EFL Pre-Service & In-Service Teachers as Agents of Change: Enhancing Social Justice Practices in a Colombian Public University

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As a critical-Colombian scholar, I read the reality of my country with an urgent need to act and build bridges between communities and academia. I discuss how 2016 peace-agreements and 2018 presidential-elections marked an important historical period for Colombia. I examine the relationship between neoliberalism and educational policies to further discuss why social justice education matters in Colombia. I introduce the roots, premises, and stages of the "Pedagogy of Possibilities" where social justice constitutes an individual and collective act to become a door of possibilities to let others be and become. I explain how a social-justice-oriented syllabus impacted EFL pre-service teachers' identity construction.

Keywords: Social Justice Education, decolonizing EFL, decolonizing the self, pedagogy of possibilities, identity construction

A WALK TOWARDS RECONCILIATION AND PEACE: A LOOK AT COLOMBIA'S SOCIO-CULTURAL REALITY

I write this chapter in the midst of a crucial historical and political time in which a neoliberal government, under the administration of Iván Duque, has represented a threat to build peace in Colombia. Although, the signature of peace agreements with one of the illegal armed groups in the country and the unexpected turn in the first-round of 2018 presidential elections arose over Colombia like a ray of hope for an unequal but hardworking, resilient, and courageous nation; the results of 2018 presidential elections have placed the present and future of the environment, social leaders, and communities into the terrain of chaos and despair. The last six years, have particularly been a fertile terrain of thought about the institutional, individual, and collective decisions and actions that shape the imaginaries of who we are as a people and as a nation. Throughout these years there have been moments of tension. After four years of dialogue with Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) - [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-RAFC], the ex-president Juan Manuel Santos called for a plebiscite on October 2, 2016. His intention was to get approval of the peace agreements to be signed with FARC. However, more than 50% of voters did not support the implementation of such agreements. Despite the negative results of the plebiscite, the Colombian government signed the peace agreement on November 2016. The nation is immersed in what some call the "post-conflict era". To me, Colombia is a nation in-conflict whose communities strive to build peace. The persisting violence inflicted by other illegal armed groups, paramilitary forces, the army, criminal bands (known as BACRIM- bandas criminales), and other forms of violence make of peace-building a complex process. When the pandemics hit the country, the social reality of Colombia was already convulsed after having experienced national strikes in 2018 and 2019. Colombian citizens were trying to

make sense of what it meant to live in this new historical time and see former FARC militants as regular citizens (Mitchel, 2017) and as members of a new political force. Four years have passed since the peace agreements were signed; nevertheless, the current government has not fulfilled with commitments acquired and some of the processes following the agreements are still unclear and uncertain. How Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz (JEP) [the Special Jurisdiction of Peace] has operated is still being debated. However, victimized peoples trust and believe that JEP will commit to the principles of truth, justice, and reparation.

Neoliberal politicians have ruled Colombia for decades. Álvaro Uribe Vélez, ex-president, has become the shadow that took Santos to the presidency (2010-2018) and who has placed Iván Duque in power (2018-2022). Uribe continues to use his economic power to control the country this time by using Iván Duque. Both Uribe Vélez and Duque openly expressed their opposition to peace agreements. As a president, Duque presented six objections against JEP that put at risk peace agreements. Fortunately, the congress rejected such objections. A portion of Colombian citizens knew that if Duque was elected "peace agreements [would] be at risk" (Sanabria as quoted in Mitchel, 2017, para. 4). Still, those politicians in the opposition have persisted in rejecting policies that threaten the environment, gender equity, and justice.

What would have the present of Colombia been if another candidate had been elected as a president? This may sound as an irrelevant question. We might wonder instead about the lessons that as individuals, societies, and institutions have learned from the pandemic. Will those lessons allow us to mobilize and unite to fight for our common good? Will those lessons be enough for us to choose a future president that may represent a ray of hope for our communities? The systematic murder of social leaders in Colombia continues to raise. More than 591 social leaders and 135 ex-guerrilla members of FARC have been murdered since peace agreements were signed in 2016. In the first ten months of Duque's government 236 social leaders were killed (INDEPAZ, May 2019) and the numbers are rising; more than 200 social leaders and human right defenders have been murdered in 2020, some of these leaders' relatives and some ex-militant from FARC have also been murdered (INDEPAZ, July, 2020). My heart breaks... but, we keep moving.

NEOLIBERALISM, DEMOCRACY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION.

