

# Cultural Immersion & Self-Reflection in Bogotá

Inmersión cultural y autorreflexión en Bogotá  
Imersão cultural e auto-reflexão em Bogotá

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## Abstract

This autoethnography highlights the experiences in Bogotá, Colombia with the collaboration of the CUNY Youth Studies program and Fundación Centro Internacional de Educación y Desarrollo Humano (CINDE). This collaboration exposed students to a different cultural setting in a Latin American country. Students along with staff members were exposed to experiences that deepened their understanding in how adults, communities and the young people of Colombia work as a whole to create social impacts which is a perfect example of leadership and self-advocacy.

## Resumen

Esta auto etnografía destaca las experiencias en Bogotá, Colombia con la colaboración del programa de estudios de juventud de la CUNY y la Fundación Centro Internacional de Educación y Desarrollo Humano (CINDE). Esta colaboración expuso a los estudiantes a diferentes escenarios culturales en un país latinoamericano. Los estudiantes junto al personal se enfrentaron a experiencias que profundizaron su entendimiento de cómo los adultos, las comunidades y los jóvenes en Colombia trabajan como uno solo para crear impactos sociales, lo cual es un ejemplo de liderazgo y autogestión.

## Resumo

Esta auto etnografia destaca as experiências em Bogotá, Colômbia, com a colaboração do programa CUNY Youth Studies e da Fundação Centro Internacional de Educação e Desenvolvimento Humano (CINDE). Essa colaboração expôs os alunos a um cenário cultural diferente em um país latino-americano. Os alunos e os funcionários foram expostos a experiências que aprofundaram sua compreensão de como adultos, comunidades e jovens da Colômbia trabalham como um todo para criar impactos sociais, que é um exemplo perfeito de liderança e auto-gestão.

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#### **Keywords**

Self-reflection, youth development, community development, leadership, cultural immersion.

#### **Palabras clave**

autorreflexión; desarrollo juvenil; Desarrollo comunitario; liderazgo; inmersión cultural.

#### **Palavras-chave**

autorreflexão, desenvolvimento da juventude, desenvolvimento comunitário, liderança, imersão cultural.

## Introduction: Navigating through Community Networks

Our first internship day started out with the introduction of CINDE, the organization that links along with other resourceful organizations to help in the participation of Colombian youth. The social setting is different; there are diverse populations in the country such as Afro, indigenous and urban low-income communities that have scarce resources. I should note the United States and Colombia are different in how they define "youth": *Niñez* or childhood is at ages 0-5; *Infancia* or infancy is between ages 5-15; Adolescents are ages 12-15 and youth are ages 18-28. During our stay in Bogotá, we got to interact with infants, adolescents and adults. According to Nisme Pineda, "CINDE is a network that aims to better the quality of life from infancy and enrich the quality of life especially with children that are vulnerable and have fewer opportunities in their development" CINDE believes that all people are capable of improving their lives. They use and promote participatory practices as a means of involving those most impacted in the creation of programs and policies that alter their lives. As Foster-Fishman, Law, & Aoun (2010) mention, involving youth and communities in problem identification, analysis, intervention, and feedback, can help to promote critical awareness of the targeted issues, which can potentially increase effectiveness and promote awareness. CINDE helps organizations develop strategies and capabilities to tackle vulnerable populations and focuses on:

1) Families: They believe that families are very important and without adults, there can't be development or change.

2) Communities: Empower communities and construct elements of change and construction.

3) Research and development: These two are essential to the construction of possible solutions.

Bogotá is rich in culture, arts, music and dancing. Young people in Bogota have a large influence and dynamic interactions with the culture of their city which is evident in the sights and sounds that permeate every block. It was clear that the youth programs we visited used methodologies that incorporated arts as a means of involving young people in creating their own positive developmental trajectories.

