RESEARCH ARTICLE

History and education in post-conflict Colombia [version 1; peer review: awaiting peer review]

Sharon Rojas Yacamán, Sven Schuster

School of Human Sciences, Universidad del Rosario, Bogotá, DC, 111221, Colombia

Abstract

In 2005, the Colombian government implemented the Law of Justice and Peace, which is now regarded as the first step towards the so-called post-conflict era. As a result of this law, many of the armed groups that had historically defied the state's monopoly on violence have laid down their weapons. This process has been accompanied by a politics of history aimed at creating a “new national narrative.” In this article, we analyze if these politics have been capable of strengthening Colombia's transition to peace. Furthermore, we carry out a review of public policies in the educational sector and analyze history-related contents in some of the most widely used school textbooks.

Keywords

Colombia, armed conflict, peace process, politics of history, education, schoolbooks

Corresponding author: Sven Schuster (svenb.schuster@urosario.edu.co)

Author roles: Rojas Yacamán S: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing; Schuster S: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: The author(s) declared that no grants were involved in supporting this work.

Copyright: © 2022 Rojas Yacamán S and Schuster S. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

How to cite this article: Rojas Yacamán S and Schuster S. History and education in post-conflict Colombia [version 1; peer review: awaiting peer review] Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations 2022, 2:16 https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17499.1

First published: 23 Mar 2022, 2:16 https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17499.1
Introduction

After more than 50 years of war, in late 2016 the Colombian government signed a peace agreement with the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrilla group. With this agreement, both the government and the insurgents hoped to bring an end to one of the longest-running armed conflicts in Latin America and the world. However, a slight majority (50.23%) of the population did not agree with the conditions of this negotiated peace, choosing to vote “no” in a referendum that was organized to lend legitimacy to the integration of the ex-combatants. Although Juan Manuel Santos’ government (2010–2018) did its best to uphold the agreement, peace in Colombia has remained far from stable. Thus, with the arrival in 2018 of a government far more critical of the proposed transition, the conditions arose for political violence to ignite once again. In recent times the Colombian registers have recorded a growing number of political assassinations, mostly of social leaders in remote regions, as well as clashes between other leftist armed groups, paramilitary groups, the army, and civil society.

Here, unlike much of the literature on violence and conflict in Colombia, we will focus on a less visible but equally important phenomenon related to the peace process. While most studies have focused on economic and political factors to explain the persistence of violence after 2016, we will analyze the discourses on the history of the conflict as they are disseminated by state institutions and the education system. Our aim is to identify whether the politics of history—understood as the realm in which different protagonists, such as politicians, journalists, intellectuals and academics, try to establish a hegemonic discourse on the meaning of history—proposed by the Colombian state in the first two decades of the 21st century have helped to strengthen the country’s transition towards peace. In addition, we will reflect on the possible impact of these politics in the educational field by analyzing curricular guidelines and didactic material. We assume that many official interpretations of the past have had in fact a limited impact on the peace process, because the policies towards the teaching of the history of the armed conflict have been too vague and indeterminate as to achieve a new—and more complex—narrative of the phenomenon.

As a starting point we chose the year 2005, when the Law of Justice and Peace—today considered the first step towards the post-conflict era—was implemented. As we will show in the first section of the article, this law established official institutions charged with the construction of an inclusive historical memory, and the elaboration of a “new national narrative.” Due to the proximity of these institutions to the state, their interpretations of the past, especially regarding the origins and the meaning of the conflict, depend very much on the respective governments’ interests. Thus, the position of these entities has oscillated between reconciliatory narratives, decontextualization and, in recent times, outright negationism.

In the second section of the article, with the intention of providing a broader empirical foundation to our hypothesis, we will analyze how the different discourses related to the causes and development of the armed conflict have been treated in the country’s schools. Although the subject of history was merged with geography and civics in 1984, so-called “social studies” still include relevant historical components. What interests us in the analysis, which draws on curricular guidelines and didactic material from the last 25 years, is the specific way in which the history of the conflict as well as the peace process have been treated in this educational material. For this purpose, we reviewed 21 social studies school textbooks for 9th to 11th grades. As for the selection criteria, we included textbooks with nation-wide circulation and which had been approved by the Ministry of National Education (MEN). In each sample, we focused on the way the history of the Colombian armed conflict has been narrated, as well as the relevance given to actors, events, and analytical perspectives. In addition, we explored the structure of the texts and asked for the relationship between recent events and long-term historical processes.

