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Beyond Voice and Advocacy: Participatory Narrative Re-imagination Among Former Child Soldiers in Colombia

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Abstract
This study explores how a project inspired by Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) supported the reintegration of former child soldiers in Colombia through collaborative creative writing. Twenty-two adolescents engaged in narrative re-imagination through self-reflection, mutual recognition, authorship and dialogue. Participatory thematic analysis identified four identity trajectories—stronger, altruistic, political and harmonious—linked to empowerment, community, peace, and buen vivir. These positive identities challenged narratives shaped by violence and exclusion. The study shows how participatory narrative practice can extend engagement beyond voice and advocacy, enabling young people to co-author transformative narratives and reimagine socially embedded and morally viable futures through psychosocial reintegration rather than conventional public advocacy.

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Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article

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Introduction

Despite Colombia's ongoing peace process, the recruitment of children and teenagers by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in the country has continued. UNICEF (2023) reports at least 2,181 under-18s were recruited between 2013 and 2022. The average age of recruitment was 14.2 for boys and 13.8 for girls. Boys spent an average of 632 days inside the ranks of an NSAG, with the average for girls slightly higher at 642. Rural, Indigenous, and ethnic minority populations were disproportionately affected.

Children and teenagers are used not only as combatants but also as messengers, lookouts or forced labourers (Wessells, 2006). While the international humanitarian sector often prefers the term 'Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups' (CAAFAG) to reflect this diversity, this study uses 'child soldier' for ease of readability, without reducing participants' experiences to combat roles alone. Regardless of their specific tasks, children involved in NSAGs are routinely exposed to violence, coercion, and significant psychological harm.

Reintegration into civilian life presents a range of challenges. Internationally, it is defined by UNICEF's Paris Principles (2007) as 'the process through which children transition into civil society and enter meaningful roles and identities as civilians who are accepted by their families and communities in a context of local and national reconciliation'. Yet this transition is often difficult. Former child soldiers may face trauma, mental health challenges (Derluyn et al., 2004; Kohrt, 2007), stigma and rejection (Denov & Marchand, 2014) and limited economic opportunity (Blattman & Annan, 2010). These conditions can entrench negative self-perceptions, limiting young people's ability to imagine new roles for themselves in society (M. Charles & Fowler-Watt, 2020a).

Working with two groups of adolescents and young adults through a collaborative creative writing process, the study invited participants to critically reflect on their pasts and imagine future identities rooted in dignity, agency and belonging. The project adopted a participatory orientation inspired by Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), extending participation beyond voice and advocacy towards collective narrative analysis and re-imagination, as detailed below. The approach is YPAR-inspired because analytic participation was intentionally youth-centred and oriented towards reintegration as a form of psychosocial and relational action, recognising young people's developmental and relational positioning in knowledge production.

A Conceptual Framework: Narrative Identity and Youth in Conflict

Narrative identity refers to the internalised, evolving life story individuals construct to make sense of who they are, linking a reconstructed past to an imagined future (D. P. McAdams & McLean, 2013). Coherence, agency, and redemptive meaning-making within personal narratives are associated with well-being and the capacity to navigate adversity (Adler et al., 2016; D. P. McAdams, 2001; Pals, 2006). For youth affected by conflict, redemptive narratives—where suffering becomes a source of insight or moral purpose—are particularly relevant (D. McAdams, 2006).

Identity construction is inherently relational. Hermans (2001) dialogical self theory describes identity as negotiation between internal 'I-positions' such as 'fighter', 'victim', or 'peacebuilder'. Former child soldiers often begin this dialogue from a place of dislocation: recruited under coercive conditions and returning to communities that may view them with suspicion, they frequently internalise 'negative' identities shaped by stigma and the loss of recognised social roles. Erikson (1968) defined negative identity as a self-concept formed in opposition to socially valued pathways, often marked by low self-efficacy and alienation (M. Charles & Fowler-Watt, 2020a; Hihara et al., 2019; Johns et al., 2017).

In contrast, positive identity involves self-worth, agency, and the ability to imagine a valued social role. The Positive Youth Development framework positions positive identity as a core developmental asset involving self-esteem, coherence and future orientation (Catalano et al., 2004). D. P. McAdams (2001) similarly argues that positive identity is sustained by a life story that affirms purpose and belonging.

A key mechanism of identity transformation is the development of possible selves—cognitive representations of who one might become (Markus & Nurius, 1986). These feared or hoped-for selves shape motivation and aspirations. For youth shaped by violence, stigma often reinforces feared selves, while hoped-for selves remain underdeveloped or inaccessible.