CINDE's director Nisme Pineda states that *desarrollo rural* "rural development" is important for young people to have spaces for them to feel comfortable and express themselves which is why the development of youth, promotion of education and *construcción de paz* "peace building" are themes that tie the pedagogy of youth experiences and knowledge. By having youth that shares knowledge from a young individual to another is important, as it creates safe spaces for feeling comfortable, welcomed and sharing commonalities that may influence others.

Youth and organizations cannot do this alone. A new term that I learned and was often used was *docentes*: They are agents of change, adults, parents, leaders. They teach and thrive with success to improve the quality of life within the school and in the community. However, how do you approach to and work with youth that have been exposed to violence? During our lecture,

Nisme Pineda explains, “We propose that schools, in conjunction with communities, bring about safe spaces and re-incorporate youth that have been in violent spaces into society and not exclude them.” Safe spaces are another key component that was common when we visited Institucion Educativa Las Villas located in Soacha. There we learned the importance of incorporating *Centros Familiares y Comunitarios* (CFC) Family and Community Centers which are safe environments for communities.

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### Intergenerational Participation Helps Create Safe Spaces

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As we traveled to Soacha, I noticed how different the environment was compared to the United States and México. There were many street vendors outside the roads. People wanted to sell water bottles, candies and chips to those traveling by car. I also saw many garbage bags out in the open like here in NYC. But I felt like I belonged there, and it felt like home. The architecture of the houses and the people reminded me of the environment where I grew up for a few years, the little city of Iguala in México. The contrast between Soacha and Bogotá was palpable. In Bogotá, our hotel was clean, there were business people in suits every morning during breakfast buffet and the bars at night had a vibrant look. Soacha is for those that work hard to make ends meet just as our low-income Latino and Black communities. When we arrived at Institución Educativa Las Villas, we were all greeted with a loud “¡Buenos días!” Kids were in their recess, playing, running, yelling, they looked full of joy and seemed very welcoming and nice. We were brought to the library where there were many projects on display. I was impressed at the beautiful art on the walls. One that caught my attention was a presentation of earth; A human like form, with the head being earth and the body covered in green with trees, flowers, and animals. There were plastic cups, bags and other little plastic components stuck to it. I wondered who made it and what was the purpose of it. I saw a poster with graffiti drawn on it, which said “*Seres sociales*” (social beings), and many other astonishing pieces of art that I assumed were made by the kids. We were greeted by the site director and coordinator who shared a lot of valuable information. They explained that the Secretary of Education and Town Hall do not have enough resources in order to give more to the institution. However, CINDE fortified the school by incorporating leaders who focused on the care of the environment, which concluded in the creation of *Gestores Sociales y Ambientales*, a school project that

focused on the care of environment. It all came together as to why that earth human like project was there.

For this institution and CINDE, it is important to take care of the environment and teach future generations about being greener, which is why they incorporate the methodology of *servicio social*, social service, a way in which youth and adults do their community service by learning and teaching. Participants stated, "We create and develop creative minds as well as games so kids can play together." Someone else stated, "I started coming here since I was eight years old and coming to a CFC created a safe space for myself and others. At first, I was very shy, but being part of this community and environment has not only made me grow but also I have learned to express myself." Parents were also part of this. A mother who is a *docente*, expressed that her son found talents deep within himself and learned to socialize. She noted that she discovered a talent to teach math and was trained by other *docentes* to teach kids after school which allowed her to stay close to her son. Her tears and smile showed that the incorporation of the arts and safe spaces created a welcoming environment, which is why she was there telling us her experience and happiness she gained from being part of the community.

Sellman (2015) suggests that adults with personal experiences, training skills and expectations possess ideal attributes for working effectively with the marginalized and vulnerable kids, which is why the mother was part of social change. After her son was diagnosed with autism, she paved her way

to create social change and be part of the Las Villas community, by helping other kids. Another student stated, "Here, you can be yourself!" It amazed me to see how much joy and many positive vibes were present as we toured this site. Arts and leadership programs often aim to build adolescent's abilities to work toward goals by engaging them in large individual or group projects, such as completing a work of art, preparing a production, planning an event, or impacting their community (Larson & Angus 2011). We were located in an urban low income neighborhood, but to see and hear the positive minds of the young people and adults was truly inspiring and taught me that stigmatized communities, such as Soacha exist but have much potential. With the incorporation of adults, arts and the influence that others create and share -especially those youth that co-exists together and build bonds- they all create opportunities for themselves.

