were teaching them were useless in the world of drugs and money. This reduced the importance of their labour and made the effort they invested in their work seem irrelevant. In this regard, they felt helpless when trying to demonstrate the importance of studying to their students as the challenges of the academic process clashed with the ease of earning money illegally.

Feeling helpless because of the lack of students' interest had a profound negative impact on the participants. Nevertheless, it was even harder to feel that the state was not interested in supporting them either, as it would ignore any communication attempt that they made. Most of the participants reported that staffing shortages would often occur in their institutions. However, the authorities did not seem to have any intention of addressing them:

> We don't have an inclusion specialist, or a psychologist, or many other people. There are six of us teachers here, so we do the job of the principal, coordinator, secretary, psychologist, and everyone else. We have written letters, we have made requests, but there has been no reply. (P1)

The proximity of the armed conflict was another relevant reason that made our participants feel helpless, even when it took relatively peaceful forms. For example, Participant 5 mentioned that some individuals from the armed groups near her village frequently asked her to let them stay in one of the classrooms to sleep and rest. She said that she had no choice but to allow them to do so, but when they stayed for too long, students started getting curious about them and in particular their weapons. These situations interrupted school activities considerably, as students' attention was completely drawn to the guerrilla "guests".

Such proximity placed a lot of pressure on the participants, as they did not know what to expect. Why are they here? Is it just a coincidence? Or did they come here on purpose? Are they observing us? All these questions affected the participants' well-being, but there was nothing they could do. Feeling the guerrilla members in such proximity made the conflict even closer. It is one thing for them to be somewhere in the jungle, hidden, and far away. It is a totally different experience when they are in the next room. The conflict becomes materialized and more real: it is right there, in the neighbouring classroom.

However, the toughest factor that contributed to the feeling of helplessness was the clashes – either between the guerrilla and the police, or between different guerrilla groups. Occasionally, teachers could not get to the villages where they worked because they were warned that either there were fights going on, or there were helicopters monitoring the area, which meant that fights would probably start soon. Consequently, teachers would follow the protocol called "remote learning", which meant that teachers and students would communicate through WhatsApp. However, the participants affirmed that teaching through cell phones was not effective at all, and the academic process was seriously affected.

Nevertheless, a much stronger impact was caused when clashes started during class time, and then simply cancelling classes would not be possible:

> During clashes, all the students (there are 72 in our school, from kindergarten to 9th grade) and teachers come to my classroom, because it is the biggest and, let's say, the safest one, as it is at the same distance from the park and the sports field. So, we tell them to sit on the floor and watch movies, for as long as it takes – sometimes hours. Of course, there are kids who get distracted watching movies, but there are other kids and teachers who say, "How can we watch a movie when this is happening?". And then, for like two or three weeks after that, we don't let kids go outside for breaks. (P1)

Participant 3 also stated that there were clashes between the guerrilla and the army in their village, and that one could hear airplanes, helicopters, and bomb explosions. Similarly, Participant 4 said that when an armed group would try to take control, they would drop bombs affecting the civilian population. He said that it was not uncommon for households to have trenches where whole families would hide to avoid getting hurt.

All over Colombia, and probably worldwide, schools have drills to train students to evacuate and to teach them how to react in case of emergency. For example, in Colombia the most common reason is earthquakes – scary experiences which, however, are natural disasters that people have no control over. Nevertheless, having to evacuate or hide because there are shots and explosions happening around the school is way more horrifying. These types of experiences made our participants feel like they were not in control of their own lives, like their lives could end at any moment, like nothing in their immediate future was certain. Would the central location of the classroom where they would always hide together with students protect them from a bomb? Would the thin glass of the windows protect them from a gunshot? Feeling helpless about being unable to protect their own lives and the lives of their students was probably the most serious manifestation of helplessness that we have identified, because it took our participants to the level of desperation.

To conclude this section, it is important to mention that there were quite a number of situations that made our participants feel helpless. The lived experiences described above contributed to the feeling of fear and to being completely dependent on the decisions and actions of the guerrilla. Feeling in charge of one's own life matters for the emotional stability of an adult person. Being dependent on another person places us in the position of a child, which is equivalent to being defenceless. This concept of being defenceless was woven into the accounts of all of our participants, one way or another. As a result, the constant and accumulated helplessness led to the last emotional domain we identified – having to bear a myriad of burdens.

