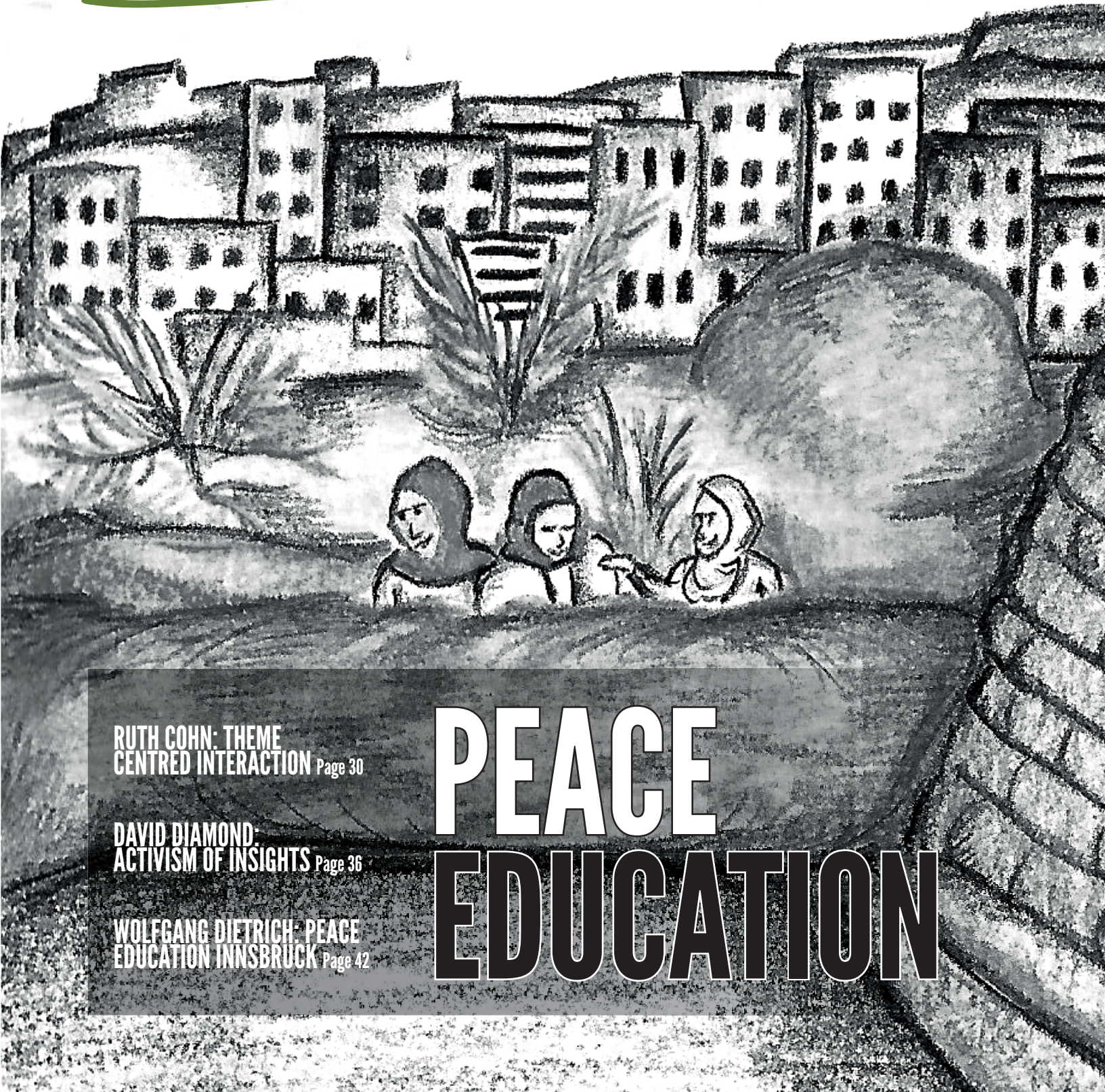




MAGAZINE

MANY PEACES

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PEACE EDUCATION

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BEYOND THE EPISODE

**TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES TO CONFLICTS IN SCHOOLS.
AN INTERVIEW WITH THE URUGUAYAN PEACE WORKER RODRIGO AYARZA**

BY ALEXA CUELLO | PHOTOS BY MARCELO CASACUBERTA

Rodrigo Ayarza started working at the beginning of the nineteen-nineties as a social educator with poor communities in the outskirts of Montevideo. “In those spaces, there were always difficult situations of human rights violations and conflicts popping up, so the question of how to tackle those situations with different methods eventually led me to study peace education.”