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### Using Art as a form of Self Expression

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Our next journey began with visiting a temporary home for girls funded by *Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar* (ICBF) (Colombian Institute for Family Wellbeing) that have dealt with violence, sexual abuse or have ran away from home and have been displaced. The coordinator explained that it is a temporary home where girls can stay three to four months depending on their case. With twenty-two years of operation, Familia Ayara is a social artistic Non-governmental organization (NGO) that uses hip-hop, breakdance and visual arts as a social development way to bring a system that strengthens life skills.

The collaboration ICBF and Familia Ayara reinforces the care that adults have for displaced youth in Bogotá. Our group was broken into three different workshops: graffiti, breakdance and hip-hop (poetry).

Initially, I wanted to be in the graffiti group, and many other did too. The line was long and the facilitators asked all of us to try to balance the number of participants in each group. No one decided to move and in an instant, I had the bravery to move to the Hip-Hop group. I thought that I had to challenge myself to create poetry; it is something I had not done in a while, so I did it, everyone clapped and a few others joined.

We were brought to the girls' dorm rooms, we sat on the floor and others sat on the beds. César was our facilitator and explained what rapping is; a way of expressing poetry, singing and creating beats. He was very knowledgeable and helped us throughout the entire process of writing. I asked him to look at what I had written. "*¡Alejo (a short way in Colombia to say Alejandro) me encanta!*" he said. I appreciated the help, guidance, and encouragement he gave us. We wrote poems with the theme of love and we created a chorus, which also included sections in English for those that did not speak Spanish. This was the perfect example of how the group included everyone regardless of the language barrier.

Hip-Hop across Colombia and around the world exhibits a series of shared meanings and aesthetics that confirm the existence of a network of cultural practices. As Tickner (2008) noted, "The lyrical content of rap, provides words, resources, and knowledge for articulating similar but not identical lived problems encountered in distinct places." (p. 128) Although Hip-Hop music is not my choice of genre of music to listen to, there was a meaningful message in the poetry we created as a whole, love and affection for those we appreciate. We all had a different story to sing to, from singing about missing someone because of the distance to rapping about how thankful an individual was to live another day.

Although this was an experience that we will never forget, it daunted me to ask myself, "Well, what happens when these girls are not exposed to activities like these?" During the *bocadillo* "snack" time, I spoke with a few girls, I was curious to know what they felt. Most of them said that they were spending a great time, as they were not focused on the issues that they had faced in the past and created art. However, they all mentioned that they wanted more. "I want to be outside and not



spend all my time inside this place, I don't like it here." Another girl said, "I miss my family even though I ran away, but living in Venezuela is not easy, people are starving, and I wish I could be with them." "I don't like it here because I want to be outside, yes we have fun inside, but I get tired of doing the same thing over and over." So, I asked, "What is something that you see yourself doing in the future?" "I don't know, I have been thinking of becoming a psychiatrist, but I know I can't do it because I can't pay for school, my grandmother does not have the money, but I wish I could incorporate music."

Baszile (2009) states, "Through their creation or participation in hip-hop culture, young people have forged a space and engaged a discourse—where they can negotiate their self-performances in ways that the traditional school curriculum does not allow" (p. 8). By providing those extracurricular activities, we can provide important developmental benefits such as motivation for adolescents that need to forget their issues (Dawes & Larson, 2011). The Hip-Hop culture has served as a vehicle for self-affirmation, that has grown into an international cultural entity representing the voices of those that are stigmatized, oppressed or silenced (Sulé, 2016).