4.3 Conflict as a Burden

We end up carrying the burdens of our students.
We have to do their mourning with them.
Participant 1

Feeling helpless and being unable to change their own reality, feeling isolated from the country and, in a way, from the outside world – all these resulted in the fact that the teach-

ers had to bear several burdens. Those were their own burdens, personal or professional, but they were also the burdens of their students. Burdens they had to bear, burdens that will always stay with them, and burdens that nobody would take off their shoulders.

First of all, we identified the burden of the educational system. Since the zones of the conflict are often ignored by the state, schools located in those zones often experience staffing shortages, which occur in two ways: on the one hand, government officials tend to leave the needs of educational institutions in conflict areas unattended; on the other hand, people, and especially teachers, are not willing to work there due to obvious risks. As a result, both the teachers and the administrative staff often had to do other people's jobs. However, the interviewees highlighted that when they had to do the job of a psychologist or inclusion facilitator, they did not feel qualified for those roles.

> All these decades that I have worked here, we have always been short on staff. So, yes, I am the principal, but I also don't have a secretary, so I do that job myself. I have always had to teach as well, because we don't have enough teachers. We have sometimes had to join two different grades as well to cover for the shortage. (P5)

This burden of the educational system affected both teachers and students alike. For instance, the service they provided to students as psychologists or inclusion facilitators might not be of good quality, as those professions require careful attention so as not to cause harm. Moreover, they felt overwhelmed, as added responsibilities were quite time-consuming and thus affected their primary duties. At the same time, they had no choice in the matter, as they realised that it was necessary to perform those jobs so that school activities could run smoothly. As a result, assuming additional roles forced our participants to carry a burden they did not choose.

Another imposition of the armed conflict on the teachers we interviewed was the curricular burden, as they had to adapt to the ever-changing circumstances of their contexts. For example, several participants affirmed that teaching through cell phones when there were clashes was very difficult, as it was a very limited channel of communication that did not allow them to really teach anything.

Apart from that, Participant 4, who often had to teach subjects like Ethics and Religion, confessed that it was sometimes impossible to teach certain topics established by the Ministry of Education in a one-size-fits-all manner, simply because they were too sensitive for students who lived in contexts of war and pain. Therefore, he felt the need to improvise and include other content that would not affect his learners emotionally, which goes in line with the conclusion made by Ariza & Saldarriaga (2023) who stated that in conflict zones thematic content or even academic calendars had to be modified.

> You don't know how to teach them topics about Family, for example, which is included in the curriculum of [subject] Ethics. How can I teach that? Knowing that some of my students have seen their fathers or mothers being shot, and some others have been growing up with some distant relatives because all their family members were killed? (P4)

For the teachers, this burden often represented a dilemma between their professional responsibilities and moral considerations. On the one hand, they had to follow course syllabi

established by the Ministry of Education. On the other hand, they could not ignore the reality their students were living in. As teachers and as humans, they had a responsibility to take students' backgrounds and prior experiences into account and modify their teaching in such a way that would not cause students any emotional damage.

However, the hardest burden that our participants had to bear, the one that stayed with them even when they left the villages at the end of each week, and the one that would probably stay with them for the rest of their lives, was the emotional burden. The armed conflict being constantly present and permeating every aspect of life inevitably led to strong negative emotional experiences that our participants had to go through day after day. This emotional burden had a two-fold nature for the teachers that we interviewed.

On the one hand, some participants affirmed that it was extremely hard for them to handle their students' emotions. They also expressed that they often did not even know how to approach, for example, a student whose family member had been killed. However, dealing with learners' emotions is a direct responsibility of every teacher, so they felt like they had to find a way to reach those children. Evidently, this was complicated even more by the previously mentioned issue of staffing shortage and the resulting absence of psychologists in those institutions.

