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Who knows, who writes, and who decolonises? Dialogues about collaborative partnerships of a rural education initiative in post-accord Colombia

Natalia Reinoso-Chávez , Laura Fonseca , María Alejandra Fino ,
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ABSTRACT

Recognition and preservation of local knowledge, practices, and ways of being are tenets of decolonial practices. However, understanding *how*, *in which* ways, and – mainly – *who* does the decolonial work is still unclear. The Education, Land, and Reconciliation Project (EDUCARE in Spanish) is an action-research initiative co-created between former guerrilla members who are reincorporating into Colombian society while building their new rural community and a group of community and educational psychologists and researchers from an urban university. This project aims to co-construct an educational model recognising peasant (*campesino*) practices and values and the philosophy of Good Living (*Buen Vivir*). The purpose of this paper is to present a systematic dialogue among six women: three former guerrilla members who are part of the project and three researchers (at different moments in their careers) about the roles, tensions, and learnings between partners in the project and how they positioned themselves throughout the process. Through focus group discussions and dialogical encounters, we jointly explore the journey of co-implementation. We focus on questions about what counts as knowledge production, and the tensions that arise within the community and outside it as a result of this collaborative effort.

La reconnaissance et la préservation des connaissances, pratiques et manières d'être locales constituent des principes des pratiques décoloniales. Cependant, on ne comprend pas encore très bien comment, par quels moyens et – principalement – par qui le travail décolonial est effectué. Le projet Éducation, terre et réconciliation (EDUCARE en espagnol) est une initiative d'action-recherche co-créée par d'anciens membres de guérillas qui se réintègrent à la société colombienne tout en construisant leur propre nouvelle communauté rurale, et un groupe de psychologues et de chercheurs communautaires et scolaires issus d'une université urbaine. Ce projet cherche à construire en collaboration un modèle éducatif qui reconnaisse les pratiques et les valeurs paysannes (*campesinas*), et la philosophie du bien-vivre (*buen vivir*). Ce document a pour objectif de présenter un dialogue systématique entre six femmes – trois ex-

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Co-production; partnership;
decolonisation;
action-research;
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membres de guérillas qui font partie du projet et trois chercheuses (à différents stades de leur carrière) – sur les rôles, les tensions et les enseignements entre partenaires dans le cadre du projet, et sur la manière dont elles se sont positionnées tout au long du projet. Grâce à des discussions en groupes de réflexion et des rencontres dialogiques, nous nous penchons ensemble sur le parcours de la mise en œuvre conjointe. Nous nous concentrons sur les questions portant sur ce qui constitue la production de connaissances et sur les tensions qui surviennent au sein et en dehors de la communauté suite à cet effort collaboratif.

Si bien el reconocimiento y la preservación de saberes, prácticas y formas de ser locales son principios asociados a las prácticas decoloniales, aún no está claro cómo, de qué manera y, sobre todo, quién hace el trabajo decolonial. El proyecto Educación, Tierra y Reconciliación (Educare) es una iniciativa de investigación-acción cocreada entre antiguos miembros de la guerrilla que se están reincorporando a la sociedad colombiana al tiempo que construyen su nueva comunidad rural y articulan a un grupo de psicólogos comunitarios y educativos y a investigadores de una universidad urbana. El proyecto pretende coconstruir un modelo educativo que reconozca las prácticas y los valores campesinos, así como la filosofía del Buen Vivir. El propósito de este trabajo es presentar un diálogo sistemático entre seis mujeres —tres ex guerrilleras que hacen parte del proyecto y tres investigadoras (en diferentes momentos de sus carreras)— sobre los roles, tensiones y aprendizajes experimentados por las socias del proyecto y cómo fueron posicionándose a lo largo del proceso. A través de grupos de discusión y encuentros dialógicos, analizamos conjuntamente el camino de la coimplementación. Nos centramos en abordar cuestiones relativas a qué cuenta como producción de conocimiento y las tensiones que surgen dentro y fuera de la comunidad como resultado de este esfuerzo de colaboración.

Introduction

After more than five decades of internal armed conflict in Colombia, the reincorporation of former guerilla members into civil society presents unique opportunities for re-thinking the partnerships between academia and community in peace-building efforts. Historically, there has been a division between the rural and urban settings, particularly as rural territories have been the most affected by conflict (Rettberg 2019). One of the main causes of the armed conflict was unequal land distribution, lack of access to basic services, inequality, and marginalisation of citizens, in particular rural dwellers who have been stigmatised, excluded, and ignored by the state (Molano 2015). The signature of the peace agreement between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, People's Army (FARC-EP in Spanish) guerrilla, and the Colombian state in 2016 offers the possibility for academia, community members, and former guerrilla members to engage in common projects to support the peace-building agenda. In particular, it brings to the fore the importance of *el campo* (rural territories), local practices, and understandings of life as valid forms of knowledge that need to be recognised, acknowledged, and leveraged to transform realities (Walsh 2007) beyond the scope of rurality and challenge hegemonic narratives of development.

One of the historic complicities of universities with the geopolitics of power is the research practice that replicates the dynamics of the extractivist/exploitation economies on our lands-beings. This kind of research is disengaged from the ongoing local projects in the global South that pursue the chance to have a *Buen Vivir* (Good Living), a project of resistance grounded on our rich and diverse natural and cultural landscape. As indigenous researchers and communities have denounced (Smith 1999; Tuck and Fine 2007), research is still being done about (and not with) local communities, local knowledge, and local projects, without proper recognition of the authorship involved, and with significant misunderstandings and misrepresentations. For academia, there is a critical view about the type of relationship between knowledge–education–society and the role of universities to re-visit, re-exist, and re-build its political role in society (Walsh 2020). However, we also ask is this a question to be answered only by academics?