The approach of Familia Ayara is truly a work of art. I have no other words to describe it, but their work is life changing even though it may be a healing factor for a few hours, it made everyone forget about their issues and gives access to freedom of expression. With our rapping session, we let our emotions out and dedicate our poems to someone we loved or appreciate. I specifically wrote about my family and grandmother who had

just passed away a few months back and embraced the hard work and love she had for me, as I had so much respect for her. Before the performance, I felt discomfort because I had to share something that made me feel a mix of emotions, and as an individual that dislikes being the center of attention; it was quite difficult to express myself. I saw the bravery of the other girls who had stories that were harsh and unbelievable. During the performance, I hesitated, and the emotions had built inside me. I got stuck and I almost did not make it through the entire poem I wrote. In an instance, I remembered how all my group as well as César looked at me and felt their support, but my emotions got in the way. I stopped looking at what I had written and improvised. I made it through and felt good about myself because I knew each and every single one in the room shared something personal. Everyone worked hard on their performance and we all were on a judgment-free zone. It was an emotional moment and the methodology of incorporating arts was important for self-expression and to embrace what we felt deep within ourselves. The girls that we worked with are brave, strong and I know that many of them will be able to push hard through their obstacles and make it somewhere. Their faces were full of enthusiasm while others were hesitant, we saw tears, but we also saw laughter and smiles, and I will never forget our chorus.

I'll be there for you  
Eres mi inspiración  
Eres el amor  
I'll be there for you  
Cuando hablo de amor  
Eres tu mi pasión



These community settings allow inclusion of multiple voices and leaders that create positive impacts on youth who take part in these programs. They generate, self-respect, and create hopes for those participating in the community (Daftary-Steel, 2018). While this experience was unforgettable, I think it has changed somewhat my introversion. This experience made me step out of my comfort zone, the shell I have always wanted to come out of and by being exposed with a judgment-free environment, I was reminded that letting go of fears and embracing who I am makes me an individual that has potential. The stories that some of the girls shared in their poetry reminds me that there are people that face even more difficult situations and my introverted personality should not stop me from trying to achieve my goals.

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### Collaboration of Urban and Rural Communities and Importance of Spirituality

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Initially, this auto ethnography was going to focus on the question on how inclusive and confirming youth feel in the social setting. However, I noticed that within my research and the experiences this was going to change. First because the words *conforming* and *youth* are associated with LGBTQ communities and second because the word *conformar* was probably the wrong term in Colombian Spanish. Thus, I brought the topic back to my personality and how inclusive I felt in the setting. The word inclusive was the key element that surrounded the theme of how youth and communities are included in the context of feeling secure and how much comfort they feel. The inclusion of the arts was also highlighted throughout our journey; as I stated before, Bogotá is rich in culture and is surrounded by art such as graffiti and dancing within the urban context. This section, however, will focus of the collaboration or urban and rural communities coming together and finding peace with oneself. This dualism creates a dynamic for two worlds to come together and create participation with youth and communities and the inclusion of spirituality, a way in which I learned to find peace within myself. Finding peace was a common theme that the student body representatives from Misión País Colombia kept on highlighting; the following paragraphs will describe what peace is and how to establish bonds between communities.

*Misión País Colombia* is an organization created by students from Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, a private Jesuit university whose methodology is to work with rural communities in order to give power and knowledge to the students and communities they work with. The organization believes in three frameworks. First, to serve the communities

and learn about their lives. Second, to generate work for the communities and tackle any issues they may face. And third, to transform communities along with students. They state, "We don't want to be better than anyone else but be better to change the world" Students from this organization visit rural communities that the state does not touch. Often, their journeys could last up to twelve hours, but their goal is to specifically work with kids and remind them of what Colombia is, a country that has been at war but is revitalizing itself with its own people that want harmony. They work as a community to enhance and not forget their culture and language. A common theme that members of this organization mention is spirituality. At first, I was confused about what they meant with spirituality. At a first glance, I figured, "Well it's a Jesuit school, maybe they will talk about religion and spreading it" However, I was wrong. The incorporation of spirituality for them is to find meaning, that there is something more to life than one's own motives and desires. Being spiritual is related to life having a particular significance that transcends the self (James & Fine, 2015). By being spiritual with oneself, individuals get to set their goals and reinforce peace and community building with the people they work with. After taking time to think and reflect what spirituality meant to these individuals, I thought about myself and having to find peace deep within myself. I reflected about how I am, and I believe that as I keep setting my goals, I should try to find significance on them.

