

**Seminar XV
Colombia**



**July 22 -
29, 2013**

Global Connections XV Education for Peace

In July of 2013, Global Connections XV met in Colombia, a land of diversity, contrasts, and conflict in politics, economic development, and education. In seven days, school leaders from thirteen countries visited a wide variety of schools, including urban schools for children of relative economic privilege as well as those from low income backgrounds; rural schools that face the challenge of educating young people to become participants in the future economy of their region; an indigenous school working to preserve the identity and customs of its people; a public school committed to parental and community involvement outside the classroom; and a dance program that promotes creativity and an awareness of the physical body as well as the mind. In our conversations, we were challenged by government officials, business leaders, and educators to explore the topic of peace education: what is peace, and what are the fundamental elements of peace education? How can we encourage conversations and active learning about peace education? And how can peace education in schools help to inspire parents, local officials, and national leaders to act on behalf of the establishment and maintenance of peace?

Delegates from diverse backgrounds explored ways to promote a culture of peace and conflict resolution in our schools to help every child grow into a respectful and active citizen of the world. School leaders can develop in students, teachers, parents, and communities the habits of mind that promote peace as a value among those that we already share as educators, including trust, respect, and cooperation. This task represents a transformation of cultural values in many communities, one that takes time, collaboration, and intentionality.

What did we learn from the culturally rich schools we visited in Colombia? We experienced the sense of profound hope that this country of forty-six million people is embarking on an educational program that lives and breathes in a climate of hope and promise. The educators we met, from classroom teachers to current and former government education officials, expressed optimism and enthusiasm about the potential of Colombian children to become educated citizens in a twenty-first century world. We considered how ideas of peace develop in a supportive and organic way. This means that we as educators must strive to nurture change through a process that begins with the participants, includes significant contributions from various stakeholders, and is flexible enough to allow for change from within. Successful change begins with mutual respect

and empathy in which we come to understand the perspectives of friends, colleagues, and those with whom we may think we have little in common. We discussed the idea that respect and empathy are necessary to dispelling stereotypes, specifically those relating to empathy and socioeconomic class, and to seeing others as human beings with valuable perspectives from which we can learn much. In our visits and conversations we grappled with the challenge of listening actively, a process through which we can come to understand the views of others.

How does this understanding contribute to the implementation of the goals of peace education? While we hope that peace is highly valued everywhere, we realize that the word may not mean precisely the same thing in different cultures. We might agree that peace can be achieved through individual mindfulness, classroom practices that contribute to emotional and physical safety, a shared commitment to safety in the home, neighborhood, and nation, and, of course, the absence of armed conflict. While we can see peace education as a product of the mind as a conceptual agent, the heart as an emotional catalyst for change, and the hand as the creator of that change, we may not agree either on the precise definition of peace or the path to its achievement. In short, at this early stage in our conversations, we continue to think and act from our personal and institutional perspectives, even as we continue to work toward common ground. We understand the need for each school to reflect on its mission and its own vision of peace education. One day, we will be able to say that it is axiomatic that peace is achieved when we can agree to disagree.

From what we learned in our week in Colombia, we understand the many challenges inherent in teaching peace. During our visit, we observed major disparities in socioeconomic status that can stand in the way of resolving conflicts and achieving peace. Many of the schools we observed are working to teach values, including peace, in the face of severe economic challenges, and we admire that work. We agree that physical and emotional safety is a primary goal. When we are secure in our homes, our classrooms, and our neighborhoods, it is more likely that we will be at peace with differences that exist among us and that we will be better equipped to dispel the stereotypes and prejudices that keep us in conflict. This raises the connection between peace education and an appreciation of ethnic and cultural diversity in an inclusive society.

In a country working to transcend decades of violence to achieve peace by treaty as well as through collaboration and restorative processes, schools play an important role in educating a generation that will understand and come to live in peace. From our Colombian colleagues, we learned about the importance of working with teachers as innovators and practitioners in education for peace. As teachers acquire and refine new skills, they can educate children, parents, and community members in conflict resolution in a process of shifting the cultural norms from ones that emphasize competition to those that place a high value on collaboration. This paradigm shift must have its roots in local priorities and cultural understanding and must begin with children at a very early age. We are speaking about a process of positive change through intentional education. Like the teaching of mathematics or history, the teaching of peace as a value for individuals and societies must be intentional.

The cooperation among neighborhood public schools, independent schools, and universities illustrates how it is possible to transcend stereotypes about socioeconomic class to set high standards and help children to achieve success. We respect the concession school model in Bogota and are hopeful about the various educational models that we saw in Colombia to raise the intellectual and emotional bar for dedicated teachers and happy students.

In our week in Colombia, we experienced a sharpening of our minds as well as a growing clarity of our own views as we listened to the perspectives of colleagues and seminar speakers with diverse views. The intentional work we have seen in values and character education, conflict resolution, self-awareness, and mindfulness education here in Colombia inspire us to think creatively about principles, curricula, and broader action plans that may be helpful as blueprints for peace education programs throughout the world. This approach embodies the UNESCO philosophy that we must reflect on the past, act in the present, and envision the future. There may be no single path to peace, but if peace is a value that has widespread acceptance, it can be achieved in a variety of ways, often beginning in schools.