



Bigger, Stronger, Braver

By Winki Chan & Natasha Raisch

An exploration of solidarity in the face of darkness through the eyes of a child

*Dedicated to those whose lives are interrupted or
consumed by the Colombian conflict,*

And to Darío

To whom we are so grateful.

Artists' Statement

Bigger, Stronger, Braver is based on an interview with Darío. Darío is a pseudonym used to protect the interviewee's identity. Fictional and artistic elements were added to his story to make *Bigger, Stronger, Braver* appropriate for elementary-aged children. Country and interviewee profiles provide additional context around the storyline we present in the following pages.

We thank Darío for the memories he shared with us and we greatly appreciate his willingness, openness, and trust.

Some illustrations are based on photos of Putumayo, Colombia taken by Stefan Ortiz, who worked closely with Darío in efforts to empower his farming community and captured the strength of Darío's people on camera.



Colombia

Message from the Authors

Darío's story is set in the Putumayo region of Colombia. The country has been in a state of protracted conflict since the 1950's. This civil war has claimed over 8.3 million victims and has greatly intervened with the economic and social development of the country. The scope of violence that was executed in various areas of the country is constantly exacerbated by the weakness of the state, the profitable drug trade and foreign intervention. Guerrilla groups and paramilitary groups have gained power and control over land, families have been pushed to leave their homes, and children and youths have become vulnerable to forced recruitment into armed groups.

Despite media portrayals of extreme violence and unrest in the Colombia society, it is important to also recognize and appreciate the individual stories that exist in this context of conflict. Many stories of resilience, love and strength are not represented in the mainstream portrayals painted by the media. Through this book, we hope to show you a child ("Darío") and his perspectives within a setting of conflict. We want to explore with you and your children how Darío interacts with the resources he has around him – his family, his teachers, his friends and his education – to stand up against the fearful shadow (violence) that had so much power over him and his community. It is also important to note that while this story is about Darío as an individual, there are often many other actors that contribute to conflict. Feel free to explore with your child the various structural and systemic inequalities that exist in Darío's community with the guiding questions that we provide at the end of the book.

We hope to send a message of hope, resilience and resistance through the story of Darío and to remind children everywhere that they have the tools and the power to be changemakers in their own communities.

Piragua: Canoe



In my village, we go from place to place on sparkling, rippling rivers. My legs propel me across winding creeks. We sail wooden **piraguas** that we carve out of trees. They slice as light as a feather across the water. The burbling of the river puts me to sleep at night, and the singsong of the parrots wakes me up in the morning.

My favorite day of the week is delivery day! A **piragua** passes by my village every week making deliveries from the city. It winds down the murky river, gliding from one village to the next. It delivers things like salt, soap, soda and other things that we don't grow.



We grow many things. Some things are harder to grow than others, and we have had to learn the secrets of the land. Some secrets are knowledge about what seeds to use and when to let the land rest.

Even though we take good care of the land, a mysterious shadow sometimes brings dangers to our lives, so other secrets are knowledge about how to protect ourselves and our crops.



Now we have leafy plantain trees, creeping pepper plants and bushy cacao trees!

Arepa: Savory pastry made of corn, water and salt




My father is a farmer. Every morning he wakes up before the sun.

Mamá makes him an **arepa** and eggs and he puts on his rainboots and grabs his tools.



Then he's off! All day he works hard, wrestling and tussling and scuffling with the sprouts, seedlings, bushes and vines.





The soil here is bright orange, like the setting sun when it shines bright and makes a halo of gold on the river.

When it is hot and sunny, the clay-like earth bakes and hardens and Papá must use all of his strength to plow.

When it rains, the earth clumps into sticky globs that cling to his rainboots and don't let go!



One evening, my sister Sofía and I saw Papá hurrying back from the fields. He swept us inside with him and told us sternly not to leave the house. Later we heard Papá talking with Mamá in hushed whispers in the kitchen. Something had happened in our field!

Our orange soil had turned black as coal. All our plants had died! The shadow had spread over the land...



