

## HUMAN-CENTRED EDUCATION: THE CASE OF COLEGIO AMOR

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*We conceive love as a transforming agent ... which is a door to a better world.  
This concept of love is what we translates into our work, action and projects...  
(Colegio Amor)*

The purpose of this paper is to explore how a human-centred approach to education has achieved the transformation of displaced children's lives and reconstruction and revitalisation of their community in Colegio Amor, a shanty town school in Colombia. This paper describes history, current educational programmes and approaches from the perceptions of founders, sponsors, researchers, teachers, parents and students of the school. It also aims at generating a discussion concerning the role of education in transforming individual lives and the community at large.

This single-case study summarised the interpretation of data from interviews of the school teachers, parents and current and ex-students, research reports and other reports from organisations and agencies that have sponsored the school over the years. The paper was intended to provide a vivid description of the particular case studied and delineate potential implications for applying a human centred education approach in communities of displaced children and families in a meaningful way.

### **The Colombian Context**

In order to understand the mission and philosophy of Colegio Amor, it is necessary to have an overview of education in Colombia within the country's political, economic and socio-cultural context in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

According to the UN, Colombia has the worst humanitarian crisis in the Western hemisphere. The country's stability has been threatened by left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitary organizations, and organized narcotics trafficking. The level of murder, kidnapping, and other violence in the country continues to be extraordinarily high. According to a World Bank report analysing Colombia, 'violence has taken an enormous human, social and economic toll on the nation. Since 1980, it is estimated that the conflict has claimed about 100,000 lives'. The report suggests that Colombia must confront inequality, poverty and violence simultaneously in order for the country to resume some social order. Part of the basis for this conclusion can be located in the startling figure that 67% of the population lived under the poverty line in 2001. When this is coupled with the fact that unemployment has reached about 18 % in the urban areas, where three-quarters of the population live, and a vivid picture of destitution and social dislocation emerges (World Bank).

In the course of half a century of political turmoil and civil war in Colombia, a large number of civilians have fled their homes or been forcefully removed to other places. Most of the displaced people cluster in shanty towns on the outskirts of the major cities. It is said that 'the cumulative total number of internally displaced people evacuating from rural villages in the areas of the conflict is approximately 2.2 million' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan March 2001). Population displacement brings with it unimaginable risks of impoverishment such as landlessness, unemployment, homelessness, marginalisation, increased morbidity and mortality, food insecurity, loss of access to common property and social disintegration (Cernea, 1996).

The social, political and economic crisis has no doubt affected the quality of education, student enrolment and retention. The World Bank, in another report, states that basic education in Colombia is still far from being universal, especially among the poor many of whom dropout before completing primary education. Moreover children in the poorest portion of the community are entering the school system late; only 17% are in the correct grade for their age, compared to the total average of 38%.

The high dropout rate and low achievement of children from poor families means basic education skills are at a critical level. More than 15% of 7-11 year old children fail to enrol in appropriate schooling and more than 35% of 12-17 year olds are out of education. The majority of these children come from poor families. In some cases, pulling children out of school has been considered to be one of the means to save money for these families; in other cases, children leave schools in order to go into the labour market in order to support their families. The World Bank report indicates that the long term consequences of education decline and therefore the withdrawal from human capital accumulation will be an 'intergenerational cycle of poverty'. It is not education alone that is failing but also the lack of health care for poor families. There is a crisis of poverty and of the social.

There have been numerous attempts from the Colombian government and international efforts over the years to bring an end to the violence and drug trafficking in Colombia, such as Plan Colombia, which includes ten strategies: economic, fiscal and financial, military, judicial and human rights, counter-narcotics, alternative development, social participation, human development, peace and international affairs, designed to address all aspects of the problems Colombia faces. These strategies include actions to stabilise the economy, promote trade and investment, stop drug activity at the production and trading levels, reform the judicial system, promote democratization and social development, and further the peace process in general (Plan Colombia).