The past six years have challenged Colombian citizens to re-position as communities that speak from a WE standpoint rather than residing in the comfort of the "I". As a nation, we have given baby steps towards that direction. Despite the peace agreements signed with FARC, Colombian people continue struggling with neoliberal policies, racism, homophobia, and the commodification of Abya Yala [mother earth], among other issues. With fourteen free trade agreements signed, neoliberal economy has deteriorated the working conditions and well-being of peasants, truck drivers, educators, and minoritized peoples. Neoliberalism has also permeated democracy and educational structures. Unfortunately, 2020 pandemics has exacerbated the pre-existent conditions of inequity, rampant impunity, and injustice.

Neoliberalism, "the latest stage of predatory capitalism" (Giroux, 2013, p. 27), centers privatization, profit making, and individualism as the cornerstones of democracy (Harvey, 2005; Giroux, 2013). Having been originally conceived in the field of economics, neoliberalism has had a great influence in the field of education. In Latin American countries like Colombia, educational reforms have embraced neoliberal globalization agendas that generate tensions (Rubiano, 2013; Torres, 2008) and place at odds public education. Old tensions in teacher education include concerns about the discrepancy between university training and the daily reality in the classroom and the low budgets allocated for teacher education (Cuenca, 2005). The reduction of funding for public education responds to the ongoing neoliberal agenda of privatizing almost everything including education (Giroux, 2014).

Equating economic stability and success with the ability to speak English (Johnson, 2005) is the ideology that has informed decisions made by the Colombian Ministry of education – Ministerio de Educación Nacional (MEN) (Guerrero, 2009; Correa and Usma Wilches, 2013). Rubiano (2013) examined Colombian educational policies like Ley 115-Ley General de Educación [Law 115- General Education Law] and concluded that this law portrays education as "a service" that generates profit rather than as "a

right" that humanizes. For Rubiano (2013) this concept of education "diminish[es] the dream of education for social justice and equity" (p. 581).

The Ministry of Education firmly believes that bilingualism will secure the economic and social development of the country. The Ministry (MEN, 2006) argues that "[b]eing bilingual is an essential tool in a globalized world [translated]" (p. 5). Nevertheless, the unsuccessful implementation of bilingual programs in Colombia may be partially explained by the MEN's decisions to rely on foreign entities like the British Council to generate such programs and to adopt frameworks like the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment (CEF)* as the guiding document to inform Colombian English teaching methodologies (Galvis, 2011). Colombian researchers have investigated the implications and limitations of Colombian Bilingualism Programs (Guerrero, 2008; Sánchez & Obando, 2008). They have also denounced the inadequacy of implementing homogenizing bilingual policies and frameworks that neglect the socio-cultural reality of the country (Guerrero, 2009) and ignore the needs of communities in rural (Bonilla & Cruz-Arcila, 2014) and urban educational settings (Galvis, 2011; Usma, 2009). Similarly, scholars have examined the ways in which language policies hinder the goal of educating critical and resourceful citizens (Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016).

The decontextualized nature of bilingual policies that ignore the multicultural and multilingual nature of the country is problematic (Guerrero, 2009; Usma, 2009; Bonilla & Cruz-Arcila, 2014). As argued by Guerrero (2009): "[s]ince the Spanish colonization, language policies in Colombia have been marked by a constant asymmetry that values the language of the powerful and disregards the languages of the powerless" (p. 21). Therefore, the use of the term "bilingualism" in a multilingual context like Colombia is a threat to the construction of individual, communal, and national identities. Consequently, Colombian researchers highlight the need to create language policies and implement teaching methodologies that use a "critical sociocultural model" (Correa and Usma Wilches, 2013) that may respond to specific communities' needs (Galvis, 2011). Unfortunately, these studies have been unattended by MEN. Instead, there is a growing trend in the nation towards the use of standardized tests.

Hence, EFL Colombian teachers have to deal with the ongoing neoliberal efforts to privatize universities, the lack of institutional investment on research, and the directives of the Ministry of Education that sees education as a business. But, neoliberal ideology is also entrenched in most university professors' ways of being and thinking. Some of their decision nurture their sense of self-accomplishment; i.e. their desire of being popular and successful. In Giroux's (2013) words, neoliberal values (e.g. competition, individualism) turn teachers into "free possessive individual[s] [who have] no obligations to anything beyond his or her self-interest" (p. 28). In my sixteen years of university experience, I have witnessed how some university teachers fall in the trap of neoliberal anti-values like plagiarism of ideas, exertion of power to use and abuse students' intellectual work, and the encouragement of rivalry and competition among members of research groups. Thus, engaging in social justice education also demands from educators to re-examine the ideologies that inform our philosophies of teaching, discourses, and actions that may promote division instead of team work.