That search took him to pilgrim to Spain, Sweden, Peru, Israel and the USA, amongst other places, collecting experiences and approaches as well as diving deeper in the realm of peace and conflict transformation. Rodrigo’s main field of work currently is the education system and its multiple conflicts. For the last twenty years, Uruguay has witnessed huge changes in terms of the violence experienced by children and adolescents, specifically in middle-high schools according to a study published by Nilia Viscardi et al in 2015, titled “*De la violencia a la participación y la convivencia: acerca de la constitución política de los adolescentes como sujetos de derechos en las instituciones educativas del estado*”. The idea of the adolescent as

being violent and representing a source of school conflicts has been normalized. Following Viscardi's study, the institutional responses have therefore focused on restoring the security, applying sanctions, hiring more police officers in the schools and more psychologists and psychiatrists, thus medicalising the answer to conflicts.

According to Rodrigo, "in Uruguay, a violent episode occurs in a school and the analysis only revolves around the episode. But there is a great difficulty to see beyond that and to take into account everything that happened before and contributed to the episode. If a student throws a stone and breaks a window glass in the school, the school authorities rarely take the time to think of the circumstances and actors that influenced the decision of the student to react that way. Sometimes, it is due to a lack of tools and training. Other times, the reason is a lack of time and the pressure to show up with a "solution". Time is certainly a relevant factor in how conflicts within schools are tackled. People tend to react, to do something, anything, instead of first stop, take a moment to sit down and analyse the context and what has just happened."

Rodrigo proposes another way to do conflict work in schools. "The idea is to always give room and time to analyse the episode, to em-

People tend to react, to do something, anything, instead of first stop, take a moment to sit down and analyse the context and what has just happened.

pathise with the different perspectives to arose, to promote creativity and dialogue, so as to transform the situation."

"The levels of polarisation are high, the points of view are radical in that sense: everything is white or black, everything that the "other" does is wrong; ergo, any proposal coming from the other side is discredited and discharged. So, part of my work - inspired by Lederach - is always to analyse all the actors involved in the situation, to identify credible actors in each "side" with the capacity to dialogue with the "others". In Uruguay, we always look for the wrongdoer. Something happens and people look for someone to blame right away. And then, they look for a sanction to apply to that wrongdoer. Whether the conflict is amongst students themselves or between students and professors, or even between professors and parents, people try to, first of all, identify someone to blame and then find a "solution" in the form of a sanction. The guilty one is sanctioned and punished and, that way, the conflict is solved."

"I do not want to be unfair, for there are some exceptions to that. There are indeed teachers who, despite their not having the formal knowledge, intuitively do interesting things because they are engaged with trying to move away from the pattern "wrongdo-



All photos: © Marcelo Casacuberta

er-sanction”. But also, the problem is that those teachers are somehow isolated in their efforts. The institutions where they work do not take their ideas forward. Somehow, the institutional culture within the education system expects that teachers limit themselves to teach their subject. So, what is missing for me is a space within the institutions to really engage and systematically work on the different conflicts. We need to give ourselves the time and space to work on the conflicts, we need different actors to articulate those spaces of reflection in schools and, mostly, we need to spread the vision that those spaces are useful and highly needed.”

“Usually, we work with the different parties: teachers, authorities and students especially. But, at some point, we bring all the parties together, for eventually that is key in the process to transform things. We promote many instances of dialogue between the adults and the youth, putting aside the syllabus for a while, focusing on listening to the many perspectives and dialoguing. And so, perhaps one day a week, they do not evaluate the performance on maths or history, but instead engage in analysing how their week was in terms of active listening, of engagement with the group, of solidarity and teamwork.”

