

The Effects of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Creative Arts on Youth Wellbeing in Bogotá, Colombia: Learnings Towards the Development of Psychosocial Peacebuilding

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Abstract

Background

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) and peacebuilding remain largely siloed in conflict-affected settings, with few community-led approaches integrating both fields. This study sought to address this gap by applying Participatory Action Research (PAR) with young adults (18–27 years) in Bogotá, Colombia, to co-develop modalities of psychosocial peacebuilding. Specifically, this paper examines how and why participation in PAR fostered psychosocial change among participants.

Methods

A participatory action research design was implemented with youth in Bogotá, Colombia. Data were collected through iterative PAR reflection cycles, focus groups, a three-month follow-up, and repeated administration of the WHO-5 Well-Being Index. Quantitative data were used to assess changes in wellbeing over time, while qualitative thematic analysis explored participants' experiences and the mechanisms underlying observed changes.

Results

Findings demonstrated sustained improvements in wellbeing during the PAR process, supported by WHO-5 scores and qualitative data. Two principal outcomes emerged: the development of safe spaces and a sense of community, and the strengthening of what participants described as "emotional intelligence," including coping and communication skills. Three interrelated mechanisms facilitated these changes: *sentipensamiento*, memory work, and communicative action. Although some benefits diminished after the intervention and collective action beyond the PAR process remained limited, participants reported greater self-understanding, enhanced coping capacity, and an increased ability to empathise, humanise, and communicate with others.

Conclusions

Participatory Action Research can provide a valuable community-led approach for integrating MHPSS and peacebuilding in conflict-affected settings. By fostering psychosocial wellbeing alongside dialogue, memory work, and social connection, PAR offers a promising framework for psychosocial peacebuilding. These findings have implications for the design of MHPSS and peacebuilding programmes and support greater integration between these fields.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background: Developing a Psychosocial Peacebuilding

In conflict-affected contexts, there is a recognised, mutually reinforcing relationship between mental health and peace (Bubenzer et al., 2017; Frasco et al., 2024). Despite this, theory and practice surrounding mental health and peacebuilding work often remain disconnected. Furthermore, both fields have been criticised for limited community participation, interventions insufficiently grounded in local realities, and a failure to translate knowledge about social determinants into meaningful action (Frasco et al., 2024). These challenges motivate a growing body of work seeking to integrate Mental Health & Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) and peacebuilding – but a holistic, community-led model for practice has yet to emerge (IASC, 2024; Interpeace, 2023; Hamber, 2023).

Critical community psychology (CCP) and the associated tradition of participatory action research (PAR) offer one pathway towards such integration. Rather than imposing external frameworks, CCP argues for '*the reconstruction of psychology itself from the standpoint of the excluded majorities*' (Burton, 2004:584), remaining action-oriented and focused on conscientisation – the development of critical consciousness through the dynamic relationship between thought and action (Freire, 1972; Kagan et al., 2020; Martín-Baró, 1994). PAR, originally developed by Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (2025), operationalises these principles through cycles of collective inquiry, action, and reflection, centring communities as co-producers of knowledge and social change (Rappaport, 2020). As argued in detail elsewhere (Frasco et al., 2024), PAR is well suited to address dominant critiques in both MHPSS and peacebuilding while providing an actionable set of principles for building integrated psychosocial peacebuilding (PSPB) models.

Arts-based methods have been integral to PAR since its origins (Fals Borda, 2025; 2020), and a related systematic review (Frasco et al., 2025) found creative interventions to be broadly effective in conflict-affected contexts – particularly when using participatory or community-led approaches. However, that review identified a critical gap: insufficient attention to the *mechanisms* through which creative methods produce change, and limited research on youth populations over 18. The present study was designed to address both gaps, focusing specifically on how and why PAR fostered change in the lives of participants.

It does so in the context of a broader study. A companion paper (Frasco, 2026b) addresses an interrelated goal – the co-production of this substantive model of psychosocial peacebuilding, including participants' conceptualisations of peace, mental health, and the barriers and facilitators in achieving them. That paper should be read alongside this one. Here, however; the focus is on PAR as an intervention, with implications for future interventions: what changed, how, and why.