Psychology, as much as education, needs to be decolonised and to take responsibility for the epistemic violence it has spread, including the individualistic ways of producing knowledge that ignore what is important for communities and how they produce knowledge (Readsura Decolonial Editorial Collective 2022). Community psychology recognises the need for partnership to address the relational aspects of power between professionals and community members, to develop a more equitable capacity of having control and authority over our own life decisions. As a result, we need to establish relationships guided by the values of social justice, diversity, power-sharing, compassion, among others, and professionals need to be reflexive to recognise their place of power as part of this process (Nelson and Prilleltensky 2005).

However, we still have work to do to enhance decoloniality in community psychology partnerships. For that, Aveling and Jovchelovitch's (2014) understanding of partnerships as knowledge encounters as central to community interventions may be particularly relevant. We need to consider the different actors and institutions – knowledge(s) and places of power – involved in the common project. We as researchers stand with the authors for the need for a Freirean dialogue as a 'joint action between agents who hold different knowledges'. In dialogical encounters, we need, firstly, an explicit personal and institutional positionality about values and *representational projects*, and secondly, a continuous conscientisation effort about the personal, institutional, and social contexts and contradictions (Guareschi and Jovchelovitch 2004).

In this line, the development of Participatory Action Research (PAR), when properly developed, is one accurate research approach that can support and scaffold decolonial critical practices. In the co-constructed projects with *campesino* and *fariano* communities (*Comunidades farianas*)¹ in Colombia, we might consider the invitation that Tuck and Fine (2007) extend to other indigenous researchers: we might take seriously the possibility of sovereignty – the absence of all forms of colonising power – as a prerequisite of democracy. For that, we must keep in mind that PAR opens possibilities for local approaches to education, subsistence, wellness, and knowledge as it must have co-constructed goals and research questions, collaborative design, transparency in all matters including ethical boards, budget and administrative issues, collaborative analysis, and co-crafted research products (Tuck and Fine 2007).

The Colombian context: peace building, new partnerships, and the possibility for reflection

Colombia is going through a post-agreement scenario which was originated after the peace signature between FARC-EP and the Colombian government in 2016. This post-agreement scenario has implied the development of actions to guarantee the well-being of the former guerrilla members, also known as peace signatories (*firmantes de paz*)² in their territories and the transformation of rural policies. After seven years of the signature of the peace agreement, its implementation has been a challenge. According to the Kroc Institute, the first chapter – *Rural Reform* – is one of the least developed at the moment. This chapter aims for the structural transformation of the countryside and to create conditions for the well-being and good living for the ex-guerrilla members and the rural population, to close the gap between rural and urban areas (Acuerdo Final 2016; Álvarez et al. 2022).

The Centro Poblado Héctor Ramírez – Former Territorial Space for Training and Reincorporation Héctor Ramírez (CP-HR), is a community inhabited by peace signatories and their families. The community has a local commitment to develop an educational project with a territorial approach, which has implied a recognition of the values, practices, and knowledge of rural dwellers. In 2017, the community initiated educational programmes aimed at preserving the *fariano*,³ peasant culture through the work of values, community practices, and knowledge. The CP-HR and Universidad de La Sabana developed a collaborative alliance in the framework of PAR. Since 2021 the purpose of this alliance has been to strengthen the education of the community with a community approach in the post-agreement scenario.

It is necessary to understand the educational programmes within the post-agreement *Rural Reform* in Colombia, as they respond to the urge for possibilities of *existence, analysis, and thoughts* besides the western extractivist socioeconomical rationality (Walsh 2018) as it has been insufficient in ensuring a good life in our rural landscapes. Decolonial pedagogies are needed to question the standardised quality criteria of goals and methodologies in education and to open the possibility of resistance in rural settings, as well as to keep open the possibility of intercultural encounters in which the mainstream culture learns and transforms (Walsh 2007). There has been a long effort to build an institutional alliance between the university and the community, which is woven by our interpersonal trust-based relationships. We as academic researchers and community teachers are developing ways of being and thinking together that we might call decolonial, as we are pursuing accountability towards equity and diversity values. This implies being vigilant of hierarchical structures of race, gender, class, and the naturalised ‘order of knowledge’ (Walsh 2018).

The aim of this paper is to present a decolonial attempt to discuss critically the role of research–practice partnerships in knowledge production and to widen our connections and relationships firstly between us as *campesino-fariano* and university women sharing, thinking, and acting together. This is in line with Mignolo and Walsh (2018) who highlight the multiple ways of understanding and developing a decolonial praxis/theorisation. We believe we need to understand how decolonial approaches can inform peace-building efforts in conflict-affected societies, aiming to transform diverse oppressive relationships

that are at the source of conflicts. The questions we are raising, we believe, need to be answered beyond universities. And in this case, we can start doing it from a partnership between *campesino-fariano* community teachers and academic teachers. We have taken seriously the feminist invitation recalled by Walsh (2018) about adopting a *relational way of seeing*. We opted to start thinking with each other about our own praxis, places of power, and complicities or re-existences towards the geopolitics of knowledge. We believe we might have a better look if we endorse the task collectively instead of individually, adopting the *fariano* value of *crítica y autocrítica* which implies honest but constructive personal and collective account.