We grew up hearing tales about the shadow. It is everywhere and it hurts us
in many forms.

Sometimes, it hurts our village.


Sometimes, it hurts our
crops.

Sometimes, it hurts our
people.

Papá always says we have to go to sleep before the setting
sun wraps his golden halo around the river so we can be
rested for school, but I know it is because of the shadow.



I was getting ready for school one day when Papá told me I had to stay home. The shadow had gotten into the school! It didn't stay long though, because the next day we were back in school as if it had never been there. Sofía and I looked all over, but it didn't leave a trace!



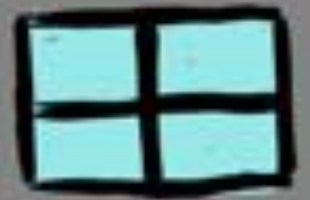
I don't see the shadow here!

It's not here either!

Most of the time, I forget about the shadow. I am way too busy playing games with my best friends, Antonio and Alejandra, playing jokes on Sofía, and going to school!

But after the shadow showed up at school, some of my friends stopped coming. Only Antonio and Alejandra stayed. We didn't have enough people to form soccer teams anymore!

Some of my teachers left, too. I don't get to take science classes this year because there aren't enough science teachers to travel all the way down the river to my village.



Profesor: teacher

My favorite teacher, Ms. Lila, stayed in our village. Sometimes, Ms. Lila's husband comes to help us with our homework. Our class likes him as much as we like Ms. Lila, and we call him **profesor** too! He always encourages us to keep learning so that we can achieve a better future for everyone in the



Ms. Lila



Profesor

We all do our part to contribute to our community.

Papá and his friends grow the food that feeds our people. But the shadow destroys their plants...



Ms. Lila and her husband teach us the knowledge that helps our brains grow. But the shadow scares away their students...



Antonio, Alejandra and I want to contribute, too, but that pesky shadow always gets in the way!

So...



We formed the **Bright Brain Club** to bring light to the shadows with the power of our brains!

Bright
The ~~Brite~~ Brain Club Handbook

1. We will contribute to our village through Creation, not destruction.
2. We will support each other and work together to make change.
3. We will use the power of our brains instead of our fists.
4. We will articulate our ideas without forcing others to believe them.



Signed,
The Bright Brain Club
Alejandra
DARIO
Antonio

The shadow is vast and powerful, and its tools are force and fear.

But when we work together, we are



We have our handbook of beliefs and ideas to guide us, and we will stand up to the shadow with our brains and our words!

We made many copies of our handbook. We distributed them to everyone we knew so that we could all work together to improve our village! Soon, the Bright Brain Club became the talk of the town. People came and asked us for advice about how to use their brains and their words to solve their problems.



We started to see people work together to create

bigger, stronger, and braver ideas!

The background features a large, soft grey watercolor wash on the left side, and several smaller, vibrant red watercolor washes on the right side. The overall style is artistic and expressive.

When all of a sudden...

BAM!

POW!

BOOM!

The shadow showed up at our Bright Brain Club meeting! It must have seen one of the copies of our handbook we passed out around the village, and noticed how we started to work together.



"You!" It screamed.

**Your Bright Brain Club is ruining my plans to take over your village!
No one wants to fight with me now.**

**They all want to use their brains and solve problems by talking. I
want to fight!**

Fight with me! Fight with me!

You are wasting your time thinking and talking to people!

**It is easier to convince people with fear. Just force them to do what
you want them to do. You don't need to work *with* them to reach
your goals!**

I can teach you to be scary, just like me.

Come fight with me...

We were prepared for this moment! We had thought carefully about our ideas and the words we would use to express them.



We were ready to stand up for ourselves!

"No. We will not fight with you!"

We don't need to be big and scary like you. We have friends and family who we love and who love us. We'd rather work and learn with them than frighten people, like you do.

No. We will not fight with you!

Sometimes talking and thinking can be difficult, but we'd rather work hard together than threaten people to get what we want, like you do.

Fear will not convince us.