1.2 Context: Youth, Mental Health, and Peace in Bogotá

Colombia has faced over 60 years of internal armed conflict, with violence continuing despite a 2016 peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) - the largest armed group in combat with the State. Accordingly, Colombia was chosen as a field site as it is representative of both

mental health and peacebuilding concerns, including growing recognition of the need to integrate psychosocial perspectives across both areas (Congress of Colombia, 2013; Ministry of Health, 2020). While peacebuilding has historically focused on rural regions, Bogotá has felt both the direct and indirect consequences of conflict: the city hosts 361,557 legally designated conflict victims (Observatorio Distrital de Víctimas, 2024), and 77.1% of residents report feeling unsafe (Bogotá Cómo Vamos, 2024).

Mental health needs are significant. The Ministry of Health (2015) estimated that 46% of adults have experienced symptoms of psychological trauma, yet only one-third of those seeking care receive treatment or support. In Bogotá, 59.5% of residents view their overall wellbeing as less than 'good', with outcomes worsening in lower-income areas (Alcaldía de Bogotá & UNODC, 2023:27). Young people have historically been excluded from both peacebuilding processes and research (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015), representing an underserved population whose perspectives on mental health and peace remain largely absent from the literature.

2. Participatory Action Research (PAR) Design & Methodology

2.1 Research Design & Procedure

PAR sessions were conducted between April 2023 and June 2023, as part of a broader study conducted between September 2022 and January 2024 in Bogotá, Colombia. PAR included two groups ($n = 30$; 15 per group) of youth aged 18–27, who met for 12 weekly 2-hour sessions. All sessions included a mix of creative arts-based, dialogical, and narrative methods. Each session began with warm-up activities (approximately 30 minutes) designed to promote emotional safety and social bonds, followed by a coffee break (15 minutes) and more substantive activities (60–75 minutes), before closing activities. Sessions were conducted by the first author in collaboration with Voces Globales Colombia (VGC), a peacebuilding organisation utilising creative arts to promote social change. For an overview of activities, see supplementary materials.

PAR sessions were structured across four interrelated stages: 1) scoping phase, 2) planning phase, 3) action cycles, and 4) reflection cycles. The scoping phase explored how participants conceptualised mental health, peace, and related concepts, and what they viewed as barriers to these. The planning phase culminated in action plans — three core goals per group — that structured subsequent action cycles. This paper focuses specifically on reflection cycles, conducted in tandem with action cycles throughout the process.

2.2 Reflection Cycle Methods

Reflection cycles took the form of feedback focus groups, conducted twice per session: at the halfway point and at the close. These discussed preliminary results, raised questions or concerns, and allowed for adaptation of activities in response to participant feedback. Additional methods were integrated to understand whether, how, and why positive changes occurred.

2.2.1 Debriefing Focus Groups

During the final week of PAR, semi-structured debriefing focus groups were conducted with both groups, reviewing study objectives, participant progress on action plan goals, and facilitators or barriers to change in their lives as a result of PAR.

2.2.2 3-Month Follow-Up Focus Groups

Follow-up sessions were conducted on 30 October and 7 November 2023 (in-person and online respectively), each lasting approximately 90 minutes. Their goal was to assess the sustained impact of PAR on participant wellbeing and to understand which lessons, skills, or changes had been retained over time.

2.2.3 WHO-5 Wellbeing Survey

WHO-5 surveys were administered at baseline (week 1) and endline (week 12) for both groups. The WHO-5 is a generalised, positively-worded five-item wellbeing scale validated across more than 40 countries (Sischka et al., 2025), including in Colombia (Campo-Arias et al., 2015; Caycho-Rodríguez et al., 2023) with conflict-exposed young people (Dedios-Sanguinetti et al, 2026). It was selected because it does not pertain to any specific condition, allowing for broad applicability across participants. While originally planned for follow-up administration, most participants chose not to complete surveys at that stage; these data were therefore omitted due to the extent of missing data.

2.3 Data Analysis

2.3.1 Quantitative Data: Paired T-Tests

WHO-5 raw scores were calculated by totaling all five items; percentage scores represent the raw score multiplied by four. Given the small sample and absence of a control group, analysis was limited to a paired mean t-test assessing change over time across participants as a collective. Results are drawn from complete cases only (13/15 from group 1; 9/15 from group 2; n = 22 total; 73.3% completion rate). Power calculations were not performed. These constraints mean causality cannot be inferred; the quantitative results provide complementary evidence for the qualitative findings, not independent evidence of effect.