WHY DOES SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION MATTER IN COLOMBIA?

FIGURE 1
GRAFFITI AT UNIVERSIDAD PEDAGÓGICA Y TECNOLÓGICA DE COLOMBIA (UPTC)[1]
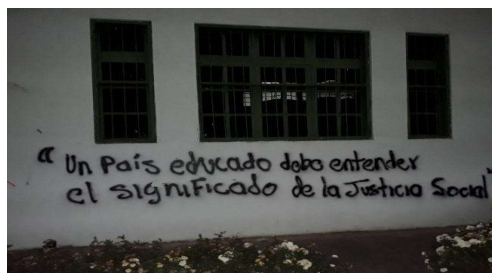
Colombia, as any other country, experiences a complex socio-cultural reality where education plays a key role in fighting against injustice, discrimination, and anti-democracy. Educating critical world citizens is a responsibility of educators from all subjects (Calle Díaz, 2017; Sierra Piedrahita, 2016). Hence, I intend to contribute and enlarge the conversations on the conceptual and practical tools of embracing social justice in EFL teaching training programs in Colombia. I will first introduce some definitions of social justice followed by a discussion of how social justice education has taken place in Colombia.

Social justice education is a contested terrain due to the ambiguity in definitions and approaches (McDonald, 2005; McDonald & Zeichner, 2009; Rubiano, 2013). Social justice does not have "a single essential meaning" (Rizvi as quoted in Hytten & Bettez, 2011); as a consequence, there is a lack of knowledge about the pragmatics of social justice and the levels of commitment to such practices is uneven (Hytten & Bettez, 2011; McDonald & Zeichner, 2009). Approaches to social justice education are usually tied to principles of multicultural education where education's ultimate goal is to train teachers to work with students from diverse backgrounds (McDonald & Zeichner, 2009; McDonald, 2005). However, Social Justice Teacher Education (SJTE) may also be conceived as the grounds for reducing inequalities in school systems (McDonald & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2011).

Social justice education in the U.S. has been widely studied. Hytten & Bettez (2011) portray the intricate nature of socially just practices in education in arranging the literature in five categories: philosophical/conceptual, practical, ethnographic/narrative, theoretically specific, and democratically grounded. The review of these studies permits to learn about principles for SJTE (Lynch & Baker, 2005), practices of e.g. "activist social justice education" (Bettez, 2008), narratives that denounce injustices (Valenzuela, 1999), and stories about successful experiences of just education (Landson-Billings, 1994). The literature review presented by Hytten & Bettez (2011) raises awareness about the myriad of fields that claim to use social justice in their agendas such as: multiculturalism, progressivism, critical theory, post structuralism, feminism, and cultural studies.

In my search for the literature about social justice education in foreign languages in Colombia I identified five experiences that directly use the notion of social justice. I acknowledge that there are other studies conducted in terms of gender equality (Mojica & Castañeda, 2017) and citizenship (Rojas Serrano, 2008), for instance, that I would consider contribute to the discussions about social justice in Colombia. However, there is a gap to be filled in terms of Social Justice Practices (SJP) in EFL teaching preparation programs. I would like to emphasize that there may be more practices that I was unable to trace when writing this chapter. Nevertheless, I invite Colombian scholars who have invested in social justice education practices to join the dialogue and share their experiences. First, Ana Maria Sierra Piedrahita's (2016) work enlarges the discussion about how social justice may enrich Professional Development Programs (PDPs). For this scholar, social justice "[helps] in-service teachers [to] develop a more political perspective about their profession" (p. 207). Drawing from authors like Hawkins (2011) and Zeichner (2009, 2011), Sierra Piedrahita (2016) suggests that PDPs should offer teachers opportunities to feel empowered, interact with community activists, and "consider and understand concepts, issues, and ideas related to teaching for social justice" (p. 208).

The second scholar, Clara Inés Rubiano (2013), used Paulo Freire's concept of "directivity" to analyze the tensions in teacher education programs including pervasive oppression, hierarchical oppression, and internalized oppression. For Rubiano (2013) Freire's notion that teachers have a motivation (utopia, dream, and/or political agenda) to teach and that they work to nurture that motivation "becomes a vital guiding principle towards conceptualizing professional knowledge in regard to social justice and equity" (p. 586). For Rubiano (2013) teacher educators are crucial role-models to "reconceptualising the way in which new teachers are prepared" (Howard as quoted in Rubiano, 2013, p. 583).