We will not fight with you!"

The shadow circled around us.

It trembled with anger.

It erupted into a fiery scarlet blaze!

“NO! You WILL fight with me.”



Antonio reached for my hand. I reached for Alejandra's hand.
There were only the three of us standing in front of the booming shadow.

“No, we will not fight with you!” a soft voice behind us whispered.



I turned around and saw Sofía standing behind me.
Papá and Mamá were also there!

Then I saw Ms. Lila and *profesor*! The whole village started to gather behind us.

“No, we will not fight with you!”

We all began to chant together, louder and louder.



All of a sudden the shadow started to shrink...



It finally spoke.

“Well, well, well, Bright Brain Club. How intriguing. No one wants to fight with me. You managed to get everyone in the village to think with you. Your ideas are thoughtful. Your handbook is clear. Your friendships are strong.”

“I guess...I will leave you be...**for now**. I will wait for you in the jungle.”

And just as swiftly as it came, the shadow disappeared. But we could still see its bright red eyes as it backed away through the swaying branches.

We know the shadow is still there. At night I hear it whisper.

Fight with me...

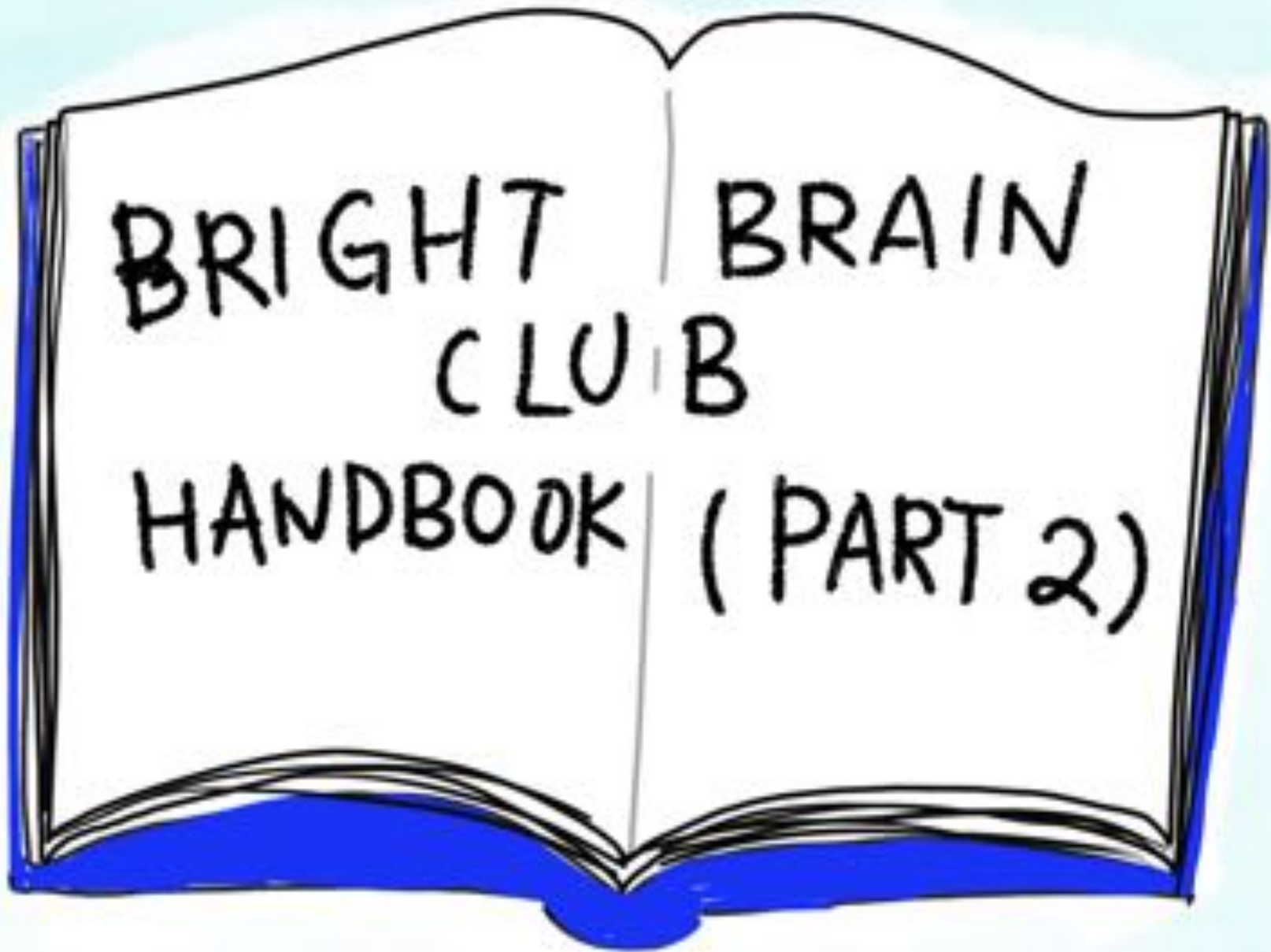


Fight with me...

Sometimes it returns to hurt our land and scares us with threats. We know the shadow is strong.

But the Bright Brain Club is growing bigger, stronger and braver, too.

We have the power to stand up for ourselves with
our brains...



...our words...

Say NO to the shadow
with your WORDS!



...and our people.



Resources for Families and Teachers

The information on the following pages is designed to help families and educators navigate the intricacies of this story and the historical and practical application of the intersection between conflict and education. Darío's profile is included to provide context and recognize the contributions of individuals, communities, and education in mitigating conflict. The *Guiding Questions* and *The Bright Brain Club Guide to Problem Solving* provide additional tools to reflect on, comprehend, and extend the text to children's daily lives.

Who is Darío?

This story is based on the life of a boy named “Darío”, who was born, raised, and continues to live in a verdant, rural region of Putumayo, Colombia. The Putumayo River is an important part of the area’s historic and cultural identity, and large swathes of the region are accessible only by river. While its seclusion has conserved the Putumayo’s pristineness, its geographic and political isolation have also made it vulnerable to the activity of clandestine armed actors and state-sanctioned counterattacks throughout Colombia’s decades-long civil war.