2.3.2 Qualitative Data: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was applied to all qualitative data, taking an inductive approach in which codes and themes emerged from the data rather than from prior frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2021; 2023). Data from both groups were combined for analysis, as both developed similar action plans and participated in comparable activities. As such, presenting them separately would not have added analytical value. Analysis was structured around three cascading levels – domains, themes, and sub-themes – with participant quotes cited by group and session (e.g., Alba, G1S2). All analysis was conducted by the first author in Spanish, with translations produced at the point of writing up.

2.4 Study Population & Recruitment

2.4.1 Participant Recruitment & Sample

Participants were recruited in collaboration with VGC through three channels: emails and flyers to public universities; social media outreach; and network outreach to community partners. Inclusion criteria required participants to be aged 18–27 and resident in Greater Bogotá. Exclusion criteria included: being a vulnerable adult (as defined under the UK Care Act 2014); living outside the area; or being outside the age range.

Recruitment was purposive, aiming for diversity across socio-economic background, gender, and neighbourhood in connection to the 'all-of-society' approach (Frasco, 2024; 2026a). This approach broadly holds that to build peace, all sectors of society are required to be in dialogue and engaged in peacebuilding, both at the community and national-level. Final participants included two groups of 15 young people: 11/15 in group 1 and 12/15 in group 2 identified as female; 23/30 were students or in training; 19/30 resided in low or low-middle income *localidades*. Protected category data on ethnic or racial background were not explicitly collected but were discussed when raised by participants. While not an explicit requirement of recruitment, most participants had engaged in some form of creative arts activity or workshop previously in their life. Six participants dropped out fully by the end of the sessions (2 in group 1; 4 in group 2); among the 24 remaining, none missed more than two sessions.

3. Results: Understanding the Impact of PAR

3.1 Action Plan Results

In week 5, participants in both groups developed action plans to guide subsequent action cycles, which focused on meeting these goals. Three shared goals emerged: 1) developing emotional intelligence through the humanisation of self, including improved self-esteem and emotional awareness; 2) promoting emotional intelligence through communication and coping skills; and 3) constructing safe spaces and a sense of community through humanisation of and connection with others. Endline debriefing focus groups found that participants in both groups felt all three goals had been met.

3.2 Qualitative Results: How and Why Did PAR Create Change?

Qualitative analysis of reflection cycles identified two core domains of positive change: the **development of safe spaces and a sense of community**, and the **development of 'emotional intelligence'**. Across both domains, three interrelated mechanisms facilitated change: *sentipensamiento*, memory work and narrative, and communicative action. These elements were not separate — they formed the backbone of the PAR process, reinforcing one another throughout.

Table 1
Analysis of Reflection Cycle Data

What changes were made? (Domains)	What constitutes these changes? (Themes)	What were the mechanisms of change? (Sub-Themes)
Development of safe spaces and community	Humanisation and mutual recognition of the other; Fostering healthy relationships; Collaborating towards shared and individual goals	<i>Sentipensamiento</i> ; Memory work; Communicative action
Development of emotional intelligence	Developing coping and communication skills; Learning to sentipensar; Humanisation of self and improvement of self-esteem	<i>Sentipensamiento</i> ; Memory work; Communicative action

3.2.1 Development of Safe Spaces and Community

The first domain was the **development of safe spaces and community** – the creation of strong interpersonal ties within sessions, and a sense of unified purpose and collaboration. As Francisco stated during the endline debriefing:

"I think that what I liked the most was this principle of community[...] I think is what caught my attention the most, because it is difficult, it is very difficult to generate, I think. To preserve that in a group of people, to preserve connections, to preserve that across many sessions" (Francisco, G2S12).

This sense of community and **collaboration towards shared and individual goals** was echoed across participants. Jorge described the depth of connection formed:

"It was a very good space[...] I think you know me better than people I have known for 7 or 8 years, because with you I have really opened up and said things that I have not been able to tell other people" (Jorge, G2S12).

Alba elaborated on the experience of feeling genuinely listened to without instrumental expectation: *"What I liked the most was feeling that I was in a space where I listened to and was listened to without the need to reach a result. There was no goal, like I didn't feel that I had to reach something and achieve [something]"* (Alba, G2S12). This sense of openness facilitated **healthy relationships** across the group. Lina and Manuela both described moving out of introversion through the sessions – Manuela noting that the experience contributed to what she called her "healing process" (Manuela, G2S12).