Identity formation is also constrained by dominant social narratives, or 'master narratives', that define which identities are seen as acceptable or possible (Hammack, 2010; McLean & Syed, 2015). For former child soldiers, such narratives frequently depict them as damaged or dangerous, reinforcing stigma and limiting prospects for reintegration.

Method

Central to participatory research is recognising participants as knowledge producers and co-creators, challenging claims of neutral, objective research

and embracing its situated, perspectival nature. Through participatory and collaborative inquiry, YPAR fosters youth engagement and activism, helping young people develop structural understandings of injustice and exercise greater agency (Karsten, 2021; Liebenberg et al., 2020). Yet critiques highlight a gap between emancipatory ideals and practice: projects may reproduce adult control when youth participate only as consultees (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Torre & Fine, 2011), and short, school-based efforts sometimes invoke YPAR without iterative cycles of reflection, action and change (Ozer, 2017).

Recent scholarship extends YPAR beyond public advocacy to a reflexive, potentially therapeutic process. Dialogic, narrative practices can enable critical self-exploration, emotional healing, and identity formation (Cahill, 2007; Mirra et al., 2016; Tuck, 2009). González (2020) advances a 'healing-centered' YPAR model explicitly positioning participatory narrative inquiry as a therapeutic tool (see also Lindquist-Grantz & Abraczinskas, 2020).

Building on this work, the study adopted a YPAR-inspired participatory orientation. Participants shaped the questions explored, engaged in collective analysis, and co-constructed outputs. Although the short timeframe constrained the iterative cycles typical of longer projects, the workshop preserved core commitments to participation beyond voice, collaboration and action orientation. We therefore describe a YPAR-inspired approach responsive to contextual constraints.

This was not a full YPAR cycle: participants did not co-design the overall framework, but they assumed central roles in collective reflection, coding and interpretation as co-analysts. While critics warn that claims of transformation can be overstated (Ozer, 2017), short intensive workshops can catalyse emotional and cognitive shifts that continue beyond the initial encounter (McAdams, 2006). Narrative inquiry functioned not merely as data collection but as a participatory epistemology aligned with YPAR's analytic commitments, positioning storytelling as a medium for reflection, critique and symbolic social transformation.

The Participants

The participants were two groups of former child soldiers aged between 14 and 21 (Table 1). The first group included 11 adolescents resident in a Bogotá refuge and the second, 11 Indigenous young people from the Nasa community of Cauca in southwest Colombia. The first group belonged to a creative writing class and the second constituted young filmmakers, who had participated in a previous animation project and had travelled to Bogotá to screen their work.

Table 1. Participant Overview.

Participant characteristics	Participants ($N=22$)
Number of days as child soldier	
Mean (*M*)	573
Standard deviation (*SD*)	268.1
Gender (%)	
Male	63.6
Female	40.9
Age of recruitment	
M	12.4
SD	0.9
Age during research project	
M	16.5
SD	1.53

The participants from Bogotá were living in a refuge, apart from their family and friends, while the Cauca participants continued to live in their community. Indigenous former child soldiers often complete their formal reintegration under the care and control of Indigenous authorities, rather than the Colombian state (M. Charles, 2021).

The Nasa people are known for their storytelling traditions (Rappaport, 1990) and political resilience (Chaves et al., 2018). They maintain a deep connection to their ancestral lands and lead spiritual lives focused on nature and sacred sites. They place a strong emphasis on community and collective decision-making. The Nasa people are also recognised for their active political engagement and efforts to defend their territorial rights and autonomy, often in the face of significant external pressures including violence and conflict (Acosta, 2023).

Ethical Considerations

We discerned—and designed mitigations for—three key challenges: (1) Building direct relationships, trust and empathy between researchers and the participants, whilst seeking to avoid invoking shame or guilt (mitigation=constant and iterative reflection); (2) the potential for re-traumatisation through taking the participants back into memories of traumatic events (mitigation=trauma-informed research design and trauma training for researchers); (3) the researchers' duty of care, both to the participants and themselves (mitigation=clear safeguarding and protection protocols); as well as the need to mitigate risk (mitigation=locating the workshop in a safe space, the Bogotá refuge).

The research team was aware of the inherent challenges presented by relying on the participants' memories; the possibility of participant bias and, in particular, social desirability bias. We were also cognisant of the peacebuilding discourse prevalent in the space of the Bogotá refuge, but the creative design of the study provides mitigation for these issues. It allows for the vagaries of the participants' power of recall and its specific interactive nature means participants' discourse can be challenged and deconstructed.

