

INVISIBLE STUDENTS



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After taking part in a teaching project working with education centers that take students forced to move due to political violence in Colombia, teacher Ángela Victoria Vera Márquez turned her focus to the invisibility that tends to affect this subject. She presented two studies that show different nuances of the same story.

When Ángela Vera was a student in her home town of Ibagué, she discovered polyphony. This was not polyphony in the strict musical sense, but a way to rescue the accounts and multiple voices of all agents in their contexts and make of them a symphony that brings each one recognition, making them participants in their own melody.

As a student, she had the chance to work on the *Schools that educate and cure* project run jointly by the Universidad del Rosario and the Universidad de Ibagué, financed by the Inter-American Development Bank and the Japan Program. The aim of this program was to train different representatives of the educational community who on a daily basis receive children who have suffered forced displacement through political violence in Colombia, thus helping them in their adaptation process, and not just the children either; their parents and classmates are also aided.

The experience showed Vera that this type of student is constantly invisible, sometimes because the teaching staff are unaware they have pupils in these circumstances, at others because the families of the students do not want people to know about their forced displacement, or because the actual education centres do not possess the tools to meet the needs of this group. It is worth pointing out that thanks to this discovery, the book *Los estudiantes invisibles (Invisible Students)* came out, written jointly with researchers Francisco and Rodrigo Parra.

With this as a cornerstone, Vera asked for permission to delve deeper into the stories uncovered by this study and, based on this, created two research articles: one based on the

THE SCHOOL MUST PROVE TO BE A SAFE CONSULTATION SPACE NOT JUST ACADEMICALLY BUT ALSO FOR REINFORCING PERSONAL SKILLS THAT ALLOW THE RIGHT DEVELOPMENT FOR PUPILS.

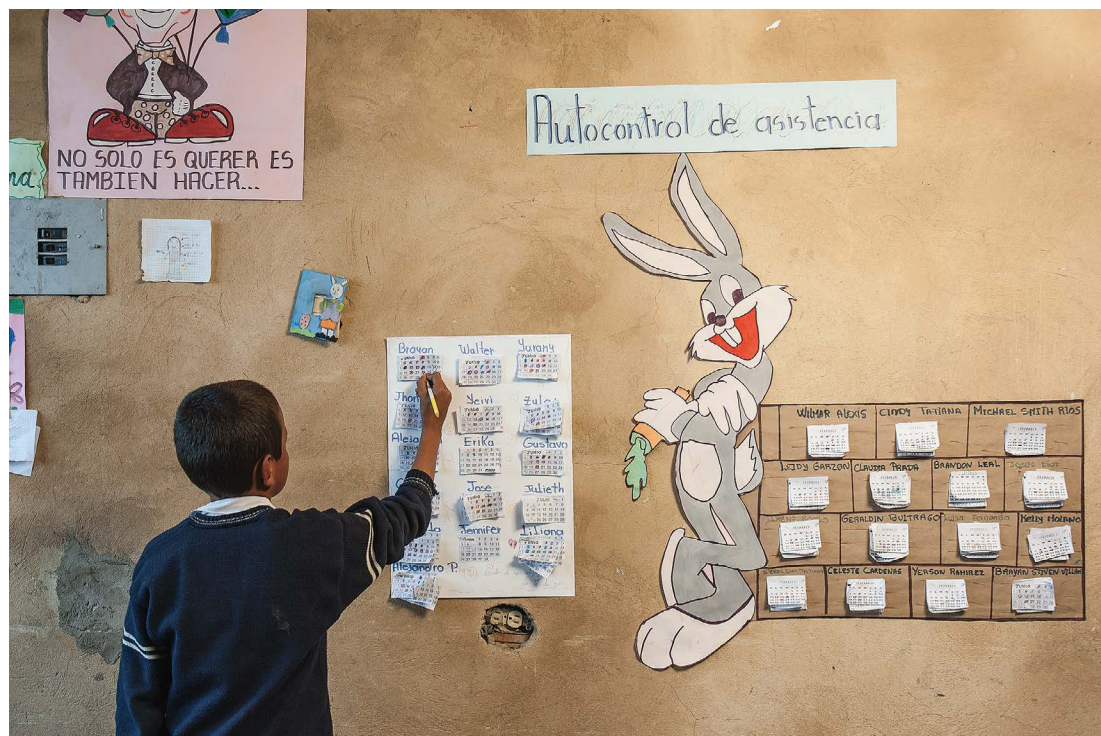
situation in schools, and the other from the point of view of the children themselves.