A further dimension was the **humanisation of others** – the development of empathy and a more generous orientation toward people and circumstances. Carolina reflected:

"I have realised that when I am in stressful situations or something like that, I am more empathetic[...] like a little calmer with the circumstances that come in life, so if something comes along that stresses me a lot, or a person[...] I have been humanising people more" (Carolina, G1S12).

Francisco offered a nuanced distinction between a "safe space" and what he termed a "free space" — one where ideas could be contested, personal things could be expressed, and learning could take place, without the guarantee of external security (Francisco, G2S12). This distinction is worth noting for future practice: participants may value the conditions for open expression more than formal guarantees of safety.

3.2.2 The Development of Emotional Intelligence

The development of safe spaces and community had a mutually reinforcing effect on the second domain: the **development of emotional intelligence**, a term participants introduced in the early sessions. Feelings of safety within the group dynamic enabled open emotional expression, which in turn supported the development of coping and communication tools. Alejandro reflected on the centrality of participant-led knowledge:

"I feel that the issue of tools[...]was achieved and not only because of the ones you provided, but also because that space was opened to be able to talk about which ones we also proposed" (Alejandro, G2S12).

Francisco connected these tools to a deeper understanding of himself — specifically, recognising that socialising, rather than isolation, was his means of coping in times of crisis (Francisco, G2S12). Lina echoed this, noting that the sessions helped her "get to know myself and control myself" (Lina, G2S12).

A key aspect of emotional intelligence as participants described it was **learning to *sentipensar***. *Sentipensamiento*, loosely translated to "feeling-thinking" in English, was understood by participants as listening to the body rather than being governed by reason alone (Lina, G2S2). This is rooted in Fals Borda's epistemological tradition, where affect is integral to processes of learning and action (see: Frasco, 2026b; Escobar, 2016). Jazmín demonstrated this through a breathing exercise, describing a physical release she experienced: *"I really put myself in the task of inhaling very deeply and when I exhaled it is as if my chest had been freed"* (Jazmín, G2S4).

Mónica drew on her experience of theatre to articulate the same idea — describing a new awareness of her body and its sensations as part of recognising *"wonderful things that we give ourselves but that we do not realise"* (Mónica, G2S4). These embodied experiences contributed to the **humanisation of self** — a process of developing self-esteem and confidence in one's own resilience through creative and relational engagement. As Maribel summarised: *"I think something very beautiful that I can take with me is like, the theme of letting yourself be carried away by impulses and by the body[...]We didn't think about it so much and we did it so it was natural, and what had to come out, came out"* (Maribel, G1S12).

3.2.3 Mechanisms of Change in PAR

Three elements were consistently identified as facilitators of positive change across both domains. Crucially, they were not experienced as separate: each reinforced the others, forming an integrated process of change.

First, *sentipensamiento* emerged as the most powerful single facilitator, in part because it enabled the other two. For example, creative activities created the conditions for emotional opening that might otherwise have been too difficult to achieve through direct conversation. Alejandro described the sessions as a "brave space" – not quite therapy, but carrying some of its qualities (Alejandro, G2S11). Mariana connected creativity explicitly to memory: *"I connected more with drawing and writing, I think I was able to bring out what happened this week, and with the drawing remember a little bit"* (Mariana, G2S8).

The second mechanism of memory work – often through narrative - enabled participants to revisit, reframe, and share difficult experiences. Leidy described how a free-writing exercise on childhood surfaced memories she had not known were significant – and connected this to the difficulty of "letting go" of self-consciousness in creative movement (Leidy, G1S8). Valeria linked memory work to the humanisation of others, recalling a session where confessing past regrets helped her "humanise the situations of the past" (Valeria, G1S12).

Boalian theatre – specifically Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 2008) – provided a particularly rich intersection of *sentipensamiento*, memory, and communication. Participants enacted difficult situations from their lives, with others as 'spect-actors' free to intervene and propose alternatives. Alejandro reflected on how the exercise allowed him to revisit a choice he had not made: *"It gave me the opportunity to live something that I didn't do[...]what would have happened if I had taken advantage of the opportunities at that time?"* (Alejandro, G2S11). Jazmín connected this to Boal's concept of the 'cop in your head': the internalised barriers that prevent action. She stated, *"I think this exercise also works a lot, [it showed] what would have happened if the barrier had not existed and he could have acted the way he wanted, and solve that oppression"* (Jazmín, G2S10).

