

*There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context.*  
Mikhail Bakhtin

# PEACEBUILDING AND THE CREATIVE POTENTIAL OF CHILDREN IN COLOMBIA (transl.)

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**María Camila Ospina Alvarado, CINDE Foundation- Universidad de Manizales  
& David Arturo Ospina Ramírez, Universidad Católica de Manizales, Colombia**

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**Interview by Ana Fonseca**

*This is a translated transcription of our audio interview originally conducted in Spanish, “Construcción de paz y el potencial creativo de la niñez en Colombia,” with María Camila Ospina Alvarado and David Arturo Ospina Ramírez.*

**Ana Fonseca:**

Hello and welcome to Radio Heteroglossia. I’m Ana Fonseca and our guests today are professors María Camila Ospina Alvarado and David Arturo Ospina Ramírez. [María Camila Ospina Alvarado](#) is a psychologist and a Ph.D. candidate in Social Sciences at the [Free University of Brussels](#) and the [Taos Institute](#) in the United States, and in Social Sciences, Childhood and Youth at the [Universidad de Manizales](#) and the [Centro Internacional de Educación y Desarrollo Humano - CINDE](#) - (International Center for Education and Human Development) in Colombia. She is currently a professor, researcher and research director at the [Centro de Estudios Avanzados en Niñez y Juventud](#) (Center for Advanced Studies in Childhood and Youth) of the alliance between the CINDE Foundation and the Universidad de Manizales. She is also the national research coordinator at CINDE and co-coordinator of the research group, “*Juventudes e Infancias: prácticas políticas y culturales, memorias y desigualdades en el*

*escenario contemporáneo*" ("Youth and Childhood: Contemporary Political and Cultural Practices, Memories and Inequalities"), of the *Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales - CLACSO*- (Latin American Council of Social Sciences).

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David Arturo Ospina Ramírez is an industrial designer and Magister in Education and Human Development, and in Project Management. He is currently a professor of specializations in education at the *Universidad Católica de Manizales*. He is also a researcher and designer of teaching materials at the *Centro de Estudios Avanzados en Niñez y Juventud* of the CINDE Foundation and the Universidad de Manizales in Colombia, and project leader at the *Fundación Elefantes de Colores*.

Today, we will be talking about the article written by these two academics entitled, *"Futuros posibles, el potencial creativo de niñas y niños para la construcción de paz,"* ("Possible futures, the creative potential of children for peacebuilding"), published in 2017 in the *Revista Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Niñez y Juventud*, which examines the role of girls and boys directly affected by the Colombian armed conflict as agents of change and peacebuilding, and analyzes how the use of their different human potentials, with an emphasis on their creative potential, interact and lead to the denaturalization of violence and the construction of another social reality of peace possible in Colombia.

Professors María Camila Ospina and David Arturo Ospina, welcome and thank you for joining us today.

**María Camila Ospina:** Thank you for the invitation.

**David Arturo Ospina:** Thank you very much for inviting us to participate in this interview.

**Ana Fonseca:** Historically, children have been considered as "people in training" in many parts of the world, and therefore as passive subjects who are not taken into account, or seriously, in the creation of societies. Your article challenges such conventional ideas about childhood by highlighting the power of transformation and social action by children affected by the armed conflict in Colombia. In this way, you point out that, "In the context of the Colombian armed conflict, children have been the most affected, but they have also been agents of change and transformation through the deployment of their human potential for peacebuilding." I

wonder if you can talk more about this and the importance of recognizing the role of children as active agents of peacebuilding in Colombia.

**María Camila Ospina:** Our research originates from a previous study where we examined the experiences of violence of girls and boys from contexts of armed conflict which we found included to a great extent the violation of their rights. In that first study we decided not to do field work as we thought it could somehow contribute to the revictimization of these children. This research was part of *Escuelas como Territorios de Paz* (Schools as Territories of Peace) from which a book has been published. As the research progressed, we thought that these children could not be defined solely by their experiences of violence, and they showed us that it was very important to see the other side of things. In that sense, they showed us that they also have great power and resources which have allowed them, alongside their families in many cases, to move forward. But I do not want to focus solely on a kind of individual agency implying somehow that children have the responsibility to take their families forward. Instead, throughout our research we also emphasize the collective resources that are present in the social relations that these children participate in. So, we had a few options in this research: to narrate the experiences of these children from a place of deficit and lack, and reproduce the kind of research that the academia has been producing a lot in our country. Or, take this research as an opportunity to listen to those other voices that have been silenced, which precisely by contradicting the dominant narrative based on violence as the only element present in the lives of these children and their relationships, would allow us to begin to identify other stories, those other voices that rightly give an account of the possibilities of peacebuilding, of the potentials that children and their families have which they have already been contributing to peace-building processes. I would say that this is the main point of our research and it springs from an interest on how language alongside dialogic and relational practices create social realities.

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**Ana Fonseca:** Speaking of those other human potentials, your article emphasizes the creative and innovative potential of children to resolve conflicts peacefully. In the same way, your article analyses how affectivity and the social construction of reality, through language and narrative, dynamically interact with these children's creative potential. How do narrative, affectivity and creativity interact to create peaceful scenarios

since childhood in Colombia? And how do such actions lead to the denaturalization of violence?