Many types of violence have cast shadows over the lives of the inhabitants of the Putumayo region. In the story, the shadow kills Darío’s father’s crops and turns the fields black. It is not uncommon for government planes to fly over the fields of the Putumayo, fumigating and killing illegal crops. However, farmers often have few sustainable legal alternatives, and fumigation poisons not only the plants, but the soil, water, and people themselves. Darío talks about teachers and students that left his school after the shadow inhabited the schoolhouse. Throughout his childhood, Darío repelled recruitment tactics from various armed actors in his region, who sometimes occupied his school and threatened adults in his community. Darío’s remark about the lack of science classes is a reference to the structural violence inherent in the unequal distribution of government resources among public educational institutions throughout Colombia. Schools in Darío’s region often suffer from a shortage of teachers, which is reflected in the limited offering of subjects in school, and stunted investment in infrastructure that affects the quality of their school building and facilities.

(More on the next page)

Nevertheless, Darío credits the people of his community as sources of motivation in continuing his studies and seeking to create a better future for himself and his village. Particularly important for him were his parents, who instilled in him the value of hard work, and his teachers, who encouraged his appreciation for school as an avenue to a more successful, stable future. The pervasive violence that shadowed Darío's community became a normalized feature in his life, and one whose effects he didn't completely identify until he temporarily left his rural region to pursue university studies in the city. The experience of living in a different environment changed the lens through which he felt and understood conflict and enabled him to more comprehensively recognize and analyze its features, causes, and consequences. After receiving his university degree he returned to his region of birth, empowered to create change and equipped with the technical knowledge to do so. He was a founding member of his community's youth group, which seeks to incubate initiative and solidarity among young people through political and environmental education (a dynamic we sought to capture in the *Bright Brain Club!*). He currently works as a social and political leader in his community, developing tools to empower farmers.