Communicative action – dialogue structured around mutual recognition and collective sense-making – was the third facilitator, running through every activity. It was through conversation that *sentipensamiento*, creativity, and memory work became shared rather than private: experiences became visible, nameable, and transformable. This aligns with Habermas's (1984) notion of communicative action as the basis for developing mutual understanding, and with CCP's emphasis on dialogue as a vehicle for conscientisation (Freire, 1972).

3.3 WHO-5 Survey Results

The positive changes reflected in qualitative data were complemented by WHO-5 wellbeing survey results. A paired t-test across 22 participants found a statistically significant improvement in general wellbeing from baseline to endline ($t = 3.43$, $df = 21$, $p = 0.001$). As noted in the methods section, these results should be interpreted cautiously given the small sample size and absence of a control group; as such, causality cannot be inferred. However, the data provide quantitative support for the qualitative findings rather than independent evidence of effect.

Table 2
WHO-5 Pre & Post Scores

Participant	Pre-Score	Post-Score
1	48	64
2	60	92
3	68	60
4	80	60
5	48	72
6	48	76
7	64	68
8	60	76
9	72	64
10	52	76
11	68	76
12	84	72
13	52	76
14	80	72
15	72	92
16	60	64
17	52	72
18	76	88
19	56	84
20	72	76
21	56	72
22	29	40
Mean	61.68	72.36

3.4 Negative Change & Barriers to Positive Change

3.4.1 Promoting Action Beyond PAR

No specific barriers to reaching action plan goals within sessions were identified. However, the broader PAR aspiration of facilitating political action and advocacy beyond the research space was not fully realised – and for several participants, the end of PAR was itself experienced as a kind of loss. Carolina described anxiety about what would follow: *"I have a little bit of anxiety because it is the last session and I say, what am I going to do next?"* (Carolina, G1S12). Alba and Esteban echoed this, with Esteban joking: *"there is not going to be Wednesdays anymore[...]what am I going to do now, I'm going to succumb to madness"* (Esteban, G1S12).

However, some participants had already begun to carry PAR skills beyond the sessions – sharing listening techniques with friends, introducing activities into teaching practice (Jorge, G2S12; Mariana, G2S12). But the question of how to sustain *community* beyond what was created inside PAR remained partially unresolved, depending on the individual participant. Martina articulated this most directly, noting that the existing group was relatively homogeneous and asking how these tools could *"bring us closer to people who are very different from us"* (Martina, G1S8).

A recurring tension also emerged around the political positionality of the research team within the sessions. PAR is an explicitly political methodology, and participants noted that the research team's reluctance to share opinions (beyond a broadly pro-peace and pro-mental health stance) or take explicit stances could feel at odds with this. Alba reflected: *"I think I just felt like a lot of times I just felt like...but I guess that's just because it has to be that way? To hear you guys like 'I want to know what [a VGC member] is proud of'"* (Alba, G1S12). This highlights a structural tension in institutional PAR: the expectation of researcher neutrality sits uncomfortably with a methodology that is explicitly committed to social change. Not taking a stance is itself a political act – and participants noticed. Future practice should engage more directly with facilitator positionality, rather than treating neutrality as a default. Relatedly, these results show that it is important for PAR facilitators to actively engage with activities and share in creative endeavours equally as far as possible, or otherwise risk feelings of alienation in participants.

3.4.2 Issues with Specific Activities

Negative feedback on specific activities did not reflect broad group consensus, suggesting individual variation in learning styles and preferences. Examples included dissatisfaction with a particular meditation exercise (Pablo, G1S12) and fatigue during an extended repetition of certain activities (Carolina, G1S12). Importantly, open dialogue – itself a key mechanism of change – allowed the team to respond to this feedback in real time. Sofia noted how a closing ceremony activity – first absent, then introduced after participants flagged that early sessions ended on a low emotional note - transformed the end of sessions (Sofia, G1S12). This adaptability is itself a strength of PAR as an intervention design. How this is responded to by facilitators will actively impact the results of a study or participatory intervention.