Data Collection

I cry.
I cry in this valley of tears.
I think of you all the time because you took away the most beautiful of my life.
My childhood and my adolescence.
I couldn't play with dolls. Instead my toy was a rifle.
I didn't have friends because you scared them.
Because of you, because of you, I haven't been able to get over it.
My life is a disaster.
I cry.
I cry in this valley of tears that runs down my face full of hope.
But I'll tell you what. . . Thinking about such hurt. . .
You taught me to respect.
I won't suffer because of you.
I live an honest life.
But I want to tell you that my hatred is bigger than the solar system.
And today, it's transforming into happiness.

This poem was written by Jazmin, a 16-year-old former child soldier resident in the Bogotá refuge for young survivors of conflict. Jazmin's poem sparked the creative process, which resulted in the production of a short, animated film, *El árbol del amor* (The Tree of Love), by the Nasa participants. They wrote a response to it, which then became the basis of their film script. This participatory project has been explored in detail elsewhere (M. Charles & Fowler-Watt, 2020a, 2020b; Jukes et al., 2021), but as part of the dissemination of the animation, 11 of the young filmmakers travelled to a refuge in Bogotá to visit the former child soldiers resident there (including Jazmin) to show their film and to participate in a creative writing workshop, which is the focus of the current study.

The 1-day workshop was held on 17 September 2019, and was led by members of the research team: a Colombian scriptwriter, animator,

psychologist and two UK academics (the authors). It began with ice-breaking exercises to put the young participants at ease and build trust. This was followed by a screening of the animated film, which presents the stories of three child soldiers: Sek, A'te and Dariel. Immediately after the screening, the participants were invited to close their eyes and envisage the character they related to most. They were then asked to select important words to justify this selection, which were subsequently shared and discussed among the group.

The aim was to forge initial connections between the participants' personal experiences, those represented in the film and those of their peers. Then the 22 research participants were put into pairs, organised by the research team. This ensured that each pair consisted of participants from the Bogotá refuge and Cauca. The participants were invited to share their thoughts and reactions, a process, which also encouraged them to recall their own personal experiences. Each pair was then tasked with writing a letter to one of the film's main characters, which they were free to select. The basic prompt was to provide advice based on their own stories, experiences and learning. Each letter was then read aloud to the whole group and participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and offer feedback, which inspired further discussion and the sharing of individual experiences. As part of these collective discussions, researchers also asked questions and shared their observations, providing an opportunity to evaluate their initial reflections.

At the end of the workshop, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with the other workshop facilitators. Additionally, a virtual focus group was conducted with participants a month after the workshop, which provided further opportunities to explore their thoughts and perspectives on the project. The research design placed the participants at the centre of the research process.

Data Analysis

The research produced 11 pieces of creative writing, as well separate transcripts of the workshop and the virtual focus group/three semi-structured interviews. These texts were analysed according to the six stages of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarisation of data; (2) generation of codes; (3) combining codes into themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) determine significance of themes; and (6) report findings. A participatory approach to thematic analysis guaranteed the inclusion of research participants in this process (Liebenberg et al., 2020).

Initial codes were co-identified by the researchers and the research participants through deliberation and analysis of the texts produced in an inductive approach that highlighted key words or ideas that were repeated (stages 1 and 2). The immersive group discussion following the reading of all narratives

enabled participants and the research team to jointly identify and co-create initial codes in a fluid, interactive, and constructivist manner. Working first in smaller groups and then collectively, participants compared interpretations, clustered similar ideas and negotiated shared meanings, grouping the codes into broader themes (stage 3). These themes were reviewed through open dialogue, where the larger group collectively examined and refined them, allowing underlying assumptions to be questioned and clarified (stage 4). The themes were then reviewed as part of semi-structured interviews conducted with members of the research team and workshop facilitators, and within the virtual post-workshop focus group conducted with participants (stage 5). This meeting provided an opportunity to validate and deepen the earlier analysis, as participants reflected on the themes' relevance, clarified meanings and proposed refinements based on their collective experience of the workshop. The findings were further analysed within the context of literature in the field (stage 6). The codes and themes identified were therefore tested for rigour and resonance, and refined through discussion, interview and literature review. The inclusion of research participants in the analysis of data guaranteed the co-creation of knowledge through the production, discussion and analysis of the texts, embedding the narrative of the participants in the final research outcome (Charmaz et al., 2018).

Results

The participatory thematic analysis discerned four interrelated elements of positive identity: knowing who I am and feeling in control (self-awareness and self-control), better relationships with others, a sense of purpose and a sense of belonging. These elements were derived from four alternative versions of 'self' constructed in the participants' writing—the stronger self, the altruistic self, the political self and the harmonious self. Each of these identities was associated with a distinct social imaginary that challenged dominant narratives of violence and failure: the imaginaries of empowerment, community, peace and *buen vivir* or good living.