Dealing with a violent past

On 9 April 1948, the liberal politician and presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was assassinated in the nation’s capital, Bogotá. His murder aggravated the already tense situation between the two traditional parties—the Liberals and the Conservatives—precipitating a civil war in the country that would last almost two decades. After Colombia’s traditional elite agreed to share power in 1958, through a system in which both government parties rotated the presidency regardless of election results, partisan violence considerably decreased. In the following two decades, leftist guerrillas continued to fight the new National Front government (1958–1974), albeit with limited success and intensity. Towards the end of the 1970s, however, a new wave of violence broke out. As a result of the booming

---


drug trade (first in marijuana and then in cocaine) and the financial opportunities that came with it, some of the already declining guerrillas gained unprecedented military strength in the early 1980s, while at the same time new violent actors emerged. These were primarily drug traffickers who had organized themselves in “cartels,” as well as right-wing paramilitaries originally founded by owners of large estates to defend themselves and their property against the guerrillas. The sharp increase in transnational drug trafficking in the 1980s and 1990s eventually led to increased profits from the illegal economy for these groups, as they became more and more powerful and effectively undermined the state’s monopoly on the use of force. As these violent actors brought the state to the brink of collapse, political analysts often described Colombia as a “failed state” during this time.

At the beginning of the new millennium the democratically elected but authoritarian president Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010) succeeded in countering the expansion of the guerrillas, while also managing to convince paramilitary groups to lay down their weapons. However, the sustainability of both measures has been questioned since. In fact, large numbers of these supposedly demobilized paramilitaries regrouped in fragmented splinter groups, while numerous military victories against the guerrillas were only achieved alongside massive human rights violations. Paradoxically, Uribe’s presidency also saw the establishment of the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation (CNRR) based on the Justice and Peace Law of July 2005. Although this law was first enacted to provide a legal framework for the informal demobilization of paramilitary groups in 2003, it also contained concrete provisions to assist in understanding the origins of the internal conflict, to widely publish the results of related research, and to create memory institutions. From 2007, this task was entrusted to the Historical Memory Group (GMH), which operated under the umbrella of the CNRR. While the initiative to construct a new, integrative historical memory fell under Uribe’s government, the endeavor didn’t fully take shape until his successor Juan Manuel Santos was in power (2010–2018).

Essentially, this policy was designed to strengthen the desired transition towards a peaceful society, in which former violent actors could participate by democratic means. As a result of the peace negotiations between the guerrilla and the government, which began in Havana in September 2012 and concluded in September 2016 with the signing of the peace agreement, the FARC agreed to lay down their weapons and become a political party, yet historical interpretations of the conflict were also at stake. Since the FARC did not agree with the contents of a final report presented in 2013 from an official commission of historians, they demanded an alternative historical reappraisal of the conflict. Thus, at the beginning of 2015, a second commission of historians, whose members sought, to some degree, the guerrilla’s approval, presented a new report with more than 800 pages. To date, both reports are highly controversial, and their findings are far from being universally accepted. From the guerrilla’s point of view, the 2013 report was overly focused on the last four decades of the conflict, while the origins of the FARC in the late 1940s as well as their foundation in 1964, during the Cold War, did not receive sufficient attention. This foundational period is especially important for the guerrilla’s leaders, who maintain that the hermetic political system of the National Front, which effectively excluded third parties from political participation, as well as the ideological struggle of the Cold War justified “legitimate self-defense” against an oppressive government. On the other hand, the far more sympathetic 2015 report highlighted these exact aspects, which is why more conservative sectors reject its findings.