> I can see that the girl is depressed, and I have seen her crying. But I don't know how to deal with that, because as a teacher I don't have the skills to work with the psychosocial aspects of a girl who has been affected so much by the conflict. So, when we see those cases, students who are depressed, students who prefer to be completely on their own and isolated, you try to create a positive environment and to look for activities that will allow them to get involved, but it is quite difficult. (P4)

The above example shows how difficult, sad, and frustrating it is for the teacher to see the girl suffer and not be able to help. Eventually, the girl's emotions become the burden of that teacher.

The same teacher also shared a very sad and personal story of a child who was affected by an explosion:

> There was a girl who had an injury on her face as a result of a grenade explosion during a clash between various groups. The grenade fell near her house and changed her face completely. The girl did have surgeries, but anyway, every time she looks in the mirror, she will see that reflection, and she will feel that memory, that pain. (P4)

The reminders of the conflict were everywhere. They were hidden inside students' minds and would sometimes manifest themselves through a sad look or apathy. But they were also visible everywhere, taking the form of either graffiti, a destroyed building, or the scars on the girl's face.

And of course, apart from seeing students' injuries, sadly, our participants often had to witness violent deaths. Participant 2 shared that when he arrived in the village every Monday, he would often find out that there were one or two people killed over the weekend. Moreover, Participant 3 said that when the armed groups shot someone, they would sometimes leave their bodies in visible places, which would be a message for everybody else

to see. However, the most painful burdens were placed on the teachers when their students lost their family members to the conflict:

> It is also very common and very-very sad that every month, or even every two weeks, we find out that this boy lost his dad, another child lost his grandfather, another one lost his uncle, and so on. The community is very small, so everyone finds out, and everyone is affected. (P1)

Living in a zone affected by the conflict means living under a constant shadow of death, which looms over those small communities all the time. Its shadow reaches every single corner of life, including classrooms. For example, Participant 1 affirmed that having to live through clashes, hearing gunshots and explosions, often became a difficult experience for many students. In the days following such events, they could be very anxious and scared, always expecting something to happen; as a result, they could not concentrate well in class or participate in the activities teachers prepared for them. Participant 2 also expressed a similar idea, but it was related to the situations when students' families were threatened or displaced:

> For example, I remember this girl. Her family was threatened by the groups, but they did not leave – I am not sure why, because I never really knew what the problem was. So, she kept attending school, but she always looked nervous, as if she didn't sleep, as if she was crying a lot, as if she was sick. She told me that, say, on Tuesday they were told that if by Sunday they hadn't left, all the family would be killed. Can you imagine going to classes like that? (P2)

As a teacher, one feels responsible for the well-being of one's students, and seeing those situations in students' lives makes one desperate to help but often unable to do so. Consequently, teachers try to make their students turn away from all the bad things happening in their lives and to create a classroom environment that would make their students feel safe. But at what price?

The price that some participants had to pay was the fact that their own emotional state was often neglected, even though they felt fear and anxiety during clashes, or sadness when a person they knew was killed. While students could at least rely on teachers who could listen to them and say a kind word, teachers did not have anybody else who was in charge and could therefore talk only to a colleague.

> My co-workers and I have talked about that a lot. So yes, we have to be in charge of students' emotional state, but then who is in charge of ours? So, we end up carrying the burdens of our students. We have to do their mourning with them. (P1)

Furthermore, Participant 5 mentioned that for many years, teachers in her school (including her) had been threatened and ordered to pay money to the armed groups, which added another stress factor to their lives and professional practice.

> I think that only God knows how I have stayed alive during these years. Once they [the guerrilla] told me I had to go to the forest, find a certain tree, and leave five million pesos there. I didn't. I told them I did not have that money: I showed my paycheck for them to see that

> I didn't earn that much; then I told them that I had five children to raise, so I couldn't pay that. They left me alone – I don't know why. Other teachers have been told to do the same – some complied, some didn't. (P5)

Consequently, this emotional aspect influenced teachers' performance, because teachers' socio-emotional well-being is directly related to a positive classroom environment (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Finally, most of the participants expressed another factor that had a negative impact on their performance, and we identified it as a separate type of emotional burden – the burden of silence. Our interviewees repeatedly mentioned the inability to speak openly to their students, or the strong need to be extremely careful with the words they used. According to them, a teacher in a conflict zone never knew what kind of students they had in class: perhaps, some students already belonged to an armed group and were sent to school to verify if a teacher was expressing ideas against them; or maybe, somebody from their students' families was part of the guerrilla groups and could report that their children's teacher was spreading "wrong" ideas.