3.4.3 Issues with Action Plan Goals

While participants generally felt their action plan goals were met, some noted that the planning process felt unclear. Sandra reflected that setting objectives "was very vague" and took time to understand

(Sandra, G1S12). In contrast, Alejandro found them clear and well-integrated into activities (Alejandro, G2S12). Future applications should invest more in explaining what action plans (or similar processes, like a collaborative theory of change) are for and how they connect to each session. Furthermore, they should communicate more clearly that goals can be adapted throughout and treat action plans not as immovable goals for PAR, but as guiding tools meant to be adapted over time.

3.5 Sustaining the Impact of PAR: 3-Month Follow-Up

At 3-month follow-up, both groups confirmed that action plan goals had been met and that the core changes identified at endline had been sustained. The most striking finding was the *embodied* quality of what remained. Valentina described how the body itself retained a memory of the sessions:

"The body had a memory of Wednesdays, then it was like – well, now what do I do?[...]I was bad, but seriously I didn't understand why, I also wanted to cry. I came home, and like I learned in the workshop, [I thought] so let's do some activity. then I started to write[...]and that helped" (Valentina, G1).

This embodied retention connects directly to the role of *sentipensamiento* in the intervention – the integration of feeling, thinking, and acting. Coping skills were not just cognitively acquired; they were physically practised and remained accessible as somatic resources. Alejandro described a similar experience of recognising emotional states in real time post-intervention: *"Now I can identify at what times I am [in emotional crisis][...]the tools, I have them in mind"* (Alejandro, G2).

Community proved harder to sustain independently. While some participants found ways to carry the spirit of the sessions into their personal and professional lives – Alba describing a renewed connection with her own creative capacities, and Jorge drawing on activities in his teaching – the collective sense of community that PAR created was more difficult to reproduce outside the structured sessions. This limitation points to the need for transition planning in future PAR designs: a gradual closing process, follow-up contact, and more explicit preparation for participants on how to sustain connection and community beyond the intervention. While this is a core component of any PAR design, it becomes more difficult with disparate groups or communities which are not inherently connected (e.g., in daily life) – something which is more likely to occur in peacebuilding work.

4. Discussion: Lessons for Psychosocial Peacebuilding

This paper has reported the results of PAR reflection cycles, addressing the question of how and why PAR fostered change in the lives of participants. WHO-5 pre-post results indicated significant improvement in general wellbeing, and qualitative analysis identified two core domains of change – safe spaces and community; emotional intelligence – facilitated by three interrelated mechanisms: *sentipensamiento*, memory work, and communicative action. Action plan goals were met in both groups. These findings, alongside three-month follow-up data showing sustained impact, offer a contribution to the evidence base on PAR as an intervention in conflict-affected settings. In connection to the sister

paper on the psychosocial peacebuilding model (Frasco, 2026a;2026b), this work thus contributes to broader debates on how to integrate MHPSS and peacebuilding 'from the bottom-up'.

4.1 Mechanisms of Change: Implications for Practice

The three mechanisms identified — arts and creativity, memory work, and communicative action — were not discrete but mutually constitutive. This finding has practical significance: it suggests that designing for any one of these in isolation is likely to be less effective than designing for their integration. Creative activities opened emotional space that made memory work possible; memory work generated material for dialogue; dialogue produced shared understanding and a sense of community. This process is consistent with broader literature on arts-based interventions in conflict-affected settings (Jeffery, 2023; Frasco et al., 2025), and adds mechanistic specificity to the claim that high levels of participation improve intervention effectiveness (Frasco et al., 2025).

The embodied dimension of change — captured in the concept of *sentipensamiento* and in participants' descriptions of somatic awareness and physical memory — is particularly notable. This suggests that for communities shaped by conflict and displacement, knowledge and healing are not purely cognitive processes. They are felt in and through the body. Interventions that engage the body — through movement, theatre, breathing, creative expression — may therefore reach dimensions of experience that conversation-based approaches cannot. This aligns with a growing literature on somatic and body-based approaches in trauma-informed practice (Frasco et al, 2025), and offers a direction for future PSPB design.

4.2 PAR as Intervention: Possibilities and Limits

The study demonstrated that PAR can function effectively both as a research methodology *and* as an intervention capable of producing measurable wellbeing improvement. This dual function is significant for MHPSS and peacebuilding programming, which tends to treat research and intervention as separate activities. PAR offers a model in which knowledge production and positive change are simultaneous goals, with communities as active agents in both (Frasco et al, 2024).