Methods

Setting

This study is based on the Education, Land, and Reconciliation (EDUCARE in Spanish) Project, which aims to strengthen education in the framework of peace building in Colombia with a participatory community approach. The project follows a PAR framework, in line with an emancipatory and social transformation approach (Cornish et al. 2023). This approach focuses on generating knowledge-for-action and through-action, in service of goals of specific communities (Cornish et al. 2023, 2). It seeks to consolidate collaborative alliances between academia and rural communities through the co-construction of an educational project that recognises and links *campesino* (peasant) and *fariano* (FARC-related) values, practices, and local knowledge.

EDUCARE is developed in the CP-HR, a community of Peace Signatories located in La Montañita, Caquetá (south of Colombia, near the Amazon piedmont) and a research team from the Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Department at Universidad de La Sabana. This project brings together the Education Committee (four women and one man who are former guerrilla members) and the research team of community and social psychologists from Universidad de La Sabana.

The project has strengthened the educational initiatives that have emerged from the community initiatives since 2018. Currently, there are four non-formal educational programmes [*Guardia del monte* (Guardians of the Forest), *Reporteritos* (Little Reporters), *Deporte popular* (Popular Sports), and *Cultura y tradiciones* (Culture and Traditions)] that have benefited more than 40 children and young people from the community and surrounding villages. The programmes offer after-school activities and seek to complement formal education with local knowledge and practices. In particular, they focus on food sovereignty, environmental awareness and preservation, historical and community memory, and sports and traditional games as a space for fellowship and collective work (Fino et al., [in preparation](#)).

Participants

Participants of this study include all the authors of this paper: community teachers, junior researchers, and senior researchers representing the multiple identities, social

spheres, and power dynamics that intersect when engaging with decolonising practices within this action-research project. The community teachers (fourth, fifth, and sixth authors) are former guerrilla members who became community teachers as peace signatories engaged in EDUCARE educational programmes. The junior researcher (third author) is a woman from Bogota, a psychologist who has been mentored by the two senior researchers. She is currently the co-ordinator of the EDUCARE project, and 'Comadre' – godmother of her child – of one of the community teachers. Senior researchers (first and second authors) are women, community and social psychologists based in Bogotá, who despite being Colombian and belonging to the label of global South academics, have had different levels of privileged access to higher education in elite universities which maintain the promises and premises of modernity (Mignolo and Walsh 2018). As a result, they have chosen to embody a critical framework towards transformative research teaching and community work in alliances with oppressed communities.

Procedure

This paper aims to explore decolonial research–practice partnerships in knowledge construction and the dialogical practices and positionings within collaborative alliances through the analysis of a systematisation of experiences exercise. Systematisation of experiences is a participatory methodology designed to build and make visible knowledge that has been systematically marginalised and oppressed in Latin America (Jara 2012) through engaging in a collective reflection–action cycle. Data have been constructed through workshops and a dialogue meeting among community teachers and academics who are part of this process (all authors of this paper). Workshops include (1) a body mapping activity, where children identified specific community values reflected in each of the community teachers and shared stories about them; (2) a reflection exercise with community teachers about their body maps; and (3) three dialogical encounters to re-construct and evaluate the implementation of the educational programmes. A final round of dialogue meetings was held to discuss the initial findings of these workshops and to think critically about the potential of partnerships for knowledge construction, and the risks and opportunities of working together in a peace-building and education project. As we were geographically separated [in Bogota (academic researchers) and Caquetá (community teachers)], we held these dialogues through letters and conversations. We opened a space for critical reflection on knowledge construction and the roles of different actors within the partnerships while evaluating the educational programmes through the evaluation of experiences. In addition, we asked for recommendations to improve an alliance that enhances the power of the community teachers' knowledge, while opening a critical dialogue with other sources of knowledge. All the workshops and dialogues were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. The letters and all the written material by the academic researchers and community teachers were also included in the analysis for this paper.

Data analysis

Academic researchers conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022) to explore the dynamics of the multiple interactions between academic researchers and community teachers. This methodology was particularly useful in allowing for both inductive and deductive theme generation and engaging with the different patterns of meaning across the dataset. The analysis focused on the interactions and dynamics within all the workshops, dialogues, and conversations held by academic researchers and community teachers. It examined what counts as knowledge production, and the tensions that arise within the community and outside it as a result of this collaborative effort. The first, second, and third authors collectively read the transcripts and created memos and initial codes. This first process was useful for reflecting on our own voices as researchers and identifying the nuances of participation in those settings. This was an important methodological innovation as this initial analysis was not centred on the accounts of ‘participants’, but also included academic researchers’ utterances and how they shaped the conversation. It also allowed creation of follow-up questions for a final dialogue meeting between academics and community teachers to understand the potential and grey areas of decolonial practices in research–practice partnerships. We printed and colour-coded the initial memos and codes into similar clusters to consolidate themes. A drafted version of the themes was shared with community teachers, through a dialogue meeting where academic researchers grouped the themes into the questions of this paper: who knows, who writes, and who decolonises? (The last question was adapted to account for local knowledge. We asked about knowledge construction and the roles of the different actors within the partnership.) Each question was written on a large piece of paper, and two versions were designed: one with academic researchers’ codes and reflections, and the other just with the questions. This methodology is aligned with Lederach’s (2016) guiding principles for ethical peace research, as it allowed a step beyond validating with community pre-defined codes by researchers. Instead, it enabled a route towards self-reflection, questions of knowledge production, and a critical understanding of the collaborative partnership. Academic researchers consolidated the written documents, letters, and conversations held by the whole team in the final round of dialogue meetings, and adjusted and revised the themes and sub-themes. All the information was analysed in Spanish and, later on, translated into English for the purpose of this paper.