Although the state does not finance Misión País Colombia, the University helps with their journeys. Students also must give a portion to help, and for the participants,

it is still rewarding. Their process of registration could take up to one year with six months of planning and could have only two experiences that last twelve days. Students explain that it is worth it because the communities they work with are accepting and even help with lodging and food. One process in which they focused was the one of accompaniment between old and young generations. The goal for this vision is to look at critical social problems within their communities and make a difference as they believe that older generations are wiser and younger generations learn from the old to make differences for the future of the community. I am reminded that this collaboration of two different worlds create opportunities because rural youth also face factors that may constrain educational outcomes due to geographical isolation. When communities are more geographically isolated, rural youth tend to have lower educational aspirations because postsecondary schooling is not needed for local job opportunities in most rural industries (e.g., agriculture, manufacturing, resource extraction, or service). For many rural youth, pursuing postsecondary educational opportunities also involves moving away from their home communities (Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011). Indigenous alongside modern communities work together to know each other and export knowledge and experience, and by getting to know what peace is, it enables all participants to enrich their lives with powerful everlasting experiences.

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### Self-Assessment

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As I go back to the experiences I lived during my week in Bogotá, I try to see what are

some of the themes that I should try to incorporate into my daily life as well as my job. Based on this experience, I need to first feel comfortable with myself and shape myself in a way in which I can say, *I am an individual that can create social change and the participants in my group feel included*. I personally find it challenging to be the center of attention, however, because I was a participant of a new community, I was encouraged by my fellow peers to feel relaxed. All of the journeys I faced made me feel included in every excursion we went to. Expressing how we feel is important, and with the incorporation of art, we saw that many of the young people we met at Familia Ayara spoke of feeling included in a community of care. The young women at Familia Ayara had all experienced some trauma from being physically abused, to running away from home or migrating. The art-based programming they employed at this organization supported the residents to use elements of self-expression to promote thriving moments. This approach had quite an impact on me and subsequently the ways I want to work with young people moving forward. I am now committed to learning more about how to tackle discomfort and converting that into a sense of peace and inclusivity through the arts.

When I came back to the United States, I kept on reflecting how I could incorporate hip-hop and art into the project I am envisioning. It is important to have young people express themselves, however, art as well as music programs are mostly underfunded. It has been on my mind to establish a program that would enable young people and their communities to display their talents by showcasing their art around the neighborhood as well as putting up a performance. As a teenager, I wanted to be in a rock band although this was not possible because of my parent's socioeconomic status. I always felt like they would not have the money to put me in a music school, not even buy me a guitar. Setting up my own program to give back to communities is now a goal I am aiming to achieve and having the privilege to have worked with passionate musicians and artists has encouraged me to keep this dream along with other ideas to incorporate into this future project.

Our "Dream Team" (which is what we named our group) was also a community, and I felt included in every way. Whether it was translating for my colleagues or being part of small group workshops, I felt included in every way and I appreciate the time we spent together. Through this journey, I also embraced my native language of Spanish and used it quite often. My notes are all in Spanish and made sure not to miss the *tildes*. I am a transformed person and I will finish this by stating that

building communities, bonds and sharing commonalities are important for everyone's own growth and I hope to one day go back and keep learning from the beautiful Colombia or anywhere else in the world. Traveling to Bogotá has given me a different aspect in how organizations work with youth but it has also taught me valuable lessons that I will embrace such as the freedom to express myself through the arts. My aim will always be to share my experiences, learn and tie all the practices to lead youth and their communities to success.

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