THE PROBLEM LOOKED AT FROM THE SCHOOL ANGLE

Professor Vera's first study, *Dynamics of subjectivation and inclusion in a school setting*, analyzes the way in which an educational community perceives a child in a forced displacement situation, underlining that in some cases Colombian schools, facing exceptional population demands—often the reason for a school's creation—as inclusive spaces, must be the initiators of healthy interpersonal relations for all the students that make up their community, as well as proving one of the vital figures in preventing risks for vulnerable groups.

“Just as city children might come to a school from situations of poverty that expose them to social exclusion, children can also arrive from circumstances of forced displacement, which besides requiring an inclusive space, also calls particularly for an affective space since, in addition to having lived through different circumstances and normal conflicts in their development processes, they also face the emergence of traumatic experiences due to political violence,” stresses Vera.

The schooling stage involves normal difficulties for pupils, such as establishing positive emotional relations with classmates and teachers, achieving good marks, understanding the content of some subjects, and many other aspects, all of which combine with possible traumas and unresolved conflicts caused by a situation of forced displacement. These can lead to another series of emotional and social problems. It is here where the school fulfils an additional role and can prove a safe consultation space not just academically but also for reinforcing personal skills that allow correct development and recovery for pupils. Meanwhile, the study revealed difficulties in



training and the understanding of the role of teachers faced by such difficulties, showing that these educators do not have the right tools to take them on. This is the basis for the research recommendations, which propose working on collective construction of integrated pedagogical ideas allowing for the contextualisation of the realities of all social actors in schools.

THE CHILD'S VISION

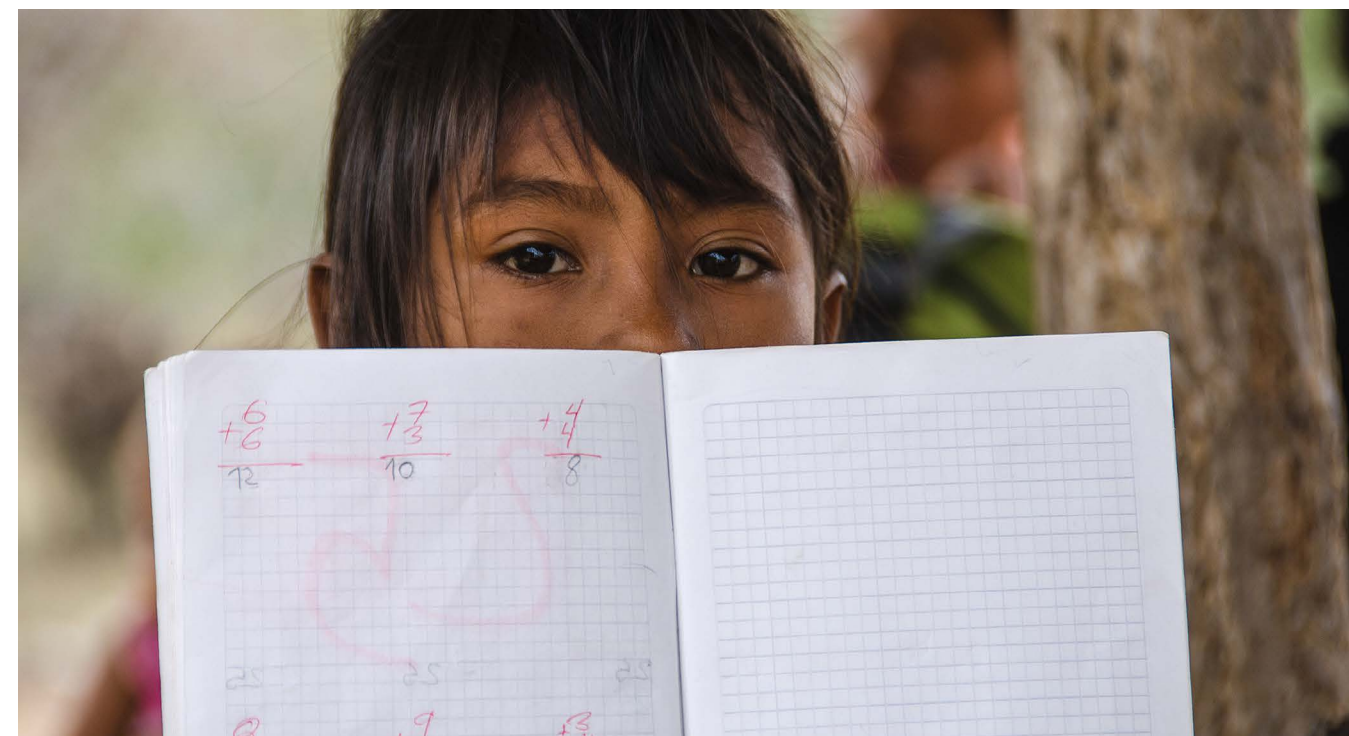
For Vera, the key to understanding the situation is to tackle the problem from the point of view of children. After studying the life stories of student victims of forced displacement due to political violence, she discovered that the main expectations of pupils going to a new school is to be accepted and welcomed but, regrettably, they often do not have the support of the full educational community when going through the adaptation process.