Findings

The aim of this paper was to discuss critically the role of research–practice partnerships in knowledge production and the different positionings within collaborative alliances in the development of an educational project among former guerrilla members and researchers. To this end, we analysed transcripts and participated in workshops led by all the women who are part of the project to reflect on our relationships and partnership, and in the community-level resistance to recognise former guerrilla members as

knowledge producers and their role as teachers within the territory. In this section, we aim to solve our initial questions, which are the main themes of our analysis. *Who knows?* refers to the different types of knowledges that are part of the partnership and how they interact; *who decolonises?* addresses the question of knowledge production and recommendations about ethically engaged partnerships in peace-building and education projects; and *who writes?* is the final theme which explores the multiple strategies for dissemination developed through the implementation of the project.

Who knows?

Who is the authority around knowledge is an important question in a partnership aimed to develop non-formal educational programmes in a rural community of peace signatories. We came to question where knowledge is, and even though it appeared to be clear that we all have different knowledge, we reflected on the requirement of popular knowledge to be certificated by the official institutions. This is particularly true for former guerrilla members who are being asked to certify their skills in order to make a living while applying their knowledge consolidated before and during the war. We discussed and concluded about specific knowledge – knowledge to do; knowledge to be (Walsh 2007) – that we all provide to the common project, while staying vigilant to the possibility of idealisation of each knowledge – academic as well as community – as we agree with Guareschi and Jovchelovitch (2004) that all knowledge should be and grows upon critical reflexivity.

Community knowledge and practice

As we shared before, the educational programmes aim to support children's development after school. They are grounded in the declared values of the *campesino-fariano* community, required to achieve the *Buen Vivir*. These values are the core know-how-to-be, that guide the pedagogical strategies developed by Yas (fourth author), Tatiana (fifth author), and Carolina (sixth author), as community teachers who can embody these values as no external teacher can do. As we highlighted in the dialogues, the three of us were the first *campesino-farianas* that signed the peace agreement. We grew up in *camaradería*, learning to be *críticas-autocríticas*, and that history is what makes us now community teachers in the CPHR. *Camaradería* is one of the values easier to recognise for our students. In the words of one of them, this is visible in our everyday life:

She [community teacher] is very respectful and kind ... in Guardia del Monte one day I asked: teacher, may I have some onion to take home? And then she harvested from the community garden a little piece ... but she gave it to me with such much love. (Jhoiner, 12 years old, children's workshop)

The whole team recognises the specific knowledge and practices within organisational structures in the community, starting with the Local Council (*Junta de Acción Comunal*), and ending with the larger *Comunes* political party. Finally, it is necessary to exercise accountability with the recognition of diverse kinds of knowledge within our pedagogical

praxis. We recognise that children and families from the CPHR, as well as from nearby schools that are engaging with our educational programmes, contribute their knowledge to the learning spaces.

Campesino-fariano community members have the knowledge (and the know-how) to live and work together towards communal goals. As a result, they know how to identify individual and group strengths and to use this knowledge to consolidate specific committees and community-level dialogues to support community development. They also know how and to understand and read nature logics in order to achieve the *Buen Vivir* project (the moon cycles, the particularities of growing crops, traditional medicine using medicinal plants). In addition, *campesino-fariano* communities that are peace signatories continue the resistance fight, using the knowledge to understand critically the social, economic, and political structures of the territory. Before and after the peace agreement we, Yas (fourth author), Tatiana (fifth author), and Carolina (six author), applied our knowledge to re-exist (Walsh 2018), inviting communities to conscientise about taking care of our seeds and to promote food sovereignty in our territories. The community's capacity to recognise strengths for teamwork is linked to the capacity to be open and to put diverse knowledge in dialogue, consolidating strategic partnerships towards the community goals.

Academic knowledge and practice

The three of us who are academics, teachers, and researchers clearly value the knowledge in which we have decided to build our professional projects. Particularly for this alliance, find useful bodies of knowledge related to popular and critical education, critical community psychology, organisational strengthening, and action research. We consider that academia can also bring specific knowledge about technology, communication, and administration in shared projects. We contribute from our academic knowledge to the common project with rigorous insights for transformational purposes, to widen the visibility of the community achievements as well as to the common project through diverse communication strategies; we are capable of knitting together creative solutions, as well as building bridges with other institutions.

However, in our dialogues within the systematisation of the educational programmes, we quickly came to learn that the old idea of academic knowledge as the official (only) source of knowledge was assumed by some of the community members. As Yas mentioned: 'We are not comfortable with the comments of some of the *compañeros* of the community that continuously highlight that we do not have a *cartón* [degree]'. Re-visiting our conversations, it is evident to us that this place of power of the academic knowledge within the community can sometimes take the power and confidence away from community teachers, even more so if people do not participate in their activities. This is part of their analysis and reflections throughout their journey: "What are we doing wrong?", we ask ourselves. They must think we don't know anything at all.' (Yas, reflective encounter 3).