## Background

The Colegio Amor is a jointly funded school (with both private and government finance) located in the shanty town of Soacha, Southwest of Bogotá, Colombia. The school has been founded and managed by the Fundación Educativa Amor since 1988 and has been a home to around 450 students of the 6-18 years old. All of the students in the Colegio are from Soacha, a growing community with a swelling population year on year, and is occupied mainly by refugees, displaced families and migrants who have left the countryside fleeing from the violence of the civil wars and conflicts, seeking new lives near the cities. Soacha itself is physically very unattractive showing all the signs of poverty, over population, pollution, and a lack of community infrastructure.

Most of the students live nearby the Colegio and walk to school in their uniforms every morning. The school premises, although located in a quiet unpaved street, are one of the most pleasant and attractive places in the community, full of vibrant laughter and the sounds of happy children engrossed in a colourful display of their work and activities.

Students and teachers are like friends, they call each other by their first names and they have constant physical contacts. Young children are often seen to walk up to staff for a cuddle and adults are often kneeling down to children's height in order to have a conversation involving proper eye contact. Over the years, there have been absolutely no drop outs from the school and the Colegio is regarded as a '*School of Love*'.

The Fundación Educativa Amor was founded by Monica Ramirez in 1988. The foundation's philosophy arises from Monica's early experience and ideas working with young children in care. In her early career, Monica, whose academic background is in psycho-pedagogy, worked in a programme that took care of abandoned children in the Popayan branch of 'Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar'. It was during this period when Monica realised that the infant mortality rate of the children in care was closely linked to the physical environment of their 'home' and the quality of care they received. She noticed that if the environment was grim and unpleasant, and the care was unaffectionate and impersonal, children were more likely to be in a poor condition and infant mortality tended to be high. Considering the likely causes, Monica decided that the physical environment must be made lighter and more colourful, and more crucially the staff must express a feeling of love for the children, including affectionate physical contact. For instance, the babies and small children should be cuddled and given clear signals of loving care; they should be talked to in soft and gentle voices with eye contact, and so on. When Monica's idea was implemented, the children's condition was dramatically improved and the infant mortality rate fell, eventually to zero.

Much of Monica's early work led to her later understanding that human flourishing should be placed at the heart of education, and the most effective approach begins with an affectionate and loving relationship between the teachers, students and families; in other words, love in action. From this stems the core of the whole approach that underpins the 'Amor' project. Monica pointed out that the importance of clarifying her interpretation of 'amor', as the word itself is so well used that it could be misinterpreted. For Monica, and other staff who started, articulated and developed the 'Amor' project, it derives from 'A-MOR', meaning 'not death'. It is the force or energy that activates our livelihood and sustains a profound human relationship.

### **The Programmes of Fundación Educativa Amor**

In 1988, Monica received clear inner indications that she should move to Bogotá and start a school in a slum district, Soacha, which is to the south of the city. At the time Soacha had a population of around 100,000, largely consisting of peasants who had migrated to the city trying to find a better life, due to conditions of extreme violence from bandits, Mafia and guerrilla movements in the countryside, and/or as a result of killings, kidnapping and torture at the hands of leftist rebels, as well as right-wing paramilitaries. The displaced not only lost their land and possessions but also their cultures and lifestyles. The most distressed amongst them were women and children, whose vulnerability and dependency made them subject to additional misery, including domestic violence. Whilst some parts of the city had been rebuilt, many were still primitive and infrastructure was chaotic. The population was very high and urban overcrowding was one of the causes for domestic violence and other family problems. Unemployment and poverty added further causes for social crisis. Children often received no schooling and ended up joining street gangs, which in turn exposed them to drug and alcohol abuse, AIDS and further street violence. This is the cycle of poverty the World Bank previously refers to. All of the displaced lived on the edge of this social breakdown.