Table 2 illustrates the analytic progression across three interpretive levels: basic themes capture the experiential focus of participants' writing, organising themes represent corresponding possible selves articulated through narrative and social imaginaries situate these possible selves within broader symbolic and moral horizons. Re-imagination refers to the dialogic process through which movement across these levels becomes possible. Table 2 provides a thematic map of this interpretive process, showing how individual expressions of experience were grouped into basic and organising themes that together articulated the four overarching social imaginaries.

Table 2. The Participatory Thematic Analysis.

Creative process		Basic themes	Organising themes	Social imaginary	Self-trajectory	Identity trajectory
Self-reflection	Reimagination	Move forward	Self-awareness & Self-control	Empowerment	Stronger self	Positive identity development
		Agency				
		Learning				
		Tenacity				
		Flourish				
		Growth				
Mutual recognition		Empathy	Better relationships	Community	Altruistic self	
		No fear				
		Joint success				
		Friendship				
		Dreams				
Creative authorship		Service				
		Voice	A sense of purpose	Peace	Political self	
		Direction in life				
		Determination				
		Action for change				
Dialogue		Responsibility				
		Home	A sense of belonging	*Buen vivir* Good living	Harmonious self	
		Bonds				
		Commitment				
		Make amends				
		At one with self				

These thematic categories formed the analytical foundation for the subsequent narrative reconstruction.

Table 3 presents selected excerpts from participants' writings that exemplify how each alternative self and corresponding social imaginary was expressed. Together, Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the analytical movement from thematic interpretation to narrative illustration, linking conceptual development to the participants' own voices and cultural meanings.

The four reimagined identities should be understood not as discrete psychological categories, but as interrelated narrative constructions. Each identity is anchored in a specific social imaginary, which acts as the broader cultural and symbolic framework through which the self is understood, positioned and reoriented. These imaginaries reflect participants' evolving sense of purpose, belonging and moral agency, and are best viewed as contextual landscapes that give meaning and coherence to identity reconstruction.

'Knowing Who I Am and Feeling in Control': The Stronger Self and the Imaginary of Empowerment

Participants redefined their stronger self as an individual with greater self-awareness and personal agency. They viewed themselves as resilient and capable of overcoming adversity. They developed a sense of control over their futures. This empowerment was generated internally, linked to greater self-confidence and self-efficacy, and the realisation of increased agency within challenging contexts: 'I used to think I had no control of my life. Now I realise the only person who can help me most is myself' (P4).

The participants depicted a desire to progress and find a route out of the violence and the negative impact it might have had on their lives. They embarked upon 'a journey of discovery' (P22) and sense-making, and relied on 'tenacity' (P16), 'thick skin' (P2) and 'determination' (P5) to help them.

The participant's experiences of war prompted a reassessment of priorities and engendered a desire for positive change. Participants felt more competent and confident to overcome the challenges they faced. They wanted to learn from their experiences and not be debilitated by them. This internal transformation was accompanied by a quiet sense of self-rediscovery and the belief that growth could emerge even from pain. They exhibited a heightened sense of perseverance and drive. Future success was presented as a choice, dependent on the participants' own actions to rebuild their lives in the present.

Table 3. Illustrative Excerpts From Participant Writing.

Alternative self and social imaginary	Illustrative text from data
The stronger self (empowerment)	Hi Sek Let me tell you that like everything in life, nothing is easy. Let's move forward because in each of us is the will to overcome, and nobody can counter that. To move forward when there's so much suffering, will in the end bring good things (as they say from darkness, comes light). These bad things that you lived through make you stronger and better in your daily routine, and that way you'll be able to get over the obstacles that life will put in your way (P1/P12). A'te Despite this difficult experience in your childhood, you always could and knew how to confront each of the obstacles. And despite the risk that you well know, you have come and tell this story. It amazes me how strong and brave you are (P2/P13). Dariel My dear friend. Your departure hurts me because your departure seems so unfair. If you'd have thought properly about things, you'd still be alive. You're a person who wanted to triumph through fighting and because of war, you left. It's made me sad, but I remember you and think I must fight. I will go out and move forward in homage to you, Dariel (P9/P15). Admirable and esteemed, Thank you for allowing me to find myself again, for reminding me who I am. Thank you for allowing me to re-write my story, for leaving a legacy that it's possible to love myself, believe and rediscover the same world and story that destroyed me, but today that frees me and gives me new life to continue flourishing, growing and becoming stronger (P11/P18).
The altruistic self (community)	You have motivated me to move forward without fear, and I'm sure when more people know about your story, they will also stop being scared (P2/P13). Hi A'te I just want to cheer you up so you can move forward. I know you have lived through a very fragile past that has marked your life, but know that I will ask God to help you with your life projects that you have planned, and that everything will turn out well. I hope it won't stay like this (P5/P20). A'te I know you suffered much because of the war, but with pain, we learn and we reach our goals, and with time, we live our dreams (P5/P20). Ariel and Sek It's beautiful when there's a friendship that nothing and nobody can separate, always helping and protecting one another. This is the friendship everyone should have. Thanks for the example you show us (P10/P16).