“We also promote the use of different artistic expressions like theatre and photography. Invisible theatre is a technique we use quite often. That is, after working for some weeks on identifying different actors to promote reflection and dialogue, we set up a secret play. We work

We need to give ourselves the time and space to work on the conflicts, we need different actors to articulate those spaces of reflection in schools and, mostly, we need to spread the vision that those spaces are useful and highly needed.

with a small group of students who come up with ideas about what kind of conflict they want to act out and we help them to set up the play. The key is to represent something common and well-known to them. Once, for example, the students of a middle-high school decided to stage a physical fight between two students during the break, something very common in that school. The “actors” (a group of students and teachers) were the only ones who were aware that the

fight was a play. So, the break started, everyone was in the school yard and suddenly a fight started between two female students. After a while, other student-actors surrounded the two girls and harangued them (as they usually would do). More students came close to the circle to witness the scene, others kept distant, until two teacher-actors separated the two girls by taking them into separate rooms for them to calm down and wait for their sanctions. The break ended and everyone went back to their classrooms. Then, ac-

tors and facilitators split and went class by class to discuss what had just happened, analyse the students’ and teachers’ different attitudes and behaviours, and open a dialogue about other possible ways to approach a similar situation in the future. The whole institution participated in the debate and was given an opportunity to engage, interact and think about different ways to do things”

The approach varies from school to school and, according to Rodri-go’s experience, there is no recipe. The key is to listen to the parties, analyse their discourses, perspectives, positions, and then try out



what could get more resonance amongst them. “In another middle-high school, I worked with a photographer and proposed a photo debate with the students. There, tensions existed amongst the different groups, which would eventually lead to situations of physical aggression. The school was located in one of the poorest neighbourhoods of Montevideo and these students experienced many deprivations in their daily lives. When we started talking to them, we realised that behind the aggressions and tensions there were topics of distrust and fear. Fear of losing resources, people they trust, the space they had in the school, etc. We held a series of workshops with them and offered them to make a photo story to reflect upon all the topics we had discussed and analysed together. Some of them chose to make a series of photos in the main stairs of the school where students from the different groups often meet and where tensions arose. As you can see in the pictures, the tensions are represented by a cord that is being pulled by the two groups.”

“Other group discussed the feelings of loneliness, emptiness and confusion after an aggression. In reference to it, they started facing a big wall. The sequence of photos ended up as an invitation to see beyond that wall: Who are those on the other side? The photo debate was a fruitful opportunity to listen and reflect on the different perspectives, to name the conflict with words, to develop many narratives thereof, to look at the “other” and to even allow oneself to see the many commonalities (or similarities) that exist with those “others”. Lederach talks about sowing seeds; and that is what we have done. We sowed the seed. Then, a certain time is needed to see the sprouts. It is a long-term kind of work which requires patience and perseverance.” ▲



RODRIGO AYARZA is an Uruguayan peace worker. He holds a postgraduate degree in Peace Culture and Conflict Transformation from the Autonomous University of Barcelona and a master's degree in Education Policies from CLAEH, Uruguay. He works with adults and children in conflict transformation and peace education across the country. He also is the author of several publications on peace education.
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"EDUCATION HAS ALWAYS BEEN A MORAL ENTERPRISE. ITS EXPLICIT GOAL IN MOST PARTS OF THE WORLD IS TO EDUCATE MORALLY AND ETHICALLY GROUNDED CITIZENS. EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS IS OFTEN SEEN AS A PSEUDO-MILITARY PROCESS THAT INSTILLS DISCIPLINE."

Hilary Cremin

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"TODAY, I STILL SEE EDUCATION AS A WAY TO WALK TOGETHER THROUGH AN ENVIRONMENT THAT SUPPORTS AND CHALLENGES PERSPECTIVES, NOT AS A MORAL CONCEPT."

Matthias Scharpenberg

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"I LEARNED DURING THIS EXPERIENCE THAT, LIKE EVERY INDIVIDUAL, EVERY CULTURE HAS SHADOW AND LIGHT ASPECTS AND THAT IT IS IN THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE OTHER, THAT OUR COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL ASPECTS GET A CHANCE FOR BALANCE."

Julia Felder

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"PEOPLE TEND TO REACT, TO DO SOMETHING, ANYTHING, INSTEAD OF FIRST STOP, TAKE A MOMENT TO SIT DOWN AND ANALYSE THE CONTEXT AND WHAT HAS JUST HAPPENED."

Rodrigo Ayarza

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"PEACE WORK IS COMMUNITY HEALTH WORK. THEY'RE THE SAME WORK."

David Diamond

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"THE EXPERIENCES TAUGHT US THE HOLISTIC LESSON THAT PROFESSORS, PEACE EDUCATORS AT A UNIVERSITY, ARE BUT PROVIDERS OF PROVIDERS OF PROVIDERS."

Wolfgang Dietrich

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