Equally polarizing are the activities of the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH), created in 2011, with which the GMH merged after the end of the CNRR’s eight-year mandate. Through numerous publications, artistic performances, films, panel discussions, the creation of sites of memory throughout the national territory and the planned establishment of a National Memory Museum, the CNMH has recently initiated important debates on the meaning and appropriation of history. However, as an official institution, the CNMH is also subject to direct intervention from the government, and since the beginning of Iván Duque’s right-wing presidency in 2018, its work has been overshadowed by a series of scandals. While its former director Gonzalo Sánchez—a renowned sociologist and historian of Colombia’s armed conflict—managed to exclude party politics from the institution, the new director Darío Acevedo is generally considered to be a spokesman for the Duque administration. Only a few years before assuming his position at the CNMH, Acevedo had even denied the existence of armed conflict in Colombia, earning him the reputation of a negationist. Since the beginning of his tenure at the institute, he has been accused of censuring exhibitions, giving more weight to the crimes of the left-wing guerrillas than to those of the military, police and paramilitary groups, and finally, of distorting contemporary history by downplaying some of the worst episodes of state-sponsored violence. Besides the CNMH, some municipal initiatives also exist, such as the Memory, Peace and Reconciliation Center in Bogotá and the House of Memory Museum in Medellín, as well as a myriad of private projects.

---

8 James Henderson, Víctima de la globalización. La historia de cómo el narcotráfico destruyó la paz en Colombia (Bogotá: Siglo del Hombre, 2012), 185–213.
11 Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, ¡Basta ya! Colombia: Memorias de guerra y dignidad (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 2013).
12 Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas, Contribución al entendimiento del conflicto armado en Colombia (Bogotá: Desde abajo, 2015).
Although a small majority of Colombians voted against a peace agreement with the FARC in Juan Manuel Santos’ referendum on 2 October 2016, two months later a revised version of the agreement between the former guerrillas and the government was ratified by both chambers of the National Congress. Due to the controversial nature of the agreement, Santos abstained from calling for another referendum. In this context, conservative and right-wing politicians close to former president Álvaro Uribe questioned the legitimacy of the peace deal and began a campaign to revoke many of its central aspects, such as exemptions from punishment. Uribe also criticized its failure to address the illegal drug trade, the FARC’s main source of income. Nevertheless, partially due to international obligations, neither the peace agreement itself nor any of the core institutions created to secure its endurance have been revoked so far.

Among these institutions, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) and the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition stand out. While the JEP is a transitional justice mechanism through which ex-FARC members, army members, as well as third parties who have participated in the conflict are investigated and brought to trial, the Truth Commission seeks to clarify the root causes of the internal armed conflict, as well as to satisfy the right of the victims and society to know the truth. The work of both institutions is intended to lay the foundations for non-recurrence.

Although both institutions face increasingly hostile conditions under the Duque administration, they have been somewhat successful in the investigation of war crimes, as well as individual and collective responsibilities in the conflict. Many of the findings from these investigations point to the Colombian government and the political elite in general, and reveal multiple ties between the state, private commerce, the military and various illegal armed actors. According to Iván Duque, however, former guerrillas have been allowed too many concessions, while members of the army and the police lack protection against “unjust” accusations from the JEP and the Truth Commission. In a context marked by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic (which began during Iván Duque’s second year in office), as well as a dwindling economy, growing socioeconomic inequality and violently repressed mass protests, the peace process is currently facing major obstacles.

In this complex panorama, one of the most frightening phenomena is the systematic assassination of social leaders and demobilized guerrillas, especially in rural parts of Colombia. Although these murders are mainly perpetrated by emerging criminal groups with ties to the drug trade, the government has been reluctant to investigate them with any degree of determination. Since the control of territories formerly controlled by the FARC has not yet been assumed by the state, new violent actors have emerged to fill the void. Currently, cocaine production, the principal “fuel” of Colombia’s armed internal conflict, has reached an all-time high. Finally, the country’s second largest leftist guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), has greatly profited from the FARC’s demobilization, and has taken over large parts of its former rival’s territory. In this context, it is no wonder that a growing number of Colombians regard the peace process as doomed.

Aside from these concerning developments, the Duque administration has failed in its attempt to create a new historical interpretation of the conflict and its origins. To start with, despite its promise to reintroduce the subject of history to the classroom, no visible steps have been taken towards this goal. While some private schools offer history as an elective subject, most continue to teach it in combination with geography and civics, such as was set out in the decree of 1984. In the public realm, recent developments have also proved disappointing, at least from the perspective of the conflict’s victims and a wide array of civil society groups. Although President Duque did not suspend the peace agreement, nor abolish the institutions created to strengthen the transition process, he gave key positions—such as the directorates of the CNMH, the National Museum of Memory and the General Archive of the Nation—to critics of the peace process, and as we have seen in the case of the CNMH, he even appointed an outspoken negationist.