Academic knowledge is linked to a strong place of power in the alliance – as usual – not only for the specialised knowledge but also because of the institutional power to build

intersectional alliances and the economic power to develop projects. We all value the possibilities of learning pedagogy, community research, and technical and organisational skills from academia that do improve educational programmes. But for the ones who are community teachers, this also represents an opportunity for the officialisation of our knowledge through academic certificates. This role of academia as legitimators of knowledge deserves attention: As Yas highlights, nowadays a *cartón* is required to do the jobs we are capable of, and the knowledge acquired before the agreement (literary skills, health care, and organisational capacities) needs to be certificated to be recognised by civil society. Officialised knowledge must not be naturalised as the better one. Latin American academics have the task to advance in inventing ‘other’ ways of ‘thinking-acting’ originated in the diverse beings and knowledge of our sociocultural landscape. It is urgent to assume our responsibility to question the ‘sub-humanity’ of some who are on the path of being eliminated and embody the *decolonial attitude* required to walk towards a social, epistemic, and existential justice (Walsh 2020).

As academic researchers we, Natalia (first author), Laura (second author), and María Alejandra (third author), recognise there is a particular version of academia in which we affiliate, being accountable with our values as community psychologists: the way we understand knowledge is guided by the pursuit of social change towards justice and diversity (Nelson and Prilleltensky 2005). During our dialogues, we put those values on the table, and we made evident how they force us to be accountable with the *campesino-fariano* value of being critical and self-critical (*críticas y autocríticas*). We need to keep exercising our awareness about our role *inside the belly of the beast*, dismantling hegemonic places of power and knowledge, and allowing traditional and *campesino* knowledge and practices to lead the required transformations.

As community teachers pointed out in our conversations, this critical awareness must be a continuous praxis, embodied in daily relationships if university teachers want their students to learn by their example. The *decolonial attitude* is similar to the *cultural humility* capacity, which we as academic teachers have come to learn from our students as something that is required to be good critical community psychologists working in intercultural settings. We also found that it is developed on practical–reflexive settings guided by role model teachers (Trigos-Carrillo et al. 2020). With this understanding, academic teachers designed enabling spaces throughout the systematisation process, aiming for individual and group empowerment described below.

Dialogically constructed knowledge

In our final dialogues, Yas has pointed out that academic and community knowledge should not remain apart as different islands. On the contrary, we should pursue dialogical spaces to learn and build useful knowledge for well-being. In this journey, the whole team has been there for the community work: we as community teachers have been there for academic researchers; and academic researchers have been there for community teachers as well. None of us has been alone.

The dialogically constructed knowledge can be found in the design of the programmes, activities, and methodologies. It is also evident in the learnings we are constructing in the

systematisation of experiences around the two years of the programmes implementation. To be fully coherent with the decolonial commitments to interculturality, the result of the dialogue must be decolonial (Walsh 2007). That is, the knowledge-practice we construct must also impact and transform the majoritarian order of knowledge of our shared context.

We know that the reluctance to hear certain voices, obscures dialogical possibilities. To construct real dialogical knowledge, we must not be naïve about power dynamics between us, but address them. And we also must be aware of the risk of masking everything as a collective endeavour. To gain dialogically constructed knowledge, we need decolonial partnerships as described below. The main knowledge at the basis of knowledge to be constructed are the shared values of social justice and being *críticas y autocríticas*.

Who decolonises?

The question of who is in charge of decolonisation is the basis of our reflection. After reading the transcripts and holding discussions among ourselves (both academic researchers and community teachers), the answer is threefold. Firstly, we agree with Mignolo and Walsh (2018) on the contradiction of trying to decolonise others, and based on this we, Natalia (first author), Laura (second author), and María Alejandra (third author), believe that we first need to decolonise ourselves as academics. Secondly, as community teachers, we, Yas (fourth author), Tatiana (fifth author), and Carolina (sixth author), consider that we also need to think about how we see our own knowledge and what we really value within our community, to keep strengthening our fight for the consolidation of our political project of *Buen Vivir*. Thirdly, and this involves both the community teachers and academic researchers (all the authors of this paper), we need to think about how to decolonise our partnership fully. In this section, we address these issues.

Decolonising academia

This first sub-theme refers to a specific self-reflection process when the academic researchers began analysing transcripts from the different workshops and focus groups held with community teachers. As we (academic researchers) were trained to do, we coded utterances to understand what was happening in terms of knowledge production in those spaces. This is in line with what the Readsura Decolonial Editorial Collective (2022) referred to as the process of identifying and challenging epistemic violence. We soon realised that this analysis had to focus on the way we were also contributing to those dynamics. From a critical and decolonial perspective, we were also reproducing standard methods of knowledge production. Although this was not always the case, we will focus on the risks we identified and end with a commentary on how we can keep learning from them and continue towards the hard road of decolonial thinking.

As academics, we are used to designing and outlining the sessions with community members. We rigorously write methodological guides to orient the main outcomes of

each session. Even though PAR processes rely on community involvement, we still need to think of strategies to engage in meaningful conversations. Throughout the transcripts, we identified two types of knowledge encounters (Jovchelovitch 2007, 2019) that mediated our interactions with community teachers. In workshops where our ideas of specific outcomes were set, there were some cases where we drew the conversations towards our own agenda despite the silence and alternative routes presented by community teachers. For example, one of our colleagues elaborated on the idea of a live museum to preserve local practices and values that could travel to different regions, and we, as academic researchers, supported the idea. However, community teachers refrained from participating in co-constructing that idea and instead ignored it by presenting specific local practices as the ideal strategy to engage in conversations with their own community. This type of monologue was then completed when, in spite of community teachers' reactions, we carried on with the idea of the live museum. In the same way, we identified several occasions in which silence after a question directed to *campesino-farianas* community teachers was rapidly filled by junior researchers or students, trying to paraphrase the questions, give examples of possible answers, or even answer them. Re-reading and analysing those excerpts have been for us a methodological route towards self-reflection and an opportunity for incorporating *fariano* values such as critique and self-critique (*crítica y autocrítica*).