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

Alternative self and social imaginary	Illustrative text from data
The political self (peace)	I would like to help you raise your voice so other children in the world will not have to live a past that nobody would want for them. To help the Tree of Love beautifully flourish in every corner of the world, where there has been so much violence (P).
	For the President Everything that is shown in the short film is a reflection of what thousands of children and teenagers, of what we lived through. I don't identify with the character I mention, but I attest that for many, war is a business. This is the beginning of many who fall out of fear. Hopefully more people will be brave enough to share what they have lived through because maybe then, and only maybe, can we begin to forge the start of a peace that we have longed for, for so much time (P3/P21).
	Sek Be brave For a cause Fair for A clean community and Future (P7/P14).
	Never again should another child or teenager be sent to war! (P7/P14).
	When I close my eyes, the first character I imagine is the commander of the FARC because it's a very sad situation in which many women have suffered their abuse, and this should not happen again in our country (P4/P19).
The harmonious self (good living)	A'te Sometimes, peace isn't about forgetting what happened, but about learning to live calmly within yourself and with others. I've learned to listen to life in silence, to enjoy small things—the sun, a smile, the wind. After so much pain, I now understand that living well is not about having everything, but about feeling harmony between what I think, what I feel, and what I do (P6/P15).
	Dariel Your story helped me understand that freedom is not only outside, but inside. When we care for others and for nature, when we forgive and let go of hate, we begin to heal. I want to live in a world where we can plant instead of destroy, where our hands build and our words unite. That's the kind of good life I dream of (P7/P17).
	When I returned, I thought people would reject me for all that had happened. But the elders received me with words of healing, and the community opened its doors again. They told me that everyone who loses their path can find it if they listen to the land. I began helping with the harvest, caring for the river, and teaching the children what I learned in the mountains. That's when I understood that living well means being part of everything again—of the people, of the earth, of the silence where the heart breathes in peace (P10/16).

The participants not only felt stronger, but were also able to 'love myself' (P11/P18). The stronger self was manifested as 'flourishing' and 'growing" as participants felt free to live a 'new and better life' (P11/P18). To flourish is to thrive and prosper, and to be in one's prime. To flourish where there has been 'so much violence' is therefore to change, to adapt and innovate (P6/P22). Flourishing here implied a renewed capacity to appreciate life's simple continuities—the everyday acts of endurance and care that make growth possible after rupture. The stronger self is not only better equipped to live with the present, but also ready and planning for the future, in ways that were previously thought impossible.

Better Relations With Others: The Altruistic Self and the Imaginary of Community

The altruistic self highlighted the importance of relationships and community. Participants experienced a profound sense of connection and empathy through their interactions with one another. This collective engagement enabled them to build a positive identity grounded in supportive relationships and a commitment to helping others, fostering a mutual respect that redefined the self in terms of shared healing and support. This process nurtured a collective ethic of care in which listening and encouragement became forms of mutual repair. There was a realisation among the young participants that their personal stories were being listened to and learned from by their peers. This acknowledgement of their suffering promoted a sense of common healing and created a more positive orientation towards the other participants, as well as to the world more generally: 'Knowing that people care about my story makes me see society better. I realise that it's important to help those in the same situation' (P9).

The pain of the past created bonds among the participants, who were able to help each other regulate their emotions of guilt, anger and shame. Acts of comfort and reassurance—letters, messages, gestures—became small rituals of belonging, reinforcing that recovery was a shared journey rather than an individual task. Empathy emanated from their shared personal experiences, that 'with pain, we learn and reach our goals' (P5/P20). As another young female participant articulated, 'It [sharing her story] really helps to see other people in the same situation or worse. It helps you move on' (P7). Encouraging others to heal helped the participants derive meaning from their own stories. It allowed individuals to reflect on and share their own story in a new light 'to rediscover the same world and story that destroyed me' (P11/P18).

The young participants realised that their stories contained a level of significance beyond the self. Some participants recognised the significance of their

stories and success for the ‘healing of the nation’ (P10). The community thus became both witness and participant in a broader social restoration, extending empathy outward into civic imagination. As another female participant explained, ‘Once you write it [one’s story], it no longer belongs to you, it belongs to the country’ (P4).