The question remains if these politics of history have also had an impact on pedagogical practices. Even if it is difficult to measure such an impact, due to the heterogeneous and decentralized nature of the Colombian education system, we believe that some of the commonly used curricular guidelines and didactic materials reflect the aforementioned struggles over history and memory. In this sense, the “new national narrative,” formulated in 2005 with the objective of disseminating a more inclusive and critical version of contemporary history, may represent yet another disappointment on the rocky road to peace.

The armed conflict in the school curriculum: recent policies and guidelines

In recent years, Colombian governments have introduced policies regarding the teaching of the conflict in schools. However, it has only been since the demobilization of the right-wing paramilitary groups in 2005 that significant progress has been made to this effect. As Carlos Mosquera and Nelsy Rodríguez point out, in comparison to countries such as Argentina, Peru, Chile and Uruguay, the Colombian government has not shown much interest in disseminating the historical causes of the war through educational measures or memory institutions.

15 Uribe rechaza el nuevo acuerdo de paz entre el Gobierno y las FARC y pide un nuevo plebiscito,” El País, November 22, 2016.
16 On the work of both institutions, see their respective websites: jep.gov.co; comisiondeaverdad.co.
17 “Dos años de Duque: estos han sido los choques entre el Gobierno y la justicia transicional,” El Espectador, August 9, 2020.
18 Meder and Sachseder, “Militarized peace.”
According to the Colombian Constitution of 1991, education is both a basic right for all Colombians and a public service with a social function. Hence, the state offers public schooling for all children and adolescents. By 2020, enrollment in public schools amounted to 81.1%, while 18.9% of the general school-attending population were enrolled in private education institutions.\textsuperscript{21} Formal education in Colombia is organized in three levels: pre-school, basic, and upper-secondary education.\textsuperscript{22} Compulsory education encompasses pre-school and basic education; however, in 2014 it was decided that upper-secondary education would also become compulsory by the end of 2030. Since the 1980s, the country’s school system has undergone a process of decentralization; while the MEN is responsible for administration, policy making and planning, regulation, and monitoring of education throughout the country, the General Law of Education (1994) states that schools are free to define the curricula in their Institutional Educational Project (PEI).\textsuperscript{23}

Under the General Law of Education, classes on justice and peace are a requirement in compulsory education.\textsuperscript{24} The law also states that secondary education should emphasize the dynamics of conflict and peace, in order to promote the ability to reflect on reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. Also, the MEN has addressed this topic in some of its curricular guidelines, which are mandatory for all public and private schools. While in the Curricular Guidelines for Social Sciences 2002, the MEN indicates that it is the schools’ duty to teach conflict resolution through dialogue, the text is somewhat vague and fails to indicate which exact methodologies or contents should be included to meet this end. Four years later, in the so-called Basic Competence Standards, the MEN outlined certain aspects of the armed conflict to be included in the school curriculum; however, despite references to the armed conflict, there are several issues with the standards themselves that make their implementation difficult.\textsuperscript{25}

The standards are a reference guide on what all students in basic and secondary education should learn in various areas of knowledge throughout the different stages of schooling. As the focus of the standards is not on topics but on competencies, they focus on abilities that students should develop to apply the knowledge. Since the standards are mandatory for all schools, they contain the most important overall guidelines for curricular planning in schools nationwide. History-related content is addressed in the Social Science Standards, which define competencies and detail a list of standards and achievements that students must accomplish at the end of each stage (basic and upper-secondary).

The contents related to the history of the internal armed conflict appear only in the final stage (upper-secondary) and represent ten of a total of 59 achievements (Figure 1). In the standards, these contents appear alongside various topics, such as: classical economic theories, the revolutions of the 20th century, the World Wars, the Cold War, the dictatorships in Latin America, diverse artistic manifestations of the 20th century, women’s changing role in society, globalization, and more.\textsuperscript{26} However, in practice, the large number of required achievements related to the contents make it difficult for teachers to fully explore them in any in-depth or detailed way. Furthermore, as there is no differentiated treatment of the internal armed conflict in the standards, there is no guarantee that the topic will be assigned any significant importance in the overall curriculum.