As a result, we argue that decolonising academia involves entering into reflexive dialogical encounters, where we constantly analyse our own roles as researchers. Further analysis of transcripts, along with academic discussions by Natalia (first author) and Laura (second author), has been a useful opportunity to examine our different positions regarding research and community work. A common thread of interactions involved the risk of over-emphasising the importance of community knowledge by minimising or masking our own. Even though methodological and theoretical knowledge is the basis of academic research, we identified instances where we invited community teachers to a co-construction of theoretical knowledge, we tried to hide the fact that we already knew the theoretical underpinnings of each session as it happened in an interaction starting the systematisation of experiences (a specific participatory programme evaluation strategy from Latin American scholars):

Academic researcher: So ... 'profes'; what do we understand as Systematisation of Experience?

Yas: No, 'profe', why don't you tell us what this is about, as you are the one that knows the strategy? (Reflective encounter 1)

However, there were other instances in which we actively established a position of co-construction of knowledge by sharing what we know as academics, but then creating spaces for discussion, questions, laughter, and honest conversations. As we set this journey of conversations and encounters not only as academic researchers or community teachers but also as women, our discussions are mediated by a sense of camaraderie, trusting each other, and being able to speak up when there is something missing. Following our previous example, when we tried to mask our own knowledge, there were moments when

community teachers ‘called our bluff’ and told us directly not to ask questions that we already knew the answer to. In contrast, Tatiana highlighted that dialogical spaces are valuable because of the encounter of community teachers with academic researchers. For her, these scenarios are safe spaces to express how we feel and to be critical and auto-critical not only about the community teacher’s work but also about the academic researcher’s role in the project.

How to decolonise the community? Reflections from community teachers

When we, Yas (fourth author), Tatiana (fifth author), and Carolina (sixth author), as community teachers think about our knowledge and our community’s knowledge, we face multiple dilemmas. On one side, we all agree on the importance of local and traditional knowledge. This is what we fought as guerrilla members, and also as *campesinos*. We came from *el campo* (rural areas) and we respect ancestral knowledge linked to good living, food sovereignty, and natural medicine. These practices and knowledge were the basis for our *fariano* culture when we were fighting in the jungle. However, we were also recognised as nurses, journalists, and politicians because we studied and got informal training in those areas. One of the challenges we face entering into civil society is the constant questioning of our knowledge and the demands for certified qualifications of what we know. Even elementary education. We understand this is how civil society works, but what happens when our own comrades question what we do?

Working as community teachers has been an opportunity to think about the education of our children, youth, and even us as adults. Even though we are not graduated teachers, we took upon the challenge of becoming teachers. Some of us were nurses, others in charge of communication, but now we all identify as women, community teachers, and peace signatories. However, this comes with doubts and problems at the community level. For some of our comrades, our knowledge is now not enough. We receive comments on how traditional knowledge is ‘outdated’, and prefer external actors coming to teach us things rather than preserving valuable processes such as community gardens, healing ourselves through plants, and overall, dismissing *campesino* knowledge. We are aware of the importance of dialogues with academics or external actors, and we are eager to learn. But we are also acutely aware of the importance of our own knowledge and we consider that one of our roles inside the community is to challenge what some people are starting to think: that it is not valuable. Sometimes we feel we are not valued and we are not enough. We question our roles, and we feel bad. However, we also think these people are mostly permeated by an individualistic society, one that they are encountering as citizens now, and our role as community teachers is maintaining what brought us here: the value of the collective.

In this regard, we also identify there is work to do to dismantle other hegemonic orders of knowledge and practice that have started to root within our community. This is the moment in which we can all apply the lessons we spread about social and economic well-being outcomes linked to food sovereignty and native seeds protection. And somehow, we see some of our comrades needing to strengthen accountability towards this central goal of our *Buen Vivir* project.

Decolonising partnerships

The alliance between the small village Héctor Ramírez (CP-HR) and Universidad de La Sabana has been consolidated for the last five years. This process requires continuous conversations and dialogues among the people involved, but also understanding how research is a relational project where everyone has different forms of knowing (Abo-Zena, Jones, and Mattis 2022). For academic researchers, rigorous research needs to be transparent and clear about the role of theory in shaping the implementation of projects, as well as the importance of practices of reflexivity aligned with the methodology (Trainor and Graue 2014). For us as community teachers and our fellow comrades, it implied honest conversations about our own goals, projects, and expectations. It was clear from the beginning that we, Yas (fourth author), Tatiana (fifth author), and Carolina (sixth author), wanted to be aware of all the products derived from the project and were sceptical about processes of researchers aiming to do ‘academic extractivism’, as one of our fellow comrades denominated the process of extracting data without any involvement. As Tatiana mentioned, the alliance with Universidad de La Sabana, in contrast with other institutions, has been successful due to a constant effort to be respectful of the agreements built with the co-operative during the initial trust-building process as well as over project design, development, and evaluation.

As time went by, and also as a result of the pandemic, members of Universidad de La Sabana were able to live for more than a year with the community, including Laura (second author). Living alongside community teachers, sharing life stories, and creating enabling spaces for open discussions and critical dialogues allowed consolidation of a knowledge encounter throughout the partnership (Aveling and Jovchelovitch 2014). This trust-building exercise has enabled the whole team to design, implement, and evaluate the project and project-related activities. But it is also a site for self-engagement and self-disclosure where we are not just community teachers or academic researchers, but also women, peace signatories, social justice fighters, and, above all, human beings who feel and relate to each other.