> One must be very careful when talking to students. You cannot show that you are in favour or against any of the [armed] groups, because you never know who is in your classroom. So, we always have to abstain from showing our point of view. (P3)
>
> Someone who sees a lot and talks a lot will have problems. And well, you simply want to work without getting in trouble. (P4)

As a result, some participants confessed that they often felt frustrated, because they could not explain to their students that there is a big world outside, where drugs and killing are not the only ways to make a living, as they felt scared of possible consequences. This also answers the questions raised in the section about helplessness: Is it teachers' fault that students join armed groups because they cannot convince them to make different choices? Most certainly it is not, because their hands are tied.

> It is very complicated. We would love to teach them that there is a different world out there, with different opportunities and ways to get ahead without the need to join armed groups. But you have to be extremely careful, because you don't want to make enemies. (P4)

We would like to conclude this subsection and, in general, the Findings section by stating that despite all the hardships – isolation, helplessness, and burdens – the most beautiful thing about our participants' experiences was that they never gave up but instead stayed in those immensely difficult contexts and continued serving communities and their children by doing the best they could, given the circumstances they found themselves in. Participant 1 said: "People tell me, 'Why are you still there? Can't you change your place of work?'. Yes, I work there, I know I have a purpose, and until I have accomplished my purpose, I won't leave." And in this single quote, we observed so much resilience, so much bravery, and so much vocation, that we understood that the battle against the conflict will never be lost as long as there are selfless people ready to sacrifice an opportunity for a less dangerous and more peaceful life for the sake of others.

5 Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate that the Colombian armed conflict is not merely an external factor to the participants' contexts but a pervasive force that fundamentally reconfigures the school's function, the teacher's role, and the student's developmental trajectory. The following points discuss the broader implications of our findings.

5.1 Schools as Isolated State Outposts

The findings suggest that the educational settings represented in this study, all affected by the Colombian armed conflict, function as isolated state outposts in territories where institutional presence is weak or almost non-existent. Although EiE emphasizes the responsibility of states to guarantee continuity, protection, and accessibility during crises (Triplehorn, 2001), the participants repeatedly described feelings of abandonment, lack of institutional support, and limited governmental presence beyond the school itself. The participants experienced the conflict not as isolated episodes of violence, but as an alternative social order in which, according to their accounts, armed groups regulated mobility, imposed rules, and shaped daily life. In this context, the five educators described schools as substitute structures for absent state institutions where teachers attempted to sustain educational processes with minimal support. Furthermore, the participants suggested that the geographical and social isolation of these communities appeared to restrict students' perceptions of future opportunities, contributing to the normalization of armed groups and illicit economies as the only possible life paths. Thus, the findings expand EiE discussions by illustrating how prolonged conflict transforms schools into fragile spaces of state representation and social containment.

5.2 Educational Continuity under Prolonged Conflict

The findings also reveal that educational continuity in the participants' conflict zones is deeply unstable and fragmented. While EiE frameworks identify continuity of education as a central goal during emergencies (Triplehorn, 2001), the participants described schooling processes as constantly interrupted by displacement, armed clashes, insecurity, and student recruitment into armed groups. As evidenced in the five narratives, rather than facing temporary disruptions followed by recovery, teachers and students experienced chronic instability that normalized interrupted attendance and unfinished learning processes. Teachers attempted to adapt through strategies such as remote learning via WhatsApp and curricular modifications, reflecting the adaptability promoted by EiE. However, as reported by the participants, these adaptations depended largely on teachers' improvisation and personal commitment rather than structured institutional support. Additionally, the participants highlighted that interruptions affected not only academic development but also students' emotional and social growth, reinforcing the idea that, within these specific contexts, schools in emergency settings fulfil broader protective and developmental functions beyond instruction alone.