In addition to this, a review of the required achievements shows that some are too broad and basic to allow for a contextualized and critical analysis of the internal armed conflict in the classroom. For instance, one of the 10 achievements related to the history of the armed conflict is to identify the characteristics and consequences of the National Front, which does not necessarily imply that the relationship between the historical bipartisan pact and contemporary armed conflict should be addressed. Moreover, since the student is only expected to identify and not to analyze, a reflective and critical approach to the history of the conflict is not particularly encouraged.

The standards, in this sense, do not encourage a differentiated treatment of the armed conflict with a stepwise handling of the topic, nor a critical reflection on it. On the contrary, the phenomenon appears just briefly in upper-secondary school, merged with dozens of other contents. From the 10 achievements found in the 10\textsuperscript{th} and 11\textsuperscript{th} grades, only two request a critical position on the topic under study. Thus, as has already been stated, the achievements promote an approach to the history of the conflict that appears unconcerned with its structural understanding.

In line with the aforementioned laws and regulations, in 2011 the Victims and Land Restitution Law was enacted. With the purpose of guaranteeing the non-recurrence of violence, the government called for the creation of forms of pedagogy that would promote an understanding of the country’s social and political history, especially its internal armed conflict.\textsuperscript{27} As a result of negotiations between the government of Juan Manuel


\textsuperscript{22} Preschool consists of one compulsory grade. Basic education is divided into two stages: five grades in primary and four in high school. Upper-secondary education consists of two grades (10\textsuperscript{th} and 11\textsuperscript{th}), Congreso de Colombia, Ley General de Educación, Pub. L. No. 115 (1994), Art. 11.


\textsuperscript{24} Congreso de Colombia, Ley General de Educación.


\textsuperscript{26} Ministerio de Educación Nacional, Estándares básicos de competencias, 130–31.

1. I can explain the origin of the bipartisan regime in Colombia.
2. After analyzing the period known as *La Violencia*, I can establish relationships with current forms of violence.
3. I can identify the causes, characteristics, and consequences of the National Front.
4. I can explain the emergence of the guerrillas, paramilitary groups, and drug trafficking in Colombia.
5. I can describe the impact of political events in the mid-twentieth century (9 April 1948, National Front etc.) on the country’s social, political, and economic institutions.
6. I can identify and explain some of the consequences of the crisis of bipartisanship.
7. I can explain the changes and continuities in the guerrilla movements in Colombia from their emergence to the present.
8. I can explain the causes and consequences of forced displacement and I am aware of the rights that protect displaced persons.
9. I assume a critical position on the violent actions of the different armed groups in the country and in the world.
10. I assume a critical position regarding past peace processes in Colombia, considering the positions of the parties involved.

**Figure 1. List of the 10 (of 59) achievements related to the history of the armed conflict that were identified in the Ministry of National Education Competency Standards (authors’ translation).**

Santos and the FARC, in 2014 the law established the so-called Cathedra of Peace (*Cátedra de la Paz*) as mandatory for all Colombian schools, in order to reweave the social fabric, protect the rights enshrined in the Constitution and promote prosperity. According to the law, the achievements for this subject must be evaluated in the national state test for upper-secondary schools. The so-called *Saber 11* is the most important mandatory test for students and schools in Colombia, as this exam ranks both students and institutions. For teenagers, test scores affect college admissions and the opportunity to win scholarships. As for the schools, they are classified into three categories according to the results, whereas teachers and administrators obtain the possibility to receive (even financial) incentives depending on the performance of the schools. Thus, despite the decentralized nature of the Colombian education system, schools have a certain need to integrate the guidelines and standards of the MEN in their PEI, as well as the contents of the aforementioned laws.

Despite this advancement, it is important to point out that the Cathedra of Peace suffers from similar problems to the above-mentioned norms. In total 12 topics are addressed, of which at least two must be taught by the educational institution, and even though the topic of historical memory is included on the list, it once again appears amidst a variety of other issues, such as human rights, the use of natural resources and political participation. This means that there is no clear guideline for a differentiated and comprehensive treatment of the history of the conflict. As with the standards, the Cathedra can be flexibly adjusted to the academic curriculum, so that each educational institution is free to adapt it to its PEI.