A Sense of Purpose: The Political Self and the Imaginary of Peace

The political self was shaped by a collaborative commitment to advocacy and societal change. Participants worked together to articulate their visions for a peaceful future, thereby cultivating a sense of purpose and political agency. This collective effort allowed them to transform their past experiences into a powerful drive for social justice and peace, reinforcing their identity as active agents of change with clear and meaningful purpose.

The political self prioritised action as a solution to suffering and made a commitment to end conflict and child soldiering. This activism forged the imaginary of peace and articulated a call for change (P6/P22). Upholding peace was perceived as a ‘responsibility’ (P10) and advocacy was conceived as the route to achieve it. Peace was depicted as a way of compensating for the violence and hurt they may have perpetrated. It also represented a moral rebalancing—a determination to transform suffering into protection for others and renewal for the community.

Participants wrote short and heartfelt pleas that displayed a political awareness in their powerful simplicity: ‘Never again should another child or teenager be sent to war!’ (P7/P14). Specifically, ‘The Tree of Love’ that featured in the animation was referred to as symbolic of the participants’ hopes for peace to ‘blossom’ and for their stories to spread beyond the boundaries of their local, regional and national contexts (P6/P22). The imaginary of peace carried within it the importance of being heard, not just by their peers and by their communities, but also within the corridors of power. Peace was imagined not as an endpoint but as a living project—rooted in the idea that voices, like trees, grow stronger when shared and tended collectively. With a direct appeal to the President, the political self became evident in a manifesto for change and peace (P3/P21).

The participants described their ambitions to study and ‘become someone’ in the future (P19). Their career designs to study medicine, psychology or law were intrinsically linked with the altruistic desire to help others, outlined above. The participants linked their chances of individual success in life with the chances for peace to prosper. Their life plans were directly associated

with the political context. Their aspirations for study and service were infused with a civic idealism that framed education and work as pathways towards sustaining peace in everyday life.

A Sense of Belonging: The Harmonious Self and the Imaginary of Good Living

The harmonious self was developed through a collaborative engagement with cultural values and traditions. Indigenous participants collectively reconnected with concepts like *Wët wët fxi'zenxi* or 'good living' (*buen vivir*) which emphasises a harmonious relationship with their cultural heritage and environment. This shared process of cultural reaffirmation provided them with a renewed sense of belonging and integration, transforming their identities to align with their cultural roots and fostering a sense of unity and peace within themselves and their communities. Good living was experienced as a quiet balance between inner calm and collective well-being, a harmony of thought, feeling and action rooted in reciprocity.

Participation in conflict disrupts this sense of harmony. It causes 'ruptures' from nature, land and community (M. Charles, 2021). It destroys the foundations of peace upon which Nasa culture is built. The Indigenous participants therefore described their experiences of conflict as being in a state of 'disharmony'. For them disharmony is tantamount to a crisis of identity that generates alienation from themselves and their surroundings: 'You become lost. You lose connections to the world around you, but also within you. It creates unbalance' (P16).

Disharmony constitutes a lack of cohesion as they became 'lost physically and spiritually' in the world (P20). The Nasa relationship to their land is so significant that when children and teenagers are removed from it by armed groups, they are not only exposed to the violence of conflict, but also forced to forsake and forget their language and customs. It is a form of cultural estrangement. Reconnection involved not only returning home but re-learning how to coexist—with people, with land and with the rhythms of daily life that sustain the spirit.

Indigenous teenagers often navigate the complex interplay between their traditional cultural practices and the influence of Western modernity. It has created cultural erosion and a conflict of identity as Indigenous teenagers often lack a sense of belonging to either (Garcés-Pérez & Alarcón-Muñoz, 2025). Having lived through violence, however, the Indigenous participants of this study experienced renewed commitment to their Indigenous values. Good living was not only a way to make amends, but also the way to progress and exist in the world. It provided meaning and purpose for them after the

horrors of war: ‘It is more than being able to say sorry for me. It is a way to absorb what has happened to me and understand it so I can move on and be at one with the world’ (P20). In this way, *buen vivir* emerged as both moral compass and life practice, guiding their reintegration through gratitude, respect, and restored equilibrium.

Re-Imagination

The four identities were shaped not only by internal reflection but through the collective process of **re-imagination**: a dialogic, symbolic, and future-facing reconstruction of the self. Re-imagination, as defined in this study, consisted of four interdependent elements, as depicted in Table 4.