To account for the multiple stories, ways of living, understandings, and knowledges, we have implemented strategies to assess our progress collectively. Community teachers have consolidated the ‘balance’ space, in which they sit down among themselves to provide feedback on activities, monthly progress, and the overall process. This space is brought from their experience as part of the guerrilla, in which being *critical of others and themselves* was a cherished value and balances were the methodology created for this endeavour. This is also a site for *collective direction*, where decision-making relies on a democratic process. The implementation of ‘balances’ is also part of the work with children, as they are included in planning the activities as well as assessing the outcomes of each one. Academic researchers are invited to participate in weekly meetings to discuss the progress of the project, and also to construct the next steps collectively. Additionally, academic researchers develop their own strategies to maintain academic rigour in line with decolonial practices. One of the pillars of this process is to respect and honour the trust and camaraderie with community teachers. To this end, the research team has constant dialogues about academic products with community teachers and other members of the alliance. In order to avoid falling into practices of epistemic

extractivism (Readsura Decolonial Editorial Collective 2022), one of the commitments we honour is to share ideas, analysis, and methodologies among partners, and have discussions about the interpretations, representations, and empirical results that are to be published with the academic community. Even though this is a lengthy and sometimes difficult process, we as a team have valued those moments where the different knowledges come together and complement each other. As Yas (fourth author) mentioned: ‘you can know a lot about methodologies and theories, but when you come to the field, we are the ones teaching you about the *campo*’.

Even more, these dialogical encounters have been key to improving our project, and identifying mistakes to be avoided in the future, to preserve the principles and values that lead towards the *Buen Vivir* goal: community teachers reaffirm that educative projects must be designed, led, and developed by community members and not by the external actors.

Thanks to this slow look at our interactions – a decolonial research practice – we identify that establishing caring and honest interpersonal relationships over time, at different levels, is a solid basis of a possible decolonial partnership. The interpersonal, as feminists have argued about the personal (Moane 2006), is highly political. It is when we share enough time together, in and outside our territories, that the need to rely on each other’s knowledge becomes mandatory. It is when we stop to hear and reflect upon personal struggles or discomfort, as well as when we give space for enthusiastic new ideas or personal interests, that we are able – or not – to unmask what needs to be decolonised.

Who writes?

The question about knowledge production necessarily involves the multiple ways in which it is disseminated. While there is a clear pathway for academia, mainly through written publications such as academic journals, book, and chapters, communities are still negotiating strategies to share their knowledge while maintaining authorship and also being in line with their goals and expectations. In our last dialogue, we discussed the importance of making visible community efforts as well as the reflections from the process by academic researchers and community teachers. In this dialogical space, we as community teachers highlighted the importance of oral tradition to share our knowledge, as well as practical knowledge that goes beyond theoretical understandings of our lived experience. For this reason, we (fourth, fifth, and sixth authors) believe that dissemination requires an effort to engage local communities, our comrades from other rural areas who can learn from our experience, and therefore, there is a need to maintain our language, oral tradition, and focus on practical tools for sharing our message. For us as academic researchers, there is a need to engage with other researchers and the academic community as it is important for us to transform the epistemological approaches to community-based research. As a result, writing academic papers, books, and chapters involves a long-term commitment to maintain critical dialogues about and with academia on our role as community researchers who are politically and socially aware.

In this line, and to be coherent with the aim of this paper, one of the conclusions of our last dialogue meeting was to consolidate a process of co-production among academic

researchers and community teachers that recognises the needs and goals of each side. For example, it is important to stop romanticising academic, written production as the only example of co-production, and instead work together to find common strategies to disseminate key messages. However, this last meeting was also an opportunity to discuss fully the potential of academic journals to transform academia and also to provide a critical view of epistemic extractivism as a risk inherent in research processes. For us as community teachers, it is important that ‘nothing is written about us without us’, which means we need to read and adjust the content of publications, and also have access to its final version. This is important, as Carolina mentioned, because ‘we would love that when people come to our library, they see our names in a piece of paper that contains our reflections and thoughts’. This approach towards co-production is in line with Lederach’s (2016) proposal of ethical research, as engaging in active dialogue with communities about data analysis and writing documents can prevent misrepresentation.

Co-production, in these conditions, plays a role in decolonising academia as well as community and self. For instance, recently María Alejandra (junior researcher) and Tatiana (community teacher) participated in a Latin American conference sharing the results of the systematisation of experiences study. Tatiana identifies that this experience – her first participation in an academic event outside her community – empowers her as a community teacher, even more when it enhances her legitimisation as a teacher in front of the community members who have questioned community teachers’ authority because of the absence of an academic certification of their capacities. This is just one of the possibilities for academia to develop decolonial practices and pedagogies. That is, to rest from the unidirectional effort of including “others” in their educational processes, and instead, lean into learning and be transformed – as Walsh (2007) has claimed – in this case by campesino-fariano ways of being and knowing. However, it is also important to problematise the exercise of co-production. As we mentioned before, papers in academic journals and book chapters are not part of the goals and expectations of the community. Its language and format are not what communities are used to reading as the audience is very specific (academics and practitioners). Therefore, co-production of papers and book chapters is not necessarily the gold standard of community-based research. Even though we are currently working together to construct this text collectively, we as academic researchers are the ones in charge of the actual writing and articulation of ideas and reflections. Our work with community teachers involves a process of translation (not only from English to Spanish, but also the language we use) to guarantee that what we write reflects their ideas and worldview. Nevertheless, we also recognise the need to move beyond academic papers and participate in dissemination strategies where knowledge is also produced and made visible to communities in their own language.