As we have seen, although the legal conditions for the teaching of the history of the armed internal conflict in schools are provided, the guidelines are far too vague. Consequently, except in the case of some institutions or due to the initiative of certain teachers, students who finish upper-secondary school may recognize actors and events of the armed conflict, but may not be able to understand, explain, analyze, and form a critical view of the long-standing and complex conflict that still affects Colombia. This argument is further supported through a review of some of the most widely circulated school textbooks, which support the politics of history disseminated by the government. As Ariel Sánchez points out, although there is no specific regulation regarding the contents of the textbooks, these manuals have promoted a curricular standardization.

**The history of the armed conflict in school textbooks**

With the purpose of offering an empirical foundation for the problems exposed up to this point, we undertook a review of 21 school textbooks of national circulation published during the last 25 years. This exercise was carried out taking into account

---


30 Sánchez Meertens, “Guerra, educación y memoria.”

31 The sample consisted of 21 books from the following publishers: Norma (9), Santillana (4), Educar (3), SM (2), Pearson (1), Libros & Libros (1), and MEN (1).
that school textbooks are good sources to learn about the prevailing ideas, values, discourses and imaginaries in a society at the time of publication. In the particular case of Colombia, they allow us to glimpse the articulations between social representations and government provisions in the context of the transition to peace. A common feature in these books is that, as the years go by, the texts openly adjust to the MEN Competence Standards (which are evaluated in the aforementioned Saber 11 test). Considering this, this didactic material is preferred by Colombian schools as a guide for curricular planning, despite the decentralized nature of the curriculum.

For this reason, this exercise allows us to reflect on the success of the policies and guidelines issued to date in promoting a complex and critical understanding of the history of the armed conflict. In the first place, we analyzed the structure of the texts and the extent granted to the history of the armed conflict in comparison to the general content. Afterwards, we examined which actors are considered relevant, as well as the way in which they are described and judged. Finally, we explored which events are mentioned, if and how a relationship to larger historical processes is established, and what rhetorical means are used to this effect.

Our analysis shows that the history of the armed conflict has received greater attention in the textbooks during the first two decades of the 21st century. The sections dealing with this topic have become more extensive since 2005, which shows that contemporary politics of history that have accompanied the peace process have had a certain impact on the curriculum in Colombian schools. In particular, the standards have been central to the development of the textbooks. This might explain why the structure of the contents is similar in the reviewed material, although they were edited by seven different publishing companies. The alignment of the books with the standards is reflected in the fact that it is common for the presentation of the thematic units to indicate which MEN achievements are being met.

Overall, as indicated in the standards, the books refer to a common set of actors of the internal armed conflict, such as drug traffickers, paramilitaries, guerrillas and—the state, yet these actors are not approached in the same way. In the case of drug traffickers, the narrative varies little across the books studied, and usually focuses on the war economy and the relationship between drug traffickers and other illegal actors. The reviewed textbooks suggest that the drug trade is a central phenomenon for the understanding of the conflict in the last 40 years, and acts related to the infamous drug cartels are generally condemned. Regarding paramilitarism, the textbooks usually explain its origins, its relationship with other actors, and the demobilization of certain paramilitary groups. Although this is not always the case, the negative impact of paramilitarism on civil society is generally acknowledged. There is also a common reference to the Justice and Peace Law, which is regarded as the principal cause for the large-scale demobilization of paramilitary organizations. In some cases, the failure to persecute and convict the paramilitary militias, whose ex-members continue to act in fragmented splinter groups or in other illegal organizations, is briefly mentioned.

Notwithstanding, the representation of paramilitarism is tendentious in several books, and in some cases, a justification of their actions can be perceived. In contrast to some of the guerrillas’ worst deeds, the actions of the paramilitary groups are not described in detail. Statistics are sometimes presented, but there are no complex explanations included, so that victims and actions usually remain as plain numbers. When the textbooks refer to concrete acts, it is mostly in reference to the assassination of militants from the Patriotic Union (UP), a left-wing opposition party whose members were systematically murdered between the 1980s and 1990s, presumably by right-wing death squads. In the textbooks, these assassinations are attributed to paramilitaries, drug traffickers and certain members of the political elite. Hence, the books eschew a complex exploration of specific acts that are mainly adjudicated to paramilitaries. Only one book, Conecta 11, refers to specific acts, beside the assassination of the members of the UP, such as the massacres of Mapiripán (1997), El Salado (2000) and El Tarra (2000).