The third experience I encountered is a book that accounts for the results of a collaborative study on in-service teachers' professional development (2009-2017) developed between Universidad Distrital in Colombia and University of New Hampshire in the U.S. Clavijo-Olarte and Ramírez (2018), book editors, narrate the process of using Community Based Pedagogy (CPB) in working with public school teachers in the urban area of Bogotá, Colombia. In the third chapter of the book, teachers from subjects like natural sciences and chemistry talk about their experiences using CPB to teach and to a design curriculum

connected to students' lives. The researchers argue that this shift in approaching the classroom and curriculum design processes is an attempt to fulfill with principles of equity and social justice.

In the fourth experience, Ortega (2019) reifies the importance of building social justice and peacebuilding curriculum (SJPBC) in the EFL Colombian classroom to promote peace and reconciliation. Ortega's collaborative action research conducted with 9th graders and a teacher of a public school in Bogotá, examined how students learned social and citizenship skills to simultaneously discuss conflict and learn English. The active participation of the students and the teacher evidenced that when peace and violence are discussed in EFL classes, not only linguistic skills are developed, but also peacebuilding skills can be developed that may impact their schools, homes, and communities.

Finally, Carvajal Medina, Poveda, and Rojas Sandoval (2012) share their experience partnering with a non-profit organization that supported displaced children. The researchers built relationships with children for about six months to identify their needs. Afterwards, they designed a contextualized unit, i.e. a unit that incorporated the children's curiosity and socio-cultural reality. The unit also considered the language Standards proposed by the Ministry of education and proposed new criteria that enlarged the scope of criticality in the foreign language classroom. The nine lessons that comprised the didactic unit were developed with eight displaced youth aged 10-16. The investigators concluded that designing contextualized units, using questioning, and allowing children to use their mother tongue (Spanish) allowed youth to develop their cognitive skills and develop a sense of belonging to the class.

One of the commonalities in these five experiences is the call researchers make to envision tangible ways to approach social justice education in foreign language teaching in Colombia. Hence, in the following section I share one of my attempts to contribute to this conversation.

PEDAGOGY OF POSSIBILITIES

Roots

I identify as a human being under construction and as a passionate-critical-decolonizing scholar activist. I will briefly explain three of the roads that may inform the way I position today.

One

> That time of the year has come. The sun caresses our souls through our flesh and bones while the wind fills our lungs with the scent of the moist soil. My parents' shadows provide shelter and warmth. Manos a la tierra- hands to the soil- Right on my knees, my three-year old fingertips sense the beating wet soil. My palms want to trace the path to unknown ancient roots.
>
> While digging, the golden treasure comes to the surface lighting my eyes.
> "Small, just like her," my mom says. And she adds, "Those are her favorites." She searches for the small potatoes and puts them in a bag. "The little tiny potatoes are what she will eat" (Carvajal Medina, 2017, p. 1)

When people ask where my passion to work with communities emerges from, I have no definite answer. I look back to memories my parents recount from my childhood to understand the nature of my "self". The previous story may speak to my respect to the land and to my parents' hard work. It may speak to the reasons why I value simple things. This experience among others and parents' example as leader of the communities we have been part of, may explain why I commit to learning from communities.

FIGURE 2
KIA'S LOGO DESIGNED BY DEILY PATINO AND JONATAN CARDENAS
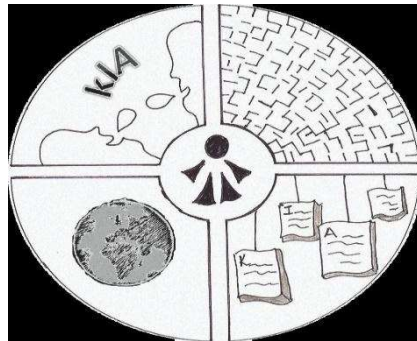
In 2008, I founded the research group Knowledge in Action (KIA). In the company of Jonatan Cárdenas and Yenny Deily Patiño we started exploring in depth Paulo Freire's ideas on critical pedagogy. Since then, KIA family has grown, we have partnered with local Non-governmental Organizations like Juventas, and we have used movies to create spaces for critical dialogue on discrimination and stereotypes on UPTC campus (the university I work for). Analyzing the group dynamics, I think KIA has been a space for building relationships, growing intellectually and humanly, developing professional skills, and serving communities.