Guiding Questions

These questions are intended as a reading guide for families and educators. There are a variety of sensitive topics present in the book that you may want to explore further in conversation with children. Important themes from *Bigger, Stronger, Braver* include community, violence, and education. The questions below can help you support a child's understanding of the impact of violence on a community, and the role of individuals, groups, and education in creating alternatives to conflict.

1. The main character in this story is based on a boy named Darío. In the story, how do you think Darío feels about his community? What are some things that he likes about where he lives?

In talking about the characteristics of Darío's village, you can help your child understand that, though Darío's home may be different from theirs, each community has unique strengths.

2. In this story, Darío and his friends have a problem with a shadow. What do you think the shadow is?

In talking about the identity of the shadow, you can help your child realize that the shadow represents many types of violence that are being imposed on Darío's community. Although violence is perpetrated by people, help children understand the complexity of conflict: people and their ideas aren't bad, but violence as a means of reaching goals is not a reasonable solution.

(More on the next page)

3. What types of things does the shadow do in Darío's village? How do you think the people in his community feel about the shadow?

In talking about the shadow's acts, you can help your child make connections between types of violence and their effects. For example, when the shadow turns the land black (crop fumigation), gets into the school house (armed actor occupation), scares away students and teachers (teacher shortages), and confronts the children (armed actor recruitment), do those instances represent personal violence (physical acts that render a person's actual abilities less than their potential abilities) or structural violence (social structures that harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs)? Who is being hurt, by whom, and how?

4. How do Darío and his friends come to a solution with the shadow? How does their education help them? What strategies do they use? Do you think the shadow is gone for good? What can Darío and his friends do if it returns?

In talking about strategies to resolve conflict, you can help your child understand the complexity of Darío's situation. We recommend that you stress learning, collaboration, and dialogue in problem solving, yet acknowledge that the challenges facing Darío and his community are substantial, and they will likely encounter the shadow again. Think creatively about what types of changes Darío and his community could benefit from in addressing the personal and structural challenges facing them. In addition to the solidarity of their community, whose help do they need?

The Bright Brain Club Guide to Problem Solving

Although there are many levels of conflict that we address in *Bigger, Stronger, Braver*, the conflicts that children face in their daily lives are often direct and interpersonal. Although this guide is by no means exhaustive, it is designed to provide a series of concrete steps for managing problem solving dialogue, which is often a challenging task for children. When your child has a problem with a friend that they're having a hard time solving, the following ideas may provide a starting point to help them construct a solution.

1. **Calm Down**

If you're feeling too frustrated to think about the problem, there are many things you can do to calm down. Practice breathing in while counting to five, and breathing out in the same way. Or, you could close your eyes and imagine a stoplight. When the red light is on, breathe deeply and think of something that relaxes you. When the yellow light comes on, think about who or what can help you solve the problem. When the green light comes on, open your eyes and identify the problem that needs to be solved.

(More on the next page)

2. Identify the Problem

To help identify the problem, practice talking about your feelings using “I feel” statements. For example, you could say “I feel lonely when you don’t invite me to sit with you at lunch.” Then, pretend to be an investigator by asking lots of questions to understand what the other person thinks and feels. Listen with your brain, your body, and your heart. When you listen with your brain, try to summarize how someone responds to your questions to make sure you understood them correctly. When you listen with your body, maintain eye contact with the person you’re listening to, so they know you’re paying attention. Listen for their tone of voice; it can help you understand their emotions. When you listen with your heart, try to understand what the other person is feeling. Examine your attitude to make sure you’re listening with an open mind. Are you more concerned about winning the discussion or understanding the other person?

3. Brainstorm Solutions

Once each person has explained their point of view, try thinking of at least three possible solutions to the problem. Remember how you did such a good job summarizing the other person’s point of view? Try to think of three possible solutions that would satisfy them, too. Talk about the consequences of the solutions. Are there any ideas that are good immediate *and* long-term solutions? Are there any solutions that might work for both of you?