Conclusions

In this paper, we aimed to present an analytic exercise of our dialogues as a decolonial relational reflexive account. This dialogue between community teachers and academic researchers seeks to demonstrate our disposition to maintain accountability to the shared

values of our partnership (social justice, being *críticas y autocríticas*). It is also an opportunity to think about decoloniality as a continuous process that involves both community and academia and a reflexive exercise about our own practices. For us, decolonial thinking involves a relational dialogue where both community and academia can mutually critically think about decoloniality within ourselves, our communities, and institutions.

We presented our path towards developing a decolonial praxis/theorisation. We conveyed a collective critical discussion among academic researchers and community teachers on the role of partnerships in knowledge construction in the implementation of an action-research educational project of a former guerrilla community in Colombia. We recognised shared goals and values, diverse roles, tensions, ongoing learnings, and evolving relationships in the team.

In our discussions about *who knows?*, we shared our mutual recognition of diverse knowledges useful for the consolidation of the *Buen Vivir* project. We agree on the importance of critical examination of local practices to avoid the idealisation of both community knowledge (Campbell and Jovchelovitch 2000) as well as academic knowledge. This is also linked to the need to remain aware of the mainstream pressure to 'legitimate' local knowledge with academic titles. Even though this is still a contested subject, we believe in the pressing need to build a middle-ground approach to understanding knowledge, knowledge construction, and its legitimation. Academic degrees can provide community members with technical tools to think about their community as well as access to education to support the process of reincorporation (Kaplan and Nussio 2018) and create a new identity for former guerrilla members. On the other hand, it is also important to highlight and preserve the place of power that the local knowledge, practices, values, and principles have. One new pathway for the partnership could be reaching this balance and finding suitable and less-invasive roles for academia, while at the same time supporting the development of education journeys that fit the needs and expectations of community members. The recognition of the community's knowledge and the knowledge of community teachers' values and practices cannot be replaced by other knowledge and is embodied in the community teachers as *campesino-farianas*. The question of how local knowledge and practices can transform those of academia is yet to be explored and enhanced. However, our discussion about *who writes?* provides tools to further develop strategies for co-production and research-practice partnerships.

Addressing the question of *who decolonises?*, we conclude that building a decolonial partnership (at the institutional and relational levels) between former guerrilla community members and academic researchers is key to supporting the local educational programmes towards the *Buen Vivir* project, needed for a stable peace in Colombia. Adopting the feminist *relational way of seeing*, we claim that institutional partnerships are built on interpersonal trust-based relationships that can only be effective when questioning the established places of power and complicities towards the geopolitics of knowledge. Academic authors agree on the call to maintain the decolonising practice within us, embracing cultural humility as an ongoing process. Community teachers agree on the need to revise to what extent we and our community are

currently valuing local knowledge and practices. All of us, as a team, highlight the value of this slow and piecemeal process to our interactions as a decolonial practice that requires to be preserved. A rigorous analysis of these dynamics requires time, trust, and patience, something that short-term research processes usually lack. Once this is part of the landscape, it is also possible to be caring, to receive ideas and points of view, and at the same time to be open to critical reflection when personal struggles or discomfort is shared.

Participatory research as we have presented here can be nurtured by decolonial approaches, as both are based on local resources, knowledge, and values. We aim to strengthen collaborations from design to implementation and co-production, maintaining collective reflection of these processes and our evolving relationships. While reflecting on *who writes?*, we conclude that we need to be accountable with the recognition of the validity of multiple ways of disseminating knowledge. Therefore, we must keep encouraging oral and applied knowledge-sharing practices in community settings, but also in academic spaces as well. In relation to co-production disseminated in academic written formats like this one, community members authorship requires procedures that ensure the approval of drafts and final written documents. Co-production in academic papers requires further problematisation in relation to when and why it is required for decolonial purposes, and how it must be developed to address power imbalances and prevent misunderstandings in the translation to other languages or academic terminology itself. However, we found that co-production in academic settings – as the participation of community teachers in academic conferences – does play a role in decolonising self, community, and academia as we are all called to recognise teachers as *campesino-fariano* knowledge keepers from whom we all can learn, with or without an academic degree.

Decolonial partnerships encourage the ongoing *críticas y autocríticas fariano* principle, to protect the protagonist role of *campesino-fariano* knowledge and practices in the local educational programmes, understanding they shape the living ways required for a sustainable and equitable life in rural settings. For that, we understand the value of the Freirian dialogical encounters beyond the current systematisation of experiences, as those dialogical encounters have proven to be key for improving the current project development, enhancing personal and institutional positionality, and to transform and strengthen partnerships as knowledge encounters.

Notes

1. *Fariano* communities refers to the ex-FARC-EP members living in the Former Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation (AETCR in Spanish) who are building a community based on their values and principles along with their families. These spaces were created in 2017 as part of the implementation of the peace agreement and are located in 24 different areas of the country where the FARC-EP had strong presence.
2. Peace signatories is the current denomination of former guerrilla members in the process of reincorporation.
3. *Fariano* is the denomination of FARC-EP-related practices and lifestyle.

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