Three

Between 2014 and 2017 I had the opportunity to conduct a critical-decolonizing ethnographic study on US rural homelessness. Grounding my study in Chicana/Latina Feminism and indigenous epistemologies was an opportunity to envision decolonizing possibilities for the "self". Thus, "comprensiones" [understandings] I developed about how to decolonize the self are reflected in the premises of the pedagogy of possibilities. Understanding that we are selves-in-relation, i.e. that WE ARE the relationships we build and honoring the relationships with the land, others and communities (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008) permeate my thinking, doing, and being.

Premises

Being immersed in neoliberal educational environments Henry Giroux (2013) invites educators to position as public intellectuals, i.e. "to combine mutually interdependent roles of critical educator and active citizen" (p. 30) and to "[develop] forms of critical pedagogy capable of challenging neoliberalism […] while resurrecting a democratic project that provides the basis for imagining a life beyond the 'dream world' of capitalism" (p. 28). Paulo Freire (1993) invokes us to remember that people's vocation is humanization. In humanizing our practices, including education, oppressed individuals need to resist the oppressors' idea that "being" is "having" since in having oppressors "suffocate in their own possessions and no longer *are*" (Freire, 1993, p. 41). The "pedagogy of the oppressed" is a "humankind pedagogy" in which the oppressor has the responsibility to critically recognize the causes of oppression, avoid resignation to dominant structures, perceive oppression as a "limiting situation" that can be transformed, and act (Freire, 1993).

Therefore, becoming a critical-resistant scholar activist involves developing not only cognitive skills like knowing and evaluating but also intellectual traits like "intellectual humility" and "intellectual empathy". On one hand, being intellectually humble implies being aware of "the limitations of one's knowledge" ("Valuable intellectual virtues," 1996) and struggling with the egocentric desire to become popular and famous. Listening to others may enlarge knowledge about how a culture is constructed and re-created. Teachers may also create communities of practice (Leave & Wenger as cited in Pallas 2001, p.7) where they share, construct, and deconstruct their own knowledge (epistemology), teaching and research procedures (methodology), values behind teaching/research practices (axiology), and perceptions about the

role of future professionals (ontology). Communities of practice have a dialogical nature, therefore, they portray "…the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing" (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 379). Considering everyone's voices in these communities cultivate fairer, more honest and ethical relationships.

On the other hand, teachers developing intellectual empathy become solidary, sensitive, and caring. Apart from putting yourself into someone else's shoes, "[t]his trait correlates with the ability to reconstruct accurately the viewpoints and reasoning of others and to reason from premises, assumptions, and ideas other than our own" ("Valuable intellectual virtues," 1996). This trait might be compared to the step of *repositioning* (Apple, 2012), that is "to see the world through the eyes of the dispossessed" (p. 38). A critical resistant scholar activist may understand better diverse ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving by analyzing a situation from different perspectives. This understanding of others' location of their cultures and identities in comparison to one's own may promote tolerance, respect, and sense of belonging.

Hence, the "Pedagogy of Possibilities" (POP) is informed by my lived experiences and critical decolonizing postures. This pedagogy is guided by a notion of social justice rooted in both individual and collective efforts to promote peace and equity. The Pedagogy of Possibilities is intricately associated with my vision of social justice. In Pedagogy of Possibilities informed by Social Justice Educational Practices/Processes (SJEPPs):

✓ Educators may serve as bridges (mediators) to create communities of peace where discourses and actions allow others to BE and BECOME.

✓ Educators present themselves as "selves-in-relation" (Wilson, 2008) that are imperfect and vulnerable but willing to develop new understandings

✓ Educators and other members of the academic community engage in "self-decolonizing" practices, i.e. where individuals "create a third space where values and belief systems are continuously re-evaluated, put into dialogue and negotiated" (Carvajal Medina, 2017, p. 105). In this way, through dialogue people can challenge the boundaries that isolate and separate.

✓ Educators, students, parents, and communities commit to "be present", i.e. "to embrace [their] mindbodyspirits to listen empathetically" (Carvajal Medina, 2017, p. 220). This process may lead to dissent and action. Actions like listening and caring matter.