At the same time, the limits of PAR as a bounded intervention were clear. Participants' distress at the end of the programme — and the difficulty of sustaining community beyond it — points to a structural challenge: PAR creates something valuable, then ends in its more structured form. And while participants may develop the skills and networks to foster change independently, this lack of structure or direct support after a research project or intervention risks those positive changes. Accordingly, this should be an explicit focus for future work.

The tension around facilitator positionality — where researcher neutrality sat uncomfortably with participants' expectations of genuine engagement — is also worth taking seriously. PAR's political commitments cannot be bracketed at the door of institutional compliance. Future practitioners should engage explicitly with this tension from the outset, rather than defaulting to a neutrality that participants

may experience as disingenuous. Relatedly, facilitators should remain actively engaged in PAR or intervention sessions, activities, and community action.

4.3 Policy and Practice Implications

These findings carry implications for MHPSS and peacebuilding programming at national and international levels. At the national level, the study offers evidence for the value of participatory, arts-based approaches in urban Colombia — a context historically underserved by both MHPSS and peacebuilding programming. The intervention reached youth not legally designated as victims, supporting an all-of-society approach (Frasco, 2026a) to peacebuilding consistent with Colombia's expanded policy frameworks. The study contributes also towards the promises of Article 27 of Law 1616 of 2013 - which enshrines the right to participate in the development, implementation, and evaluation of mental health programmes - by deepening youth participation in mental health interventions and research. At the international level, findings support commitments in the IASC (2024) and Interpeace (2023) guidance frameworks to deepen participation, contextualise interventions, and address the intersections between mental health and peace. This case study is an example of how to honour those commitments in practice.

4.4 Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. The small sample and absence of a control group mean that causal claims cannot be made about the WHO-5 results. The study's focus on youth in Bogotá — a relatively homogeneous group, primarily students — limits generalisability to more diverse populations, including former combatants or displaced communities, for example. Furthermore, as most participants had some affinity or previous experience with creative arts, it is uncertain if groups with no exposure to these practices would respond as positively. Future research should expand to include such populations and should develop evaluation designs with greater power to detect effects, including quasi-experimental comparisons or participatory peace measures such as Everyday Peace Indicators (Firchow, 2018). Social cohesion or social capital measures, validated (or developed) for the Colombian context, would also strengthen future assessments. Finally, the limitations of facilitating action beyond the sessions — and the political tension inherent in institutional PAR — represent areas requiring further methodological development.

5. Conclusion

Reflection cycle data demonstrated that participant action plan goals were met and that PAR produced sustained positive changes in wellbeing, confirmed by both quantitative and qualitative evidence. Two core domains of change — safe spaces and community; emotional intelligence — were facilitated by three interrelated mechanisms: *sentipensamiento*, memory work, and communicative action. These findings contribute to the evidence base on participatory, arts-based approaches in conflict-affected settings, and offer lessons for future PSPB practice.

Alongside these contributions, the study highlighted important limitations: the difficulty of sustaining community and action beyond PAR; the need for better transition planning; and the unresolved tension between researcher neutrality and PAR's political commitments. These are not merely methodological footnotes – they are invitations for future research and practice to go further. A companion paper (Frasco, 2026b) presents the substantive findings of the broader study, including participants' conceptualisation of psychosocial peace, the barriers to achieving it, and the preliminary framework for psychosocial peacebuilding that emerged from the research. Together, the two papers offer a complete account of what was found and how it was produced.

Declarations

Competing interests:

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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All participants signed informed consent forms regarding the collection, analysis, and publication of research data. All authors approved the manuscript.

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Author Contribution

EF designed the study and performed data collection, data analysis, and writing of the manuscript. LS, NVSJ, MCDS, and RAB supervised the study and supported its intellectual development. CD supported data collection and transcription. CLS supported data collection. All authors contributed to editing and review of the final manuscript.

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Data Availability

The data analysed in this study includes confidential qualitative data and personal demographic information. Where possible, data can be requested where fully anonymized and approved by participants.

Ethics & Data Protection: This study was approved by the UCL (21751/001) and Universidad de Los Andes (#1393 de 2021) ethics committees for data collection involving human participants. All participants signed informed consent forms. Following GDPR regulations, all data was anonymised and stored in an encrypted OneDrive, as well as backed up on UCL's secure N Drive. A data privacy notice was issued to participants.

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