The first was ***self-reflection* (on past trauma and stigma)**, in which participants critically re-examined the labels imposed on them. They were able to shape the imaginary of empowerment through the realisation of their agency and critical evaluation of their context to reject stigma and look forward to positive futures. This process of reframing past experience was a foundational step in reconfiguring identity.

The second element was ***mutual recognition***, whereby participants affirmed and humanised one another’s narratives through peer listening and shared vulnerability. They were able to shape the imaginary of community through engaging with shared experiences to build empathy and courage. This relational dynamic allowed for the externalisation of shame and the recovery of narrative voice.

Third, ***creative authorship*** emerged as a tool for symbolic re-authoring. Through metaphor, future projection and storytelling, participants imagined alternative self-constructions. They were able to shape the imaginary of peace through reframing their lived experience beyond one of trauma to establish meaning in their lives, inspired to contribute to a peaceful society. This act of narrative reconstruction enabled participants to test out possible selves and move beyond imposed identities.

Finally, ***dialogue*** served as a space for ethical reflection and communal negotiation of justice, responsibility, and healing. Indigenous participants were able to shape the imaginary of good living through re-engagement with their cultural and spiritual values that emanated from discussing the impact of rupture. Such conversations allowed participants to move beyond silence or polarisation, and towards a more nuanced engagement with their past and future roles. Together, these four interwoven practices—self-reflection, mutual recognition, creative authorship, and dialogue—formed the scaffolding for identity transformation.

Table 4. The Elements of Reimagination.

Reimagination	Constituent elements	Illustrative quotes from data
	Self-reflection	*I thought I was a bad person* (P5) *(awareness of stigma)*
		A journey of discovery (P22) *(move forward)*
		The only person who can help me most is myself (P4) *(agency)*
		Before, I thought I was just a bad person. That's what they always said. But writing it down, seeing what I lived through. . . I started to realise I wasn't born this way. Things happened to me. And now I get to decide what happens next. (P5)
	Mutual recognition	*With pain, we learn and reach our goals* (P5/20) *(empathy)*
		Listening to others helps us to rediscover the same world that destroyed me (P11/18) *(no fear)*
		I realise that it's important to help those in the same situation (P9) *(joint success)*
		Sharing our stories is about more than understanding, it is about making new bonds (P17) *(friendship)*
		When you know it has happened to others, dremas stop feeling impossible and start feeling shared (P2) *(dreams)*
		When she shared her story, I saw parts of mine too. I never thought someone else would understand what it's like to carry that kind of silence. Hearing her made me feel less alone. Like maybe my story is worth telling too (P14).

(continued)

Table 4. (continued)

Reimagination	Constituent elements	Illustrative quotes from data
	Creative authorship	*When a story helps others, it becomes more than a story—it becomes a building block for peace* (P9). *(service)*
		By turning our stories into guidance for others, we learn that our voices can serve something larger than ourselves (P20). *(voice)*
		I will become someone. This will not be my story (P19) *(determination)*
		Never again should another child or teenager be sent to war! (P7/14) *(action for change)*
		In my text, I wrote myself as a bridge. Not between war and peace, but between who I was and who I want to be. It's not easy. But the words helped me build something. Even if it's just on paper for now, it's a start (P12).
	Dialogue	*It is not just about the past, but about the decisions we choose to make now to make things right* (P6). *(responsibility)*
		Speaking with others made me see that responsibility grows from connection; you want to make things better because the friendship matters(P14). *(bonds)*
		It is a way to absorb what has happened to me and understand it so I can move on and be at one with the world (P20) *(make amends)*
		We *didn't all agree. Some said justice means punishment. Others talked about forgiveness. But we listened. And I started thinking—not just about what I did, but what kind of person I want to be now. That's justice too, I think. (P15).*

Discussion

Through dialogic and reflective practices, participants engaged in narrative identity work that brought coherence, agency, and moral orientation to their life stories, aligning with D. P. McAdams' (2001) account of reinterpretation as a basis for continuity and meaning. The four thematic identities represent interconnected dimensions of a reimagined self.

The stronger self reflected increased agency and self-efficacy, echoing Markus and Nurius's (1986) 'possible selves'. These redemptive narratives (D. McAdams, 2006) reframed suffering as a source of growth and resisted dominant imaginaries of failure. The altruistic self signalled a turn towards community and care, aligning with Erikson's (1968) generativity and Cahill's (2007) 'shared reflexivity', as participants transformed harm into motivation for social contribution.

The political self emerged through critical consciousness and civic purpose, challenging 'master narratives' that cast former child soldiers as victims or threats (Hammack, 2010). These imagined futures resonated with Freire's (1970) conscientização and findings by Blattman and Annan (2010) on political engagement among demobilised youth. The harmonious self, most visible among Indigenous participants, reflected cultural and spiritual reorientation rooted in buen vivir, functioning as epistemic resistance (Fricker, 2007) and integrating multiple dialogical positions (Hermans, 2001).