Another aspect affecting social adaptation, and one that creates the sensation of rejection and lack of support, is the way in which classmates perceive the newcomer. While it is true that pupils studying alongside them might be in conditions of poverty, there are times when these feel that classmates suffering forced displacement might be dangerous. The former, nevertheless, receive manifestations of support and solidarity.

Something that must not be forgotten is that many children and families in these circumstances may be experiencing situations of emotional and economic stress, and this brings an additional complexity to the adaptation process.

Despite finding themselves many times in surroundings hardly favourable for establishing good interpersonal rela-

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tions, some children suffering forced displacement begin to take on a protective role, not just in support of new children arriving at the school themselves in displacement situations, but also with those who, for one or other reason, are not accepted either. “I studied the case of a child who met a classmate with growth difficulties (low height/age ratio) and took on the task of protecting this pupil from the others,” Vera recalls.

HEALING WOUNDS

The study carried out by Professor Ángela Vera concludes that there are several aspects that help in healing the wounds caused in children by forced displacement. In the first in-

stance, there is the family, because these types of traumatic situations—which often include death, separation from the family, loss of personal possessions, and discrimination, among others—tend to lead to the strengthening of connections and the construction of a support network among loved ones.

On experiencing situations of difficulty, many children and youths suffering forced displacement acquire altruistic attitudes, seek social support within their families or new friendships, and participate in important processes for their communities, and this allows them to cure their emotional wounds, recuperate, and strengthen their personalities.

The new community to which families in forced displacement situations arrive has several fundamental roles to meet, not only as a space for acceptance but also in both affective relations and informative support, in other words offering tools that help the newcomers to adapt to a new lifestyle.

Finally, but no less important, is government support in creating the feeling among victims that their rights have been recovered and redressed, involving them in different programs of help and encouragement aimed at meeting their basic needs, providing attention for emergencies and financial stability, helping to heal wounds and not to expose the situation of so many children and families who have had to leave part of their lives behind and reconstruct a new story. ■



Aspects that boost social justice

Individual

Precedents:

Personal and family history in relation to the displacement situation.

Adaptive behavior:

a) Personal:
reflective thought, meaning of the forced displacement experience, psychological resistance, spirituality.

b) Relation-based:

Seeking social support, altruistic behavior, and participation in community management.

Family

- Family history in relation to displacement situation and displacement with the primary family intact.
- Perception of help and family support.

Community

- Perception of social support, recognition and acceptance in host community.
- Having informative support.
- Belonging to a community of persons in displacement situation.
- Taking part in community organization processes.

Institutions

- Achieving efficient emergency humanitarian assistance through institutions.
- Accessing aid programs for economic stability.
- Support of local government and social programs.
- Restitution and recognition of their rights.