On the other hand, concrete examples of guerrilla violence appear in all units of these textbooks. For instance, in the case of M-19, a demobilized left-wing guerrilla group, they usually mention the robbery of arms from a military base (1978), the siege of the embassy of the Dominican Republic (1980) and the siege of the Palace of Justice (1985). In the case of the FARC, they refer to acts such as the kidnapping of influential politicians, such as former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt. The treatment of the history of guerrilla groups is perhaps the most varied. Their historical links with the peasant self-defense groups of the 1940s and the political violence of the 1950s and 1960s are usually mentioned, and in some textbooks the explanation is comprehensive, while in others there are clear analytical shortcomings, as reference to decontextualized facts is common. Since most of the books organize Colombia’s history by governments and not according to specific social processes or problems, guerrillas and other actors appear mainly in relation to the various government administrations. Nonetheless, books such as Proyecto Saberes Sociales 10 make considerable effort to establish links between the current conflict and long-term structural problems.

As for the state, the textbooks generally refer to it as an actor, but do not consistently hold it accountable for its role in the conflict. The governments of the last four decades are generally portrayed as key-players in the search for peace. When the peace negotiations throughout history are referred to,

---


34 Iván Fernando Parra and Mauricio Riveros Alfonso, Proyecto Saberes Sociales 10 (Bogotá: Santillana, 2016).
governments are presented as promoters of peace, as if these negotiations were an act of benevolence. For example, when referring to earlier peace dialogues between 1998 and 2002, the books often state that the failure of these negotiations was due to a lack of will on the part of the guerrillas. The only exception in this regard is *Enlace Sociales 9*, which contains more in-depth explanations regarding these episodes. The authors of this particular book propose that the government underestimated “correlational forces,” in that the dialogues began when the FARC was at the height of its power.

Furthermore, our review revealed the presence of a more critical perspective of the state in relation to the political violence of the 1940s and 50s or the National Front, and the historical political exclusion and persecution of the opposition. As the books approach the history of the 21st century, the state’s responsibility in the conflict is seldom addressed. In the case of the army, for instance, only a couple of textbooks refer to the extrajudicial executions during the Uribe administration (the so-called “false positives” scandal), and do not elaborate on the matter in any in-depth way. This situation is striking, considering that for most political analysts there is little doubt about the relation between the Democratic Security Policy of the Uribe administration and the executions of thousands of civilians, who were registered as members of the guerrillas killed in combat. The book *Conecta Ciencias Sociales* draws attention to this matter, since it appears to justify the policy in question. While addressing this topic, the textbook proposes the following questions to the reader: “What situation justified the Democratic Security Policy? Why?”.

Overall, a common problem with the reviewed textbooks is that the armed conflict is not usually treated as a central issue. After all, these are books used in the subject of social studies, which is why a variety of topics and problems that are not necessarily related to the history of Colombia are also covered. Because the schoolbooks are arranged according to periods of government, they tend to organize the units around international and national history in the 20th century. There are seldom more than two units dedicated to Colombia and these are usually located towards the end of the textbooks; thus, the conflict is included as a subsection of parts which mostly address political periods (as assigned by the standards), or it is addressed as a small section of a unit. It is therefore no coincidence that only four out of 21 books, all of which were published as of 2010, dedicate an entire unit to the armed conflict. The present situation is also problematic because the history of the conflict generally appears decontextualized in the textbooks. In consequence, certain facts and actors are addressed, but there are no complex explanations that establish relationships with long-term historical processes. Although there has been an improvement over the years, textbooks usually present historical facts but do not promote historical thinking. Teachings in relation to the armed conflict are largely absent and the information in many books is excessive and presented out of context. Moreover, only a few of the reviewed textbooks provide tentative solutions to the armed conflict in Colombia. All of this makes it difficult to consolidate the “new national narrative” proposed in 2005.