Monica, along with her husband Sebastian and their children, had lived in similar slums for some time before coming to Soacha, where they experienced considerable difficulties, which commonly existed in these places, such as not being accepted by the community, living in primitive housing and coping with high levels of pollution. This experience provided them with a significant understanding of the conditions under which the community in Bogotá survived, and the backgrounds and attitudes of the families. They were also aware of the crucial needs of such communities and the critical elements that would help bring basic wellbeing into the communities.

14 like-minded people, including Monica and Sebastian, who lived close to Soacha, who cared deeply about the children and family within the community, decided to start an organisation with the aim to reverse the drift towards social collapse in Soacha. Fundación Educativa Amor initially offered education to children through the school of Colegio Amor before extending its work to the children's families and other adults in the community.

### **'Amor in Action'**

The mission of the foundation is 'love in action'. It believes that the most conducive environment for children's development is one that provides security, protection, love and respect. If these conditions are successfully met, children are more likely to overcome the traumas and pressures of their lives and develop into human beings with a firm set of internal and external values, and an awareness of their own self-worth, talents and potential. In this way the children would also become the seeds or agents of change and help with the growth of the community.

The Colegio, which has gone through ups and downs over the last two decades, has provided for approximately 500 students; and is indeed a place where children are safe and largely free from the pressures and violence in the streets, and in some unfortunate cases, within families. One visitor commented:

*When we drove through Soacha and arrived at the project we noticed that the grey tristesse around us was suddenly replaced by the happy sound of mingling children in a schoolyard. The atmosphere ... is very good. The children are open, curious and happy. (Julia Frischeisen-Köhler and Reinhold Schirren, Report on Amor 2003.)*

All of the students of the Colegio live in Soacha. Many of them have been with Amor for their entire school life. Ex-students often come back to do voluntary work at the school. A few teachers are ex-students who proceeded to university studies after completing schooling at the Colegio and returned as qualified teachers. Students who have been with the Colegio for a long time are observed to be strikingly open and affectionate, often kissing and hugging visitors, their teachers and each other. Many students consider the Colegio as their home. Visitors have also observed that the attitude between staff and children is much closer and warmer than one expects in a school. Children and staff treat each other as members of a family. According to Halimah Polk, an educational researcher, who visited the Colegio in 2000/2001, the nature of the closeness between teachers and students in Amor was unique:

*The unusually friendly and loving relationship between teachers and students at Colegio Amor was often cited as key to the beneficent influence of this school - although many teachers were new! The philosophy of Amor clearly permeated the school culture, and extended beyond the walls of the school. Parents often reported visits and calls from teachers when their children needed special help. Many of the teachers participated in community service activities. A few teachers displayed a special sensitivity to the talents and abilities of their students, as well as an awareness of the particular problems their students faced at home. (Polk 2001:243)*

Children and young people in the Colegio seem to respond to the 'amor in action' approach very well, and their attitude towards adults is also friendly. In Polk's report, she says: *One parent said that her son loved Arifin (the teacher) "more than his own father!"* The foundation believes that the loving relationship within the school is born out of respect for the other and for the self as a human being. It is this respect that allows adults, children and young people in both the school and community to develop their potential. For instance, the staffs are required to closely observe all the children and to look out for any changes in their emotions or health so that any developing conditions can be followed up. Similarly, if children are absent from school, the teacher will investigate and visit their homes. Home visits are a routine of the Colegio. The classroom teacher visits every child's home twice a year. In this way, the Colegio seeks to build a bridge between the school and home lives of its students. Through home visits, teachers have an opportunity to learn about the child's home environment, in particular the family economic status, maternal educational attainment, maternal psychological wellbeing and parent-child relations. The home visit scheme helps the school to develop the appropriate attitude and strategy for school/community partnership and strengthen the bond between the teacher, the child, the Colegio and the family. It is a way to extend 'amor' into the community. One of the staff summarises:

*Home visiting is one of the best tools in Colegio Amor. We investigate the needs and try to help the whole family. (Horthy 2002)*

The philosophy of 'amor in action' has penetrated the very being of all members of the Colegio. Many staff reflected that, after a short period of time, they noticed changes in themselves through the experience. In a loving and trusting environment, children are encouraged to be self-disciplined; there are no school bells to impose timing and attendance is motivated by students' interests to learn and participate, rather than by fear of punishment. For Monica, love in action produces visible results that can be seen on the faces of the students.