**David Arturo Ospina:** As María Camila said a moment ago, this research allowed us to use other lenses. We continually used the metaphor of using other “appreciative lenses” in our research. What do we mean by it? It consists of not only inquiring about the harsh experiences that these children and their families had gone through, but also recognizing that they had also been transformative agents in their communities, and that they were continuously contributing to the process of peacebuilding in the country from their own capabilities. Then, we took into account the potentials for human development proposed by the national program, *Niños, Niñas y Jóvenes Constructores de Paz* (Youth and Children as Peacebuilders), which has been carrying out peace-building processes in the country for more than seventeen years. Two of the human potentials proposed by this program are the affective and the creative potentials. All these potentials coexist and develop simultaneously. There is the creative potential for conflict transformation, the political potential, the communicative potential, the affective potential, and the moral-ethical potential. So, within our research, and especially in this article, we gave particular attention to how the creative potential and the affective potential could generate transformations from these children’s own capabilities. What do our findings tell us? It turns out that children use everyday actions to transform their community and transform conflicts into scenarios and opportunities for joint, constructive action with their families, peers and teachers. But then, it is important that researchers use those “lenses of appreciation” and see in the resources these children have and in their small and everyday actions the great impact they are having in the community. There, we were able to see how these girls and boys, for example, motivate and encourage reconciliation among their parents; how they promote the dynamics of effective communication; how they encourage cooperative work, play and creativity in their neighbourhoods and in their communities; how they develop their creativity in daily actions through play, painting, oral expressions, through different expressions that are within their capabilities and allow them to interact with the community. In this context, the affective potential becomes a great mediator in the sense that we consider that any experience has an effect on the subject, but also the subject impacts those experiences and those social dynamics. So, children are affected and transformed by what is happening around them, but they are also transforming the events

happening in their societies. Then, based on the affective potential we recognize that the relations we engage in have an effect on us; as a result, we become much more aware of how we engage in those relations with others. Here, we use different resources such as generative dialogism, as well as appreciative positioning where dialogue becomes a much more conscious act about the ways in which we state our words and use our verbal resources to help empower children in order to avoid revictimization. An important thing to consider is that our research project took into account the historical moment the country was going through with the signing of the peace agreements, as well as the idea of action without harm; the latter is precisely thought to avoid revictimization and instead find the potentials these children have, without ignoring their struggles, but focusing mostly on their resilience and capabilities to move forward after their painful experiences.

**María Camila Ospina:** I would like to add to what David just explained, a discussion about the connection between narrative, affectivity and creativity. For us, and as it is shown in the article, creativity involves an alternative for peacebuilding from the own voices of children. Often times we want children to speak the language of adults. Creativity makes us think about the language of children themselves, and we see it as an opportunity for building peace that allows us to connect future possibilities with present actions without ignoring the memories and the endured past; it is rather an alternative that encourages the creative resignification of that lived past. In this sense, we understand creativity as the possibility of building future possibilities in the present. And in the same way, we consider that to generate such transformations for peacebuilding, it is essential to participate in social relations that encourage change, as Kenneth Gergen has suggested in his theory of social constructionism. In our experience with these boys and girls, we have seen that it is not any relationship that transforms but rather those relations that have an affective element. From that emotion, from that affective expression a larger transformation is generated and propelled. Our research also follows the research findings of the program, *Niños, Niñas y Jóvenes Constructores de Paz* (Youth and Children as Peacebuilders), as well as the program *Convidarte para la Paz* (Inviting you for Peace), in regard to the role of the communicative potential in peacebuilding processes; fundamentally by understanding narrative, which was quite central to our research, as a generator of reality. Hence why we have come to talk about the idea of generative peace that is

built from that process of social construction that comes from naming ourselves, being named and naming children from these other voices.

**David Arturo Ospina:** I would also like to add something here in regard to the fact that our article also borrowed insights from other disciplines. This in part explains the emphasis on creativity found in the article; creativity consists of using given resources and transforming those resources into something different from what existed. For example, children who were affected by the armed conflict were exposed to certain circumstances given by the scenario of violence they lived through, but they also transformed such circumstances through the use of their potentials into different scenarios that took them away from a violent path which allowed them to build peace by means of all the resources that María Camila has just mentioned.

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**Ana Fonseca:** It called my attention that your article contributes to certain contemporary trends towards a broader definition of creativity, which is not limited to an artistic expression but extends beyond this. As you emphasize during this talk and in your article, creativity - as the word itself implies - is about creating, transforming environments and situations; and in a context of transformation like the one that Colombia is going through, rethinking the idea of creativity as a human skill that we all have through many forms of expression not solely art per se, but also, as you highlight in your article, through our words, through language so as to create other forms of relating and communicating that are more peaceful. It seems to me that this is very important for all, including boys and girls, to feel that they can contribute to the creation of a more peaceful society. And in a way this leads us to my last question. At the end of your article you conclude that, "Creativity materializes from everyday actions, the products of creativity generate transformations in social dynamics." In what way the creative resolution of everyday conflicts impacts society at large and extends beyond everyday life and immediate family dynamics? In other words, how is society built through everyday actions?