Another situation that is worth highlighting is that the content on the history of the armed conflict is found mainly in books for 9th grade. This may be related to the fact that the books for 10th and 11th grades usually focus on Economics and Politics, which is a specific requirement for the upper-secondary level according to the General Law of Education. This could be a problem because, as mentioned before, the history of the armed conflict does not appear among the achievements proposed by the MEN for basic education in the standards. Thus, teachers would have to find the necessary space to address the topic, in addition to fulfilling the 50 achievements that appear in the standards which are related to other content. Therefore, if the books are used according to their sequence, there may be not enough time for the teaching of the history of the armed conflict in 9th grade, or just in a superficial manner, as frequently is the case in 10th and 11th grades. Since upper-secondary education is currently not compulsory in Colombia, many students are finishing school without learning about the history of the armed conflict at all. Against this backdrop, an in-depth treatment of the topic in 9th grade books seems urgent.

By and large, future schoolbooks would be greatly improved by establishing a dialogue between history, and disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, thereby allowing for a structural understanding of the conflict and its roots. History should not be taught according to presidential periods, as the learning outcomes are insignificant, and hinder understanding or critical thinking in the face of structural social problems in the country. Fortunately, some textbooks have taken this route by developing more complex units that focus on the armed conflict. In these few cases, the structure of the text is not exclusively designed according to governments or actors (as the majority), promoting more in-depth explanations. Although most schoolbooks explore the historical background of the different actors involved in the armed conflict as well as the relationship between them, they should also offer a critical perspective on actors such as the state and paramilitary groups, as well as past peace negotiations.

39 Although the topic is addressed in books for 10th and 11th grades, it is further developed in 9th grade material.
Conclusions
As our review of the most widely used social sciences schoolbooks in Colombia has shown, most of them tend to disregard structural explanations of the internal armed conflict. This is perhaps due to the strong attachment to the provisions of the MEN, which require addressing the conflict alongside a great array of other topics and issues. The structure of these books is clearly guided by the Competency Standards. For this reason, they all share the pattern of approaching the history of the armed conflict with an emphasis on bipartisanship, the period of La Violencia and the National Front. As we have seen, they normally refer to the emergence and development of the guerrillas, paramilitary groups and drug traffickers, along with the peace negotiations that have taken place since the 1980s. However, as they are tied to the standards, whose content is evaluated in the Saber 11 test, they do not promote a complex understanding of the conflict. Such an understanding can only result from a critical examination of the state’s role in the conflict together with an in-depth analysis of long-term processes. However, this is a complicated matter—even for the textbook authors—since such a renovated approach to the history of the armed conflict implies a revision of the general history of Colombia.41

Nevertheless, the wide circulation of these books should not obscure the fact that there have been other efforts—although less visible—to achieve a critical and complex pedagogy of the armed conflict. For instance, before undergoing the above-mentioned change of direction and focus, in 2016 the CNMH created a toolkit that sought to move away from official interpretations of history, fostering critical historical thinking in the classroom. Likewise, Bogotá’s Memory, Peace and Reconciliation Center created innovative pedagogical material, which reflects on the changing meaning of history and memory in different contexts.42 There are also significant efforts by universities, such as the Universidad de los Andes’ proposal to teach 10th graders about La Violencia, or the cooperation between the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional and the mothers and sisters of the victims of extrajudicial executions by the army, who were invited to give artistic expression to their experiences.43 However, despite these important initiatives, the textbooks analyzed in this article still reign supreme in Colombian schools, since they are better aligned to the MEN guidelines as well as the requirements of the Saber 11 test.

In conclusion, the Colombian state faces a great challenge in resolving the internal armed conflict that still affects the population today. A certain level of autonomy for the state institutions dedicated to the construction of historical memory and the dissemination of the history of the conflict is essential if the state wishes to make progress in this regard. Additionally, renewed and transparent public policies on how to approach the history of the conflict in schools are necessary if this matter is to be addressed in an in-depth and critical way, and not just as a curricular requirement. The development of historical thinking in students cannot be strengthened if textbooks treat history as an accumulation of dates and events; hence, there is a strong need for a true pedagogy of conflict.

Data availability
No data are associated with this article.


43 Enrique Chaux et al., “No one can take away my living memory: Teaching about violent past in Colombia,” in Dealing with the Past. Perspectives from Latin America, South Africa and Germany, eds. Tatjana Louis and Stefan Peters (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2021), 145–67.