*For me the most important sign is the face of the child. They have the face of happiness, not fear. [They are] confident and secure. They come to you, hug you, and ask you many questions. (Polk 2001: 112)*

The Colegio has thus created a culture of love that has resulted in children's happiness, confidence, feeling of being secure and above all a sense of self as a member of the community. It is hoped that children educated in such an environment are more likely to become caring and responsible human beings because they have been loved and cared for themselves.

### ***Education for the Community***

Colegio Amor develops educational goals that are deeply rooted in the needs of the community. The foundation exists to support and enhance the community, which in turn is at the heart of the foundation, through societal transformation and the partnership between the school and the community.

The school operates as a conventional Colombian school, offering a traditional curriculum as regulated by the government, which also incorporates additional programmes and extracurricular activities. The foundation identified major social problems within the Soacha community and developed a number of integrated educational programmes that attempt to respond to these issues. For instance, the school provides a substantial snack everyday to its students, in particular the younger children. In the early days of the Colegio, the founders noticed that children in Soacha were badly nourished and many often came to school without any breakfast. The school decided that it was important to meet the very basic needs of the children, such as food, as well as other educational needs.

Other programmes, which include the integral prevention programme, enterprise, art and culture, are not only part of the school's education programme but also social projects that cater for the needs in the community. The social projects include preventive health care, adult weekend and evening classes for parents and other community members, after school and weekend creative activities for children in the community, such as music, dance and theatre, and art and graphics.

None of these programmes and projects is exclusively for the children and young people at the Colegio. On the contrary, they are, in one way or the other, open to or including the majority of the community members. The essence of the education in the Colegio is to provide the children and adults in the community with the competence, knowledge and skills required for successful living in their own social and cultural contexts.

### ***Integral Prevention Programme***

Colegio Amor has been running this programme since 1993. It has become one of the key features of the school's educational content and is the main engine that the Colegio uses to address the critical needs of the community. Smith (2001) explores the concept of community in a number of ways, such as the notion that community can be seen as where people share the same geographical locality and also a common characteristic in addition to the locality. In this sense, the community of migrants, refugees and displaced persons in Soacha share social instability, family stress and misery in an over-populated and highly polluted town. As it is described in the early part of this paper, unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual problems and AIDS, gang/street violence and family violence are the major serious problems facing the community.

The Integral Prevention Programme aims to help those at risk become aware of the underlying causes of the existing problems and their social consequences. It educates young people about drugs and alcohol and the damages of the abuse; it also offers sex education and encourages young people to discuss sex related diseases and illness. The main approach of the programme is dialogic and participatory, allowing the participants to understand the roots of their social problems and be empowered to make changes about their own lives. Dialogues with young people and amongst young people give them the opportunity to express their feelings and experiences, which can open up further discussions about attitudes and strategies they could adopt to withstand risks and dangers. Dialogues and discussion groups are not only active within the Colegio but also within the community, where regular meetings are set up for broader topics such as health care for children and families. Young women in the community meet to discuss contraception, pregnancy and childbirth. The participatory process allows a partnership to be established between the Colegio and the community, and gives people the opportunity to put what they have learned back into transforming community.

The Integral Prevention Programme has initiated many significant changes in young people's behaviour, attitudes and capacities in dealing with day-to-day issues. Older students, especially students in the final two years, having participated in the programme and benefited from it, are willing to extend this learning experience to others within the community. Under the inspiration of the

Colegio's programme, young people began to play a more active role in the community. For instance, Michael Lloyd witnessed a number of student-led community service activities during his visit in 1997, including a group of students entertaining elderly people and students helping to organise a children's birthday party. He also noted some community activities supported by the Colegio staff, such as sports, a Scouts troop, a Red Cross unit and an ecological group recycling waste.