5.3 Teachers as Improvised Humanitarian Actors

Another important finding is that based on the five interviews, the participants assumed responsibilities that extended far beyond traditional pedagogical roles, effectively becoming improvised humanitarian actors. In line with EiE perspectives that view schools as spaces of psychosocial support and protection (Triplehorn, 2001), the participants described acting simultaneously as teachers, counsellors, psychologists, administrators, and emotional caregivers despite lack of formal preparation for many of these responsibilities. The teachers frequently supported students affected by many difficulties while also attempting to maintain institutional functioning in their contexts marked by insecurity and staffing shortages. However, the findings reveal an important tension within EiE implementation: although psychosocial support is considered essential during emergencies, in the five cases examined the emotional burden of providing such support was transferred almost entirely onto teachers themselves without sufficient institutional assistance. Consequently, the participants became central figures in sustaining both educational continuity and emotional stability within the communities where they worked.

5.4 The Paradox of Schools as Safe Spaces

The findings also reveal the paradoxical nature of the schools involved in the study as both protective and threatening spaces. EiE conceptualizes schools as safe environments capable of providing stability and emotional protection during crises (Triplehorn, 2001), and the participants indeed described schools as spaces where students could seek refuge, maintain routines, and receive emotional support. Nevertheless, violence continually permeated these educational spaces through nearby clashes, armed actors entering schools, and constant fear surrounding daily activities. Particularly significant was the "burden of silence" described by the participants, who explained that they often avoided expressing opinions or discussing certain realities openly due to fear of retaliation from armed groups or their affiliates. This self-censorship limited the teachers' professional autonomy and transformed silence into a survival strategy. Therefore, the findings complicate the notion of schools as inherently safe spaces by demonstrating that, in prolonged conflict contexts where the participants worked, educational institutions may simultaneously function as places of protection, fear, surveillance, and restricted expression.

5.5 Resilience amid Structural Abandonment

Despite the isolation, helplessness, and emotional burdens identified throughout the findings, the participants consistently demonstrated resilience and strong professional commitment toward their students and communities. They continued working in dangerous and emotionally demanding conditions while attempting to preserve educational processes and provide emotional support for learners affected by violence. However, the findings suggest that this resilience should not be romanticized or interpreted as evidence of effective EiE implementation. Much of the continuity and protection described by the participants depended primarily on individual sacrifice, emotional labour, and improvisation rather than sustained institutional support. Therefore, based on the five interviews, the study

reveals an important contradiction within EiE frameworks: while education is positioned as a humanitarian and protective response during emergencies (Bessler, 2019), the responsibility for maintaining that response frequently falls on the teachers who themselves receive little protection or support. Consequently, the findings may highlight the urgent need for long-term, context-sensitive educational policies that address not only students' needs, but also the emotional, professional, and institutional realities faced by the teachers in conflict-affected regions included in the present study.

6 Conclusions

The present study aimed to explore how the Colombian armed conflict has affected secondary educational processes in the rural schools represented in the accounts of the five participants – four teachers and a principal – through the lens of Education in Emergencies theory. By employing a phenomenological approach, we were able to capture the intricate reality of the five educators working in the country's most volatile regions. The findings lead to several critical conclusions regarding their perceptions of rural education in the shadow of conflict.

The findings showed that the school environments reported by the participants often function in isolation in regions characterized by lack of the state presence and strong influence of the guerrilla. Although the Education in Emergencies framework emphasizes protection, accessibility, and continuity of education during crises, the participants described feeling abandoned by the state and unsupported by long-term institutional or humanitarian programs. The participants' schools often became the only visible representation of the state within their communities where armed actors exercised territorial control and established alternative forms of authority. Additionally, the geographical and social isolation of the five regions involved in this study appeared to limit students' perceptions of future opportunities, contributing to the normalization of violence and illicit economies. At the same time, educational continuity in these contexts proved highly unstable and interrupted due to displacement, armed clashes, insecurity, and recruitment into armed groups which affected not only students' academic processes but also social and emotional development.

Although the teachers interviewed attempted to adapt instruction through remote learning strategies, such as WhatsApp, these adaptations depended largely on individual improvisation rather than institutional or governmental support. Furthermore, the participants' accounts demonstrated that they frequently assumed responsibilities extending far beyond traditional pedagogical roles. Due to staffing shortages and the psychosocial needs of students affected by violence, the teachers became improvised counsellors, emotional caregivers, administrators, and humanitarian actors within their communities. However, while EiE literature emphasizes psychosocial support as a central educational response during emergencies, the findings revealed that the participants themselves often lacked emotional and institutional support, which forced them to carry both their own emotional burdens and those of their students while also trying to maintain educational processes under difficult and often dangerous conditions.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to the study participants. We thank them not only for dedicating their time and effort, but also for their courage, openness, and willingness to share their experiences on such a complex and sensitive topic.