✓ Educators, students, and communities engage in spirituality. Spirituality may be conceived as "a way of understanding someone's [or a community's] position in the world by trying to make sense of unfair economic conditions and gender inequality, and *to do something about it* [italics added]" (Elenes as quoted in Carvajal Medina, 2017, pp. 104-105). In other words, members of the academic community work WITH/FOR communities to develop understandings of a specific reality and transform it.

✓ Members of the academic community allow themselves to imagine the possibilities of who they are and, most importantly, of who they may become

✓ Educator and the academic community engage in healing processes. Healing comes from a belief that does not "[let] the rest of this oppressive society dictate our behavior, devour our energies, and control us, [mind], body and soul" (Davenport as quoted in Carvajal Medina, 2017, p. 221).

A Pedagogy of Possibilities entails being willing to create safe spaces for people to "be". It also involves embracing SJEPPs to know, understand, care, take a critical position in front of oppression, and act (Freire, 1993; Boyd, 2017).

EFL Syllabus With a Social Justice Perspective

Between 2018 and 2020 I designed syllabi for eight semester EFL pre-service and students of the Master in Language Teaching (they are mostly in-service teachers) at Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia, a public university in Colombia. I designed the English Workshop I and II syllabi, and the Pedagogy and Culture and sociolinguistic MA courses. I designed these courses to join national conversations about in-service and pre-service teachers' responsibilities within the post-conflict

landscape. As a critical-decolonizing-scholar- activist, I envision "teachers as agents of change and peace builders" (N. E. Carvajal Medina, personal communication, April 23, 2018).

The syllabus has two components: a linguistic one and a social justice one. The structure of the syllabus demands to list the competences students are expected to develop in the course. Apart from the communicative, cognitive, socio-affective and pedagogical competences, I included the "critical" competence. In this competence "pre-service teachers will raise awareness about systems of oppression and will enhance criticality by designing units with a social justice-oriented perspective" (Syllabus, 2018, p. 2). In the syllabus, I pose the questions below to guide the course activities and processes.

> What role do teacher training programs, like Modern Languages, play in peace construction processes? How are and can EFL pre-service teachers in Colombia be equipped with the tools to create and/or implement courses like "Cátedra de la paz" [Course for Peace] requested by the government?

The course activities included workshops given by the teacher educator, readings, online forums, 5min oral presentations, written, grammar, listening exercises, and social justice practices. Students were invited to read: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1993), *Social Justice Literacies in the English Classroom* (Boyd, 2017), articles about social justice and critical pedagogy/thinking experiences in Colombia, and articles students chose according to their personal interest from the online magazine *Rethinking Schools*. In every class, a few students summarized the articles and shared insights about why they chose the article and what they had learned from it. As a result of this activity, some students took the initiative to contact the authors of the articles and asked them questions; they are in constant communication with the authors. When we finished reading Ashley Boyd's book, Ashley accompanied us through skype to dialogue. Online forums were posed whenever there was a need to deepen understandings on a topic.

In relation to Social Justice Practices (SJP) I offered pre-service teachers three alternatives and gave them the opportunity to suggest others. I prepared a guide about the SJP with descriptions of every one of the alternatives and guidelines for the written document. SJP are small actions students can engage in three directions: research (to make a lit review on any topic related to social justice in Colombia or to propose a mini-scale project), pedagogy (to design a unit from a social justice-oriented perspective or to evaluate EFL materials from a critical stance) and community intervention. In relation to the community intervention I invited students to:

> Visit a **community, a foundation/NGO, a classroom** and identify their needs. Analyze how you can support the community and organize an action plan to work with the communities at least 3 times throughout the semester (February 2018)

I proposed the following seven workshops for the sixteen weeks of work:
- ✓ Philosophy of Teaching and Professional Identity (Carvajal Medina, 2012)
- ✓ Challenging Biases and Stereotypes
- ✓ How do Systems of Oppression Operate? Part I and II (Two sessions)
- ✓ What does Social Justice Education entail? Initial Insights" (Two sessions)
- ✓ The Colombian EFL classroom: Challenges and Opportunities. Why does social justice in EFL matters?

Implementing the syllabus, allowed me to identify some of the stages students invested in. These stages comprise the Pedagogy of Possibilities. They may vary according to experiences changes in the classroom. It is important to note that in the first workshop I conducted "Philosophy of Teaching and Professional Identity" I asked students to visually represent the answers to the questions: Where do I come from? Why am I here? How do I see myself here today? Then, students shared the stories behind their pictures and it allowed us as a group to get to know each other and how we saw ourselves. Drawing from their lived experiences, and their vision of who they were students could start exploring the nature of their teaching

attitudes, beliefs, principles, and practices. That is the reason why, the stages 1 and 2 are numbered, because they were key in the processes that followed the first workshop. The other stages are not numbered because they did not take place in a linear way. The double-edged arrows in the graphic indicate how each stage informed the processes of other stages.