From the initially aim of keeping young people off the street and protecting them from the danger and risk of violence and abuses, to turning young people into self-motivated teaching assistants and agents of change, the prevention programme has indeed changed the way the community in Soacha is organised. A new relationship between the people and the community is in the process of being created, and new prospects for the community are being discovered from within the community itself. Through the experience, young people have started thinking about and looking at themselves from new perspectives; and the programme has also changed the way they see their role as members of the community.

In 1998, the success of the Colegio's Integral Prevention Programme led to a contract working with the Colombian government on the '*Desplacados Project*', a project for the displaced people and refugees in Soacha.

#### Micro Enterprise Course

All secondary students (sixth grade to eleventh grade) are offered *microempresas* (micro enterprise) classes. This is the Colegio's specialist course that is in addition to the compulsory national curriculum. The concept of the course was the result of defining the necessity for all individuals in the community to possess skills and knowledge, in particular the young people. The micro enterprise classes apply experiential learning and introduce hands-on workshops in baking, jam and juice making, dressmaking and tailoring and computer technology. Apart from the skills-based workshops, the Colegio also provides weekly classes in theoretical studies related to enterprises – business management, accounting and career counselling. The final assessment of the course is a graduation thesis based on the practical skills and theoretical knowledge acquired. The Colegio encourages the students to make field trips within the community, visiting businesses and using in-depth research and analysis to investigate authentic and realistic enterprise solutions and possibilities within the community.

The Colegio believes that the learning process is most effective when students are involved in experiential learning situations. That is why the enterprise course is designed to engage students in real hands-on tasks and problem-solving at the workshops. The experiential learning allows students to develop skills and work experience that give them an edge on the competition for initial employment upon completion of schooling. Through developing the enterprise programmes, the Colegio, its staff and students are brought closer to their communities. According to existing research, these newly formed links and partnerships may in turn contribute to the economic development in the community, with better-educated and trained school graduates as potential employees and owners of enterprises. The underlying intention of this project is to link the classroom to the community and prepare young people for real life challenges after the completion of schooling, and to sow the seeds for potential community transformation.

Some of these workshops are turned into small enterprises that produce high quality products fully in accordance with the food and hygiene standards of the country. The first enterprise was in fruit-based products, making high quality jams and juices that fully complied with all hygiene requirements. The goal is that these workshops provide for the consumption of the local community, as well becoming financially self-sufficient. Parents are encouraged to share their expertise in the skill areas, and parent volunteers working with the children are provided the chance to learn the skills and knowledge of managing their own small business. At those times when students are not using the workshops, there is the opportunity for people in the neighbourhood to learn the skills. For example, a number of mothers have started their own home second-hand clothes businesses.

In 1994 the Colombian government established a basic national curriculum that allowed individual colleges to add their own specialist courses in accordance with the students' social-cultural environment and community. Colegio Amor's specialist subject is Micro Enterprise, and it has been the

only school in the country that is recognised to be able to offer qualification in this area of study. In a number of reports, it has been noted that the students' achievement in this subject is very high and universities are accepting a good number of graduates to continue their studies.

Micro Enterprise also helps strengthen communities by improving people's knowledge, skills, confidence, leadership and organisational capacity. Students are given the opportunity to discover, articulate and develop their individual talents and interests to the fullest. In this way, students are more likely to become aware of their own identity and determine who they are and what they want to do. The self-discovery will also reinforce the students' self-esteem and self-confidence as a contributing individual in the society. These students will most likely be facilitated with potential capacity to escape the poverty cycle.

### Arts and Culture

The question of identity has been a critical issue within the Soacha community. When people are removed violently from their own land, they are also removed from their own traditions, cultures and lifestyles. The loss of cultural roots leads to the loss of the sense of self. The Colegio saw the need for these people to have a means to express their feeling of loss, and perhaps reactivate their traditional values and cultural attributes. *Arte y Cultura* (Art and Culture Programme) has been developed for young people to retune themselves with their community by introducing a variety of creative activities into the school's overall educational programme. There are music and dance traditions of the *campesinos*, visual arts, dance, music, theatre and so on.