ORCID

Alexandra Novozhenina https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0639-8243
Vanessa Sánchez https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8011-1056

References

Adeoye-Olatunde, O. A., & Olenik, N. L. (2021). Research and scholarly methods: Semi-structured interviews. *Journal of the American College of Clinical Pharmacy*, *4*(10), 1358–1367. https://doi.org/10.1002/jac5.1441

Arbona, A., García, V., López-Estrada, S., & Prior Jiménez, D. (2022). *The relationship between armed conflict and efficiency of educational quality in Colombia* [Preprint]. SSRN. https://ssrn.com/abstract=4309983

Aristizábal, L. A., & Ávila, A. I. (2025). Armed conflict in Colombia: A review from the impacts and contributions of education. *Journal of Education Culture and Society*, *16*(1), 213–229. https://doi.org/10.15503/jecs2025.2.213.229

Ariza, J., & Saldarriaga, J. P. (2023). Armed conflict and academic performance. A spatial approach for Colombia. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, *80*(5), 503–523. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-023-10098-7

Barrera, D. J. (2024). *Towards a culture to live in peace. Analyzing emotions in Colombian artists' narratives* [Master's thesis, OvGU Magdeburg]. ResearchGate. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.23279.55201

Bessler, M. (2019). Prólogo: la educación, un imperativo humanitario y de desarrollo. *Migraciones Forzadas*, *60*, 4–5. https://www.refworld.org/es/ref/polilegal/rsc/2019/es/129298

British Educational Research Association [BERA]. (2024). *Ethical guidelines for educational research* (5th ed.). www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethicalguidelines-for-educational-research-2024

Cabra-Torres, F., Lara-Salcedo, L.M. & Mateus-Arbeláez, J. (2025). Entre las desigualdades y la justicia restaurativa: experiencias de escuelas rurales colombianas. *Magis, Revista Internacional de Investigación en Educación*, *18*,1–25. https://doi.org/10.11144/Javeriana.m18.edjr

Charles, M. (2021). *Bajo Cauca and Vaupés: Colombia's child recruitment hotspots*. InSight Crime. https://insightcrime.org/investigations/bajo-cauca-and-vaupes-colombias-child-recruitment-hotspots

Cifuentes, M. (2015). Niñez y juventud, víctimas del conflicto armado: retos para el trabajo social. *Tendencias*, *20*(1), 161–177. https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/5097459.pdf

Derakhshan, A., & MacIntyre, P. (2025). A transcendental phenomenology on existential positive psychology (EPP) and L2 education: Setting a practical agenda for regulating students' well-being and ill-being. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, *15*(3), 533–556. https://doi.org/10.14746/ssllt.46216

Enseña por Colombia. (n.d.). *Enseñar para construir una Colombia en paz desde las aulas*. https://www.ensenaporcolombia.org/paz-desde-las-aulas

Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*, *5*(1), 1–4. https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11

Gómez Soler, S. C. (2017). Civil conflict and educational achievement: The case of the Colombian secondary school exit examination. *Colombia Internacional*, 92, 73–103. https://doi.org/10.7440/colombiaint92.2017.03

Galvis Céspedes, I. (2021). Incidencia del conflicto armado en la educación rural en Colombia. *Conocimiento Semilla*, (6), 60–78. https://doi.org/10.24142/cose.n6a5

García Duque, J. (2016). *Aulas en Paz: Construcción de paz a partir del conocimiento. Prácticas y perspectivas en los territorios*. APC Colombia. https://www.apccolombia.gov.co/sites/default/files/archivos_usuario/casos/aulas_en_paz.pdf

García-Noguera, L., Aguirre Castro, O., & Gómez Durán, R. (2025). Education for peace: An experience from the implementation of the peace chair in Bogotá – Colombia. *INTED2025 Proceedings* (pp. 7525–7529). https://doi.org/10.21125/inted.2025.1978

Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, *79*(1), 491–525. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325693

Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz (JEP). (2021). *En 2021 el conflicto armado se reactivó en 12 zonas del país, dio a conocer la UIA de la JEP*. https://www.jep.gov.co/Sala-de-Prensa/Paginas/En-2021-el-conflicto-armado-se-reactiv%C3%B3-en-12-zonas-del-pa%C3%ADs%2C-dio-a-conocer-la-UIA-de-la-JEP.aspx

Mora-García, J. P. (2019). Aproximación a las pedagogías alternativas: de la pedagogía de la diversidad a las pedagogías de la resiliencia en el marco del postacuerdo. *Revista Historia de la Educación Colombiana, 22*, 39–66. https://doi.org/10.22267/rhec.192222.51

Moreno Trujillo, J. E. (2017). Educación, conflicto y posconflicto en Colombia. *Diálogos de Saberes*, *46*, 125–142. https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=6260867

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995658

Navarro, K. (2013). Conflicto, violencia y no-violencia. *Revista Misión Jurídica*, *6*(6), 95–107. https://doi.org/10.25058/1794600X.61

Novelli, M. (2010). Education, conflict and social (in)justice: Insights from Colombia. *Educational Review*, *62*(3), 271–285. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2010.503598

OECD. (2024). *Workshop schools, tools for peace programme – Colombia*. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-youth-policy-toolkit_41fab624-en/workshop-schools-tools-for-peace-programme-colombia_591f85ad-en.html

Ortiz-Correa, J. S. (2014). Math and language at war: The effect of the Colombian armed conflict on math and language learning. *International Journal of Developing and Emerging Economics*, *2*(3), 1–30. https://eajournals.org/wp-content/uploads/Math-and-Language-at-War.pdf

Osorio González, J. J. (2016). La escuela en escenarios de conflicto: daños y desafíos. *Hallazgos*, *13*(26), 179–191. https://doi.org/10.15332/s1794-3841.2016.0026.07

República de Colombia. (2011). Ley 1448 de 2011. Por la cual se dictan medidas de atención, asistencia y reparación integral a las víctimas del conflicto armado interno y se dictan otras disposiciones. Bogotá, Colombia.

Rodríguez, C., & Sánchez, F. (2012). Armed conflict exposure, human capital investments, and child labor: Evidence from Colombia. *Defence and Peace Economics*, *23*(2), 161–184. https://doi.org/10.1080/10242694.2011.597239

Rojas Bahamón, M. J., de Parra, M. L. L., & Arbeláez Campillo, D. F. (2017). Rendimiento académico en estudiantes de secundaria según asignaturas, estrato socioeconómico y su contacto con el conflicto armado en Colombia. *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios Educativos*, *47*(3–4), 155–172. https://doi.org/10.48102/rlee.2017.47.3-4.140

Romero Medina, F. A. (2013). Conflicto armado, escuela, derechos humanos y DIH en Colombia. *Análisis Político*, *26*(77), 57–84. http://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0121-47052013000100003&lng=en&tlng=es

Tarricone, P., Mestan, K., & Teo, I. (2021). *Building resilient education systems: A rapid review of the education in emergencies literature.* Australian Council for Educational Research. https://doi.org/10.37517/978-1-74286-639-0

Triplehorn, C. (2001). *Education: Care and protection of education in emergencies: A field guide.* Save the Children. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/2388.pdf

Unidad para las Víctimas. (2023). *Registro Único de Víctimas*. Datos para la Paz. https://datospaz.unidadvictimas.gov.co/registro-unico-de-victimas

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA]. (2025). *Humanitarian trends and impact report in 2025*. https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/colombia/humanitarian-trends-and-impact-report-2025-data-compiled-between-january-and-june-2025-publication-date-august-5-2025

Winthrop, R., & Mendenhall, M. (2006). *Education in emergencies: A critical factor in achieving the Millennium Development Goals*. The Commonwealth Ministers Reference Book. https://alnap.hacdn.io/media/documents/education-in-emergencies-a-critical-factor-in-achieving-the-millennium-development_BoA.pdf