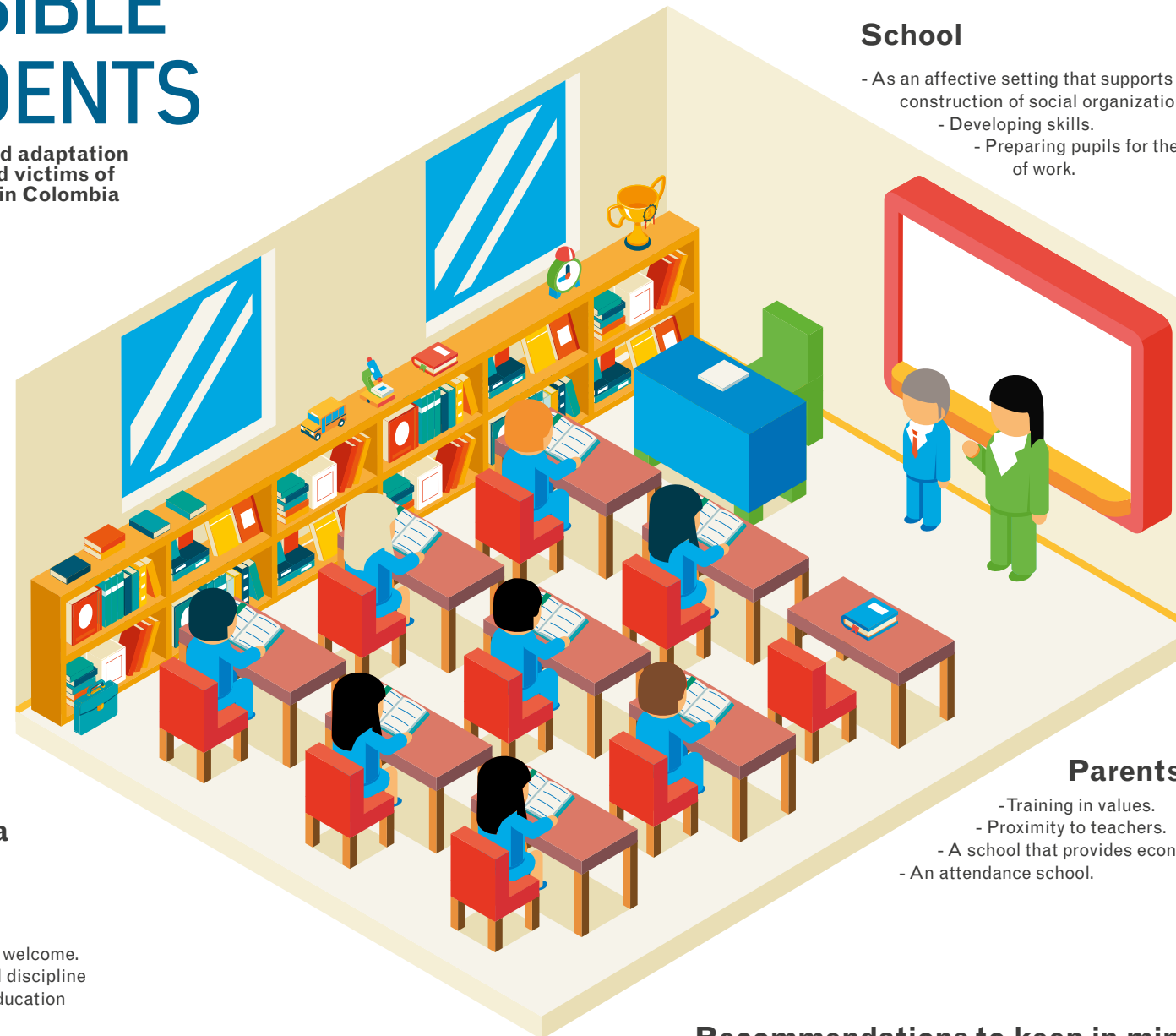
INVISIBLE STUDENTS

Social identity and adaptation processes for child victims of political violence in Colombia

Expectations on admission to school settings

Boys and girls expect a school that:

- Receives them with a welcome.
- Establishes order and discipline
- Promotes affective education



School

- As an affective setting that supports the construction of social organization.
- Developing skills.
- Preparing pupils for the world of work.

Parents

- Training in values.
- Proximity to teachers.
- A school that provides economic options.
- An attendance school.

Recommendations to keep in mind in reflection and action processes to boost changes towards inclusive practices in victim groups suffering political violence:

1. Know and understand the enforced displacement situation and the meanings that accrue for the victim group of this social problem in the school setting.
2. Plan and promote a school atmosphere process that favors positive relations and interactions between school actors.
3. Recognize the historic and social context of the school and community setting.
4. Identify school resources, networks, and everyday practices that can favor cohabitation and adaptation of the group that is the victim of political violence.
5. Act on teaching and didactic elements.
6. Reflect on times, school moments and processes developed within the school setting.



Aspects that make social adjustment difficult

Individual

- Emotional imbalance.
- Mourning process for numerous losses.
- Financial stress.
- Perception of social stigmatization and discrimination.
- Little knowledge of context and procedures for obtaining support.
- Yearning for original setting.

Traumatic events

- Experience of traumatic events at the place of origin.
- Being victims of violent acts.
- Separation from relatives and friends.
- Death of relatives or loved ones.
- Experience of forced displacement.
- Financial instability.
- Material deprivation.
- Experiencing social discrimination episodes.

Community

- Scarcities among host and displaced community.

Institutions

- Dependence relation with institutions.
- Difficulties with institutions and local governments.
- Delays in emergency humanitarian assistance.
- Negative perception with regard to institutions.

Results from research developed in 2012 as part of the Colciencias Young Researchers Program