The Art and Culture Programme meets the essential needs of the children and helps enhance the quality of life for both children and adults, encourage self-worth and self-sufficiency and above all, foster community pride in a neighbourhood with a deprived social and economic background. Through the *Arte ye Cultura*, children learn to live creatively and with self-respect.

Once more, Colegio Amor extends its work into the heart of the community. There are frequently events and ceremonies for national, local and school festivities when all members of the community are welcome. Children also form various groups to perform for the public. Many reports and observations have noted that children of the Colegio thoroughly enjoy these creative activities and take pride in their presentations.

### **Implications**

The overall mission of Fundación Educativa Amor seeks to offer children and young people an environment that is based on love and care, providing them with a learning experience that nurtures their sense of self and individual talents, and ameliorates the social problems facing families and the community. To a great extent, the Colegio's goals are highly interrelated, as explained in Polk (2001). She elaborated in her cross-cultural study that focuses on talent development in Colegio Amor:

*A child's talent will emerge in a school environment that is calm, loving and secure, but such an environment must be protected by interventions with the families and the community. (Polk 2001:144)*

The learning outcomes at Colegio Amor are widely recognised by research and project evaluations, as well as children, parents and the community, not to mention the Colombian government. These outcomes include *persistence in education, the discovery of selfhood, the development of individual talent, youth staying out of trouble and having good character*. The young people who completed schooling at the Colegio are reported to have the prospect of continuing higher education, if they can raise the funds. Many of the ex-students are found to be continuing the social services started at the Colegio.

The founders of Fundación Educativa Amor believe that all human relationships are socially-oriented, which are based on a relationship with others in a wider community. Education is therefore focus on the development of the capacity of the community as a whole. In this sense, the development of the individual is seen as a contribution to the overall advancement of the community. Fielding argues that education is 'fundamentally about community'; and that 'community is both the condition and the

means of educational and human fulfilment' (Fielding 1995:147). In the same light, the foundation is very visible in Soacha and the Colegio is considered as a community school. The underlying philosophy is that children thrive on a loving, caring human environment and that a genuine relationship, based on love and care between teachers and children, is significant in facilitating the teaching and learning process. In Colegio Amor children and their needs precede the requirement for high performance; happiness, safety and security, self-esteem and confidence, the competence to relate to one's own cultural root and values, the knowledge and skills to sustain a decent human livelihood, and the capacity to discover and develop one's talent are the educational goals.

Bloom (1952) argues that in an environment where there is love, friendship, security and the recognition of each child's worth, children are more likely to develop a human quality that comprises for citizenship. He argued that in such an environment,

*The child is able to satisfy his basic needs, resolve his inner turmoil and mature. He comes to recognise himself as a personality that matters, and his responses issuing from within, are part of him, are his. At the same time he is aware of the community of his fellows, equally free and freed, of which he is a part, and it is by and through the constant interchange of communal experiences, and guided by his teachers, that he learns, while remaining loyal to his self, to meet the reasonable demands of the community. In this integration of self and community lies true happiness and the highest form of citizenship* (Bloom 1952:137 quoted in Infed 2004 online).

Education should be human-centred and community-oriented, with an aim at bring out the full potential of each individual child in the process of their human becoming. Indeed, this is what underpins Colegio Amor's work and it continues to create opportunities for meeting the needs of community members – children, their families and other individuals – and establishes a partnership with the community. Therefore, education in Colegio Amor goes far beyond what is on offer in the traditional school curriculum and provides academic, social, health, life and work skills, and an art and culture programme, with the emphasis on problem-solving skills and encouraging young people to become agents of change who extend their learning into the community. Under the impact of the Colegio's approach and programmes, the community is likely to become more integrated and stronger, empowered to take further initiative to change the way of people's thinking and lead to the ultimate transformation of individuals' lives and the transformation of the community.

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