I provide a short description of some of the actions students developed in every one of the stages:

1. **Reading my world:** students explored and connected to their personal and family stories-histories. They developed a sense of place and belonging by recounting memories and lived experiences that explain who they are and how they think about themselves. Engaging in other stages allowed the student to eventually strengthen her/is self-worth and self-esteem. Students started acknowledging and valuing lived experiences and background knowledge (coming from informal and formal educational experiences) as sources of knowledge and reflection. Activities: I proposed seven workshops conducive to explore individual and collective identities. Topics focused on self-image, stereotypes, biases, prejudices, and assumptions.

2. **Reading my context:** Students acquired knowledge and developed understandings about some forms of systemic oppression. Students put into perspective their personal experiences within structures of power such as religion, education, and politics. Students put in dialogue their local realities within an international scope. Activities: I invited guest lecturer of one of the books we read. We made online forums, read articles on SJP in Colombia, among other activities.

3. **Developing my positionality:** Students drew from lived experiences, theories read, and lessons they learned while conducting SJP suggested for the course to position in the field of foreign language teaching. Students wrote a three-page document that comprised their philosophy of teaching. Students started to position within the socio- cultural reality of Colombia.

4. **Social Justice Practices (SJP): Acting in/beyond the classroom** Students chose one of the three options proposed by the teacher educator. The teacher gave students the opportunity to propose other options. After submitting at least three drafts of the document, pre-service teachers delivered a final document that contained sections agreed with the teacher. Students made two oral presentations about advances in their SJP in order to receive feedback from the class. The delivery of the document included a students' individual statement where they addressed the challenges and limitations of the SJP, what they had learned from their peers, themselves, and the topic explored, among other reflections.

5. **Being an empathetic listener:** Through workshops, small group activities, peer-review assignments, among others, students were invited to step out of their bubbles (i.e. their realities). Pre-service teachers were offered opportunities to challenge and confront their assumptions, biases, prejudices, which prevented them from being part of and building communities of resilience and understanding. Some tensions emerged but dialogue was key to clarify misunderstandings.

6. **Co-constructing knowledge & Reflexivity:** Students were engaged in constant reflection throughout the sixteen weeks. I designed peer-review formats for students to read and comment on each other's SJP documents. Online forums, oral and written feedback provided by peers and by the teacher allowed the students to understand complex topics, see new possibilities for their units' design, express their concerns and clarify next steps in SJP, among other aspects. In order to assess the development of the course and for me to reflect on the process I made two questionnaires, planned a focus group interview, and opened spaces for dialogue at the end of each class, among other strategies.