These identities were not fixed categories but symbolic constructions embedded in social imaginaries—empowerment, community, peace and buen vivir—that helped participants make sense of their pasts, navigate present exclusions, and envision ethically viable futures. The four dimensions of positive identity observed—self-awareness and control, improved relationships, renewed purpose and belonging—echo the PYD model (Catalano et al., 2004) but emerged here through relational and symbolic re-imagination rather than developmental sequencing.

Participants crafted positive identities through storytelling, metaphor, recognition and ethical dialogue, projecting futures grounded in inclusion and moral viability. These shifts mark movement from negative identities associated with alienation (Erikson, 1968; Hihara et al., 2019) towards coherent, socially valued selves. Narrative transformation was non-linear, involving negotiation of multiple internal positions and often following a redemptive arc (Pals, 2006). Crucially, these identities were anchored in collective witnessing and solidarity.

The findings underscore that identity reconstruction is central to reintegration (Gluecker et al., 2022). Reintegration requires symbolic and moral repositioning (McMullin, 2022; Wessells, 2006), and when such identity work is absent, reintegration falters (Denov & Marchand, 2014; Schmitt

et al., 2021). Former child soldiers face particular challenges: their identities are shaped by coercion, harm and agency, yet reintegration frameworks often reduce them to binaries—victim or threat—overlooking lived complexity (Ladisch, 2019; Worthen et al., 2019). Without space for reflection and imagination, reintegration remains superficial, increasing the risk of recidivism (Sharif, 2013).

Narrative inquiry guided by a YPAR framework offers a generative alternative to conventional, descriptive uses of narrative methods. While narrative inquiry alone typically focuses on meaning-making and interpretation rather than action, its integration with YPAR infuses it with an explicitly transformative and action-oriented ethos. By engaging youth in participatory storytelling and collective inquiry, this combined approach creates the symbolic, relational and political conditions for identity transformation. In our study, it enabled participants to move from being objects of reintegration to agents of narrative reconstruction—redefining who they are and how they imagine their place within society.

This shift from externally imposed scripts to self-authored narratives is not only transformative but fundamentally decolonial. It aligns with approaches that challenge universalising models of trauma and recovery, to foreground epistemologies rooted in local meaning-making and collective experience (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Smith, 2012). By centring youth voices, privileging Indigenous knowledge, and embracing relational and dialogic forms of inquiry, this YPAR-informed narrative process resists extractive research and reframes reintegration as a culturally embedded, symbolic, and morally significant practice. Rather than imposing prescriptive identities, it facilitates co-authorship and community-rooted imaginaries of healing—constituting both a methodological innovation and an ethical and political stance against colonial legacies in peacebuilding.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

This study offers insights into how former child soldiers re-imagine positive identities through a YPAR-inspired approach, but acknowledges several limitations. The study was intentionally designed as a participatory inquiry inspired by YPAR, rather than a full YPAR cycle, as participants did not collectively formulate the overarching research question or design, even though they generated the narrative data and participated in its collective analysis. In this sense, the project aligns with recent work that conceptualises participatory inquiry as healing-centred and psychosocial rather than exclusively activist. The findings may not be generalisable given regional and individual differences, and selection

bias is possible, as participants already engaged in creative projects may be more prepared for reflection. Finally, while the study captures short-term narrative shifts, it does not assess behavioural or long-term reintegration outcomes; future research should examine how identity reconstruction evolves over time.

Conclusion

This article shows how participatory narrative re-imagination operates as a psychosocial process that extends engagement beyond voice and advocacy. Through an intensive participatory workshop, former child soldiers engaged in self-reflection, mutual recognition, creative authorship, and dialogue, catalysing four identity trajectories. Such short encounters function as catalysts rather than endpoints of transformation, initiating processes of meaning-making over time. Framed as a healing-centred narrative practice, this YPAR-inspired approach foregrounds agency and belonging and demonstrates how participatory methods support reintegration as symbolic and social repositioning, through which YPAR's action dimension is realised psychosocially rather than through conventional public advocacy.

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Ethical Considerations

The study secured institutional ethical approval from Bournemouth University in the UK (reference 21063).

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and for those under the age of 18, consent was additionally provided by a parent or legal guardian.

Consent for Publication

Consent for the publication of anonymised data and quotations was obtained from all participants and, in the case of minors, also from their parent or legal guardian.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Data Availability Statement

Due to the nature of the research and to protect the identity of the participants for security reasons, supporting data is not available.

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