**David Arturo Ospina:** Here, I would like to comment on one of the cases we had in the project. One of the tools we worked on while on the field was the "mailbox of affections." What was this "mailbox of affections" about? It was more or less like a mural that we created with the children, and in this mural we placed short letters with messages of affection and recognition of the potential of others. There were messages about



caring for others, how we valued the resources that each other brought, how we valued their joy, their creativity, their play, their way of expressing themselves, the relationship we had with them. It was a resource that the children liked very much, and this was a resource that two girls of the project particularly employed in their community. They used it in their school and also in their neighborhood. We participated by accompanying them in this process, but this is a clear example of how an activity within the research project began to have an impact on the community, and how they became leaders in their community and began to generate a transformation in the relationships they had with their immediate social environment and also with the other children. In the same way, our research found in many everyday expressions of these children, actions that for us may seem small but for them have a great impact. For example, children told us that when they argued with their parents they would write letters apologizing or expressing what they disliked, or help their mother with the housekeeping, or make a special dinner for their mother. We found how small attitudes and small practices had a great impact and began to generate a transformation in the family and then in the community closest to the children.

**María Camila Ospina:** I would like to add that this commitment to starting from the relational and then create a ripple effect more at the structural or social level, as well as at the public policy level, is also part of the institutional trajectory that the *Centro de Estudios Avanzados en Niñez y Juventud* (Centre for Advanced Studies in Childhood and Youth) of the CINDE Foundation and the *Universidad de Manizales* have developed since 1998 through the program *Niños, Niñas y Jóvenes Constructores de Paz* (Youth and Children as Peacebuilders), and since 2009 through the program *Convidarte para la Paz* (Inviting you for Peace). These two programs, and in general the different projects of this research center, initially focus on transformations in relational contexts to generate impacts at the social, cultural and larger public policy levels. In the case of this research, our referents were the systemic perspective, social constructionism, political socialization, and also alternative perspectives of human development. From these points of reference, we acknowledge that if we create transformations at a structural level, change will come much more linear and much faster towards the subject, but we also see that from the same subjects and especially from their relationships and their dialogic practices, it is possible to start generating transformations that may be micro, but if we think in terms of a butterfly effect, such small actions can have larger effects.

Examples like the ones mentioned by David demonstrate the latter, but we also saw such effects in the very stories that these children told us, in the very simple and everyday actions they took when faced with a fight; how they managed to reconcile, talk to each other very soon and generate actions like the ones mentioned in the article such as picking up one another, talking about studying, doing homework. These are things that we may think are very small, trivial and quotidian, but that are actually generating major impacts in the educational environment in this case. But if we consider the case of families, in many instances the parents participating in our study shared with us how in moments of struggle during which they felt hopeless, their own sons and daughters said to them: "Don't worry mom, we will get through this; don't worry, we will figure out what to do tomorrow." So, these children from their own agency propose other alternatives to their families and this leads to other effects first at the family level, then in communal and school settings. We consider that from these actions it is possible to have an impact at the macro level even when it is a slow process. We think that from that denaturalization of violence encouraged by these actions and from that commitment to build peace from human relations, it is possible to start important transformations. That is why we believe that the peace agreements in Colombia, as well as the current peace talks with the ELN, are fundamental at the macro level; at the level of public policy to consolidate the peace process. But we also consider that, in addition to the latter, it is fundamental to create transformations at the level of human relations that can also impact the culture, and we think that the transformative potential of language is also key in this process.

**Ana Fonseca:**

Yes, there are definitely several scenarios from which people can build peace in Colombia. In addition, it is a situation too complex that cannot be seen and solved from a single angle or perspective. Quite honestly it strikes me as peculiar that all these initiatives, all these projects that you mentioned during this conversation, have existed for so long and many people are not aware of them. So, I really appreciate your willingness to participate in this interview because by doing so you help create awareness about these initiatives so that other alternatives can be considered for the creation of a more peaceful society in Colombia. So, professors María Camila Ospina and David Arturo Ospina, once again thank you for being with us today and for sharing your knowledge and points of view on this topic.



**María Camila Ospina:** Thank you very much for the invitation, Ana. We are very glad to share these research findings because we consider that the role we have as academics is to go beyond the academia, have an impact, disseminate results; and in that sense we think that this interview enhances that. Thank you very much for the invitation.

**David Arturo Ospina:** Thank you very much for the invitation and for including us in this process, as well as for telling listeners about what is occurring in Colombia and how the kind of research done on this topic has changed. I would also like to say that, from this research, many other research projects in the field and in many Colombian institutions have changed their focus to a kind of research that concentrates more on human potentials. This research has also contributed to public policy from an understanding of children's capacity for peacebuilding and action without harm to prevent revictimization.

**Ana Fonseca:** Certainly. Thank you both.

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