FIGURE 3
PEDAGOGY OF POSSIBILITIES GROUNDED IN SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES/PROCESSES (SJEPPS)
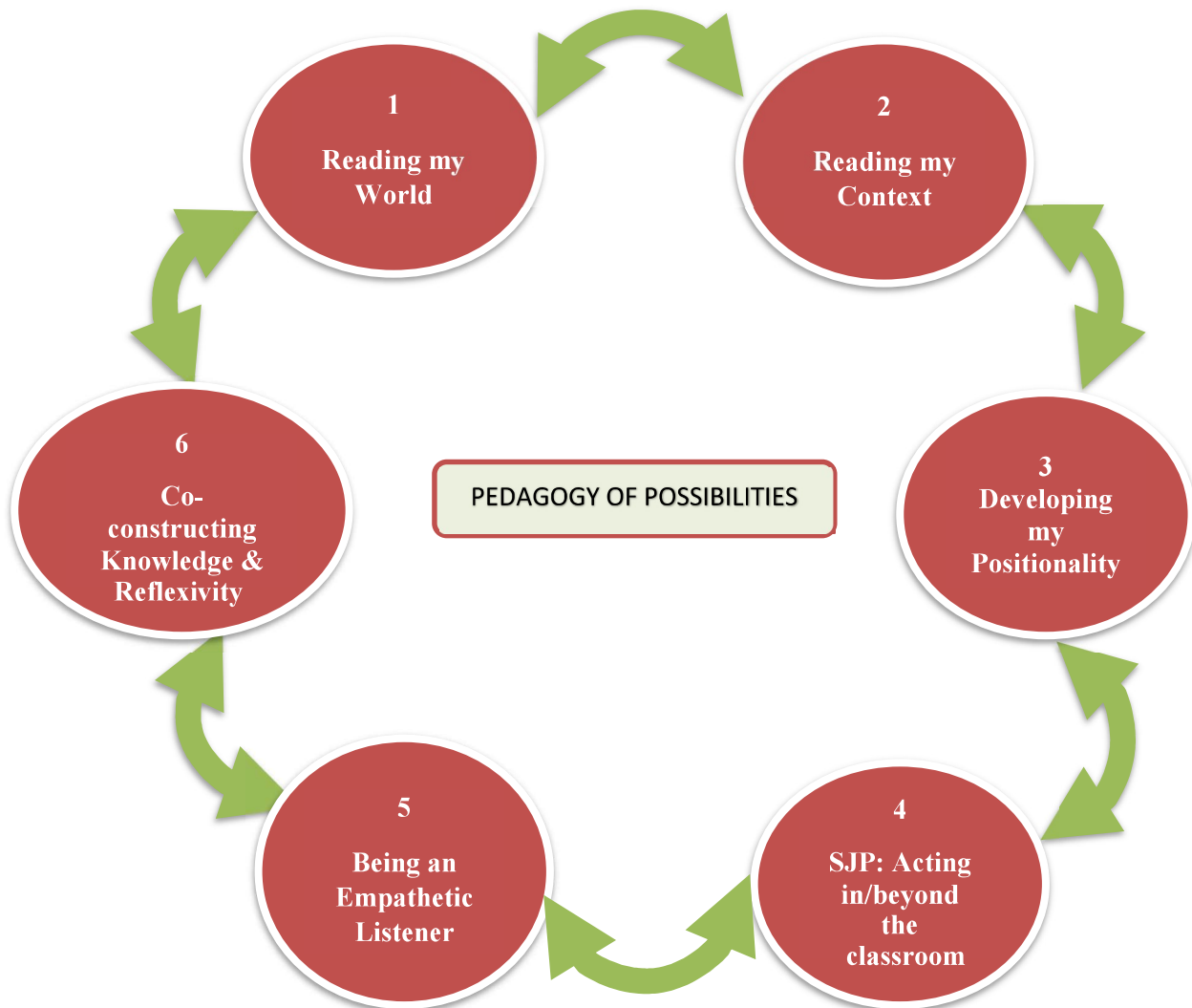
SOME LESSONS LEARNED: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Educators have a responsibility in contributing to the understanding of sources of oppression under which operate our communities. Critical decolonial educators are invoked to act and imagine possibilities for self-transformation, self-empowerment, communal action, and social change. In the midst of Covid-19 pandemics, the Colombian government continues to fulfill its oppressive role. Still, as a society and humanity, in general, we have the opportunity to confront our demons, find our strength, and experience what care and empathy feel like. As I continue to use principles of the pedagogy of possibilities from my teaching and administrative role, I continue to reify the power of honest dialogue and action, the transformative nature of a caring respectful encounter, and the impact of being a leader who believes in her team.

The pedagogy of possibilities is grounded on critical decolonizing principles that invite us to question our philosophies of being and teaching. In further exploring our ways of being and acting in the world we are meant to honor others' humanity and the relationships we build with our own selves, others, and land.

Principles of this pedagogy have also been implemented with MA in Language Teaching students. The lessons learned will be explored in other publications.

Every stage in the Pedagogy of Possibilities allowed us, teacher educator and pre-service teachers to co-construct knowledge about our philosophies of teaching and understandings of social justice. For instance, Antonio reminds me of the intricate nature of social justice. He argues "in educational settings social justice is a broad term because it has to deal with students, with community, with educational materials, among others" (Reflection June 1, 2018). Through Antonio's reflections I can also sense the impact that 16 weeks of work have caused in his positionality and professional identity development:

> Before this course, I did not know that I could [focus] my lessons on social justice and help to improve the world through interesting topics rooted in human problems. *It gives me hope* personally, because before [taking] this subject I wondered how [teaching] grammar could help students to be critical and reflexive [and] better human beings. I will continue looking for more information about relevant and important topics like social justice, to [bring] it into the scene in my classroom. That information [might] help my students to think and to improve their human condition.

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ENDNOTE

[1.] The message on the graffiti reads "An educated country must understand the meaning of social justice".

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