

# From New York City to Bogota: A Youth Worker Autoethnography

De Nueva York a Bogotá: auto etnografía de un trabajador juvenil

De Nova York a Bogotá: auto etnografia de um trabalhador jovem

Diane John\*

\* M.A. Youth Studies, B.S. Business Administration, CUNY School of Professional Studies, USA. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2257-9263>

## Abstract

This article is an autoethnographic reflection of a New York City based youth worker's participation in an immersive educational experience in Bogotá, Colombia during the summer of 2018. By reflecting on this experience, the author aims to gain a better understanding of her own reasons for entering youth work. At the same time she aims to obtain a deeper insight into how she is better able to serve and work with youth by incorporating some of the best practices learned through this immersive experience. The autoethnographic study further examines whether or not socioeconomic status affects the delivery of positive youth development services to youth in marginalized communities in Colombia and compare these findings as they relate to the delivery of services to marginalized youth in the United States.

## Resumen

Este artículo es una reflexión auto etnográfica de la participación de un trabajador juvenil de Nueva York en una experiencia inmersiva educativa en Bogotá, Colombia durante el verano de 2018. A través de la reflexión sobre su experiencia, la autora pretende entender mejor sus razones personales para entrar al trabajo con jóvenes. Al mismo tiempo, pretende obtener una percepción más profunda sobre cómo ella sirve y trabaja mejor con los jóvenes al incorporar algunas de las mejores prácticas aprendidas durante esta experiencia inmersiva. Luego, el estudio auto etnográfico examina si el estatus socioeconómico afecta la entrega de servicios positivos para el desarrollo de los jóvenes en comunidades marginales en Colombia. Finalmente, compara estos resultados ya que se relacionan con la entrega de servicios a los jóvenes marginados en Estados Unidos.

## Resumo

Este artigo é uma reflexão auto etnográfica da participação de jovens trabalhadores da cidade de Nova York em uma experiência educacional imersiva em Bogotá, Colômbia, durante o verão de 2018. Ao refletir sobre essa experiência, a autora pretende entender melhor suas próprias razões para ingressar ao trabalho jovem. Ao mesmo tempo, ela pretende obter uma visão mais profunda de como é mais capaz de servir e trabalhar com jovens, incorporando algumas das melhores práticas aprendidas com essa experiência imersiva. O estudo auto etnográfico examina ainda mais se o status socioeconômico afeta ou não a prestação de serviços positivos de desenvolvimento de jovens para jovens em comunidades marginalizadas na Colômbia e compara essas descobertas no que se refere à prestação de serviços a jovens marginalizados nos Estados Unidos.

Cómo citar este artículo: Jhon, D. (2019). From New York City to Bogota: A Youth Worker Autoethnography. *Revista Aletheia*, 11(1), 217-231.

#### **Keywords**

reflection, experience, autoethnography, youth development, socioeconomic status, New York City, Bogotá.

#### **Palabras clave**

reflexión; experiencia; auto etnografía; desarrollo juvenil; estatus socioeconómico; Nueva York; Bogotá.

#### **Palavras-chave**

reflexão, experiência, auto etnografia, desenvolvimento da juventude, status socioeconômico, Nova York, Bogotá.

---

## Introduction

---

I was nervous and excited as I prepared for my trip to Bogotá, Colombia. I had never planned on visiting the country, and my family and friends thought it was a bad idea. "You have to take chances in life; I'm not letting fear hold me back," was my reply when they tried to convince me to stay home. I was more nervous after I purchased my plane ticket, deciding then that I would be a "rebel" and travel without my group of peers since I had to make a quick stop in Florida.

"Did I make the right decision? I don't want to go anymore. Studying abroad will be a great experience. I'm going to Colombia." These were the thoughts that plagued my mind weeks leading up to the trip. As the time to leave drew near, I was excited that I was going to witness youth work in action, something that I am so passionate about. In fact, I was extremely excited to have the chance to be a part of this study abroad experience.

As I prepared for a group meeting with CINDE and my team the morning after my arrival, I thought how grateful I was to have been granted this opportunity to study youth work in Colombia, since it would allow me to gain knowledge at a deeper level. During our pre-trip workshops, we were encouraged to think about a specific topic that we wanted to explore. I have always been interested in how socioeconomic status affected opportunities for youth, so I believed that it was best to approach this experience with a question already in mind: How does socioeconomic status affect the delivery of positive youth development services to youth in marginalized communities?

---

## What Youth Work Means to Me

---

Before getting into why I chose this field of youth work, I believe that it is necessary to attempt to define what it is, especially since it is something that I have always been extremely passionate about. Prescribing a definition for youth work can be somewhat complex, especially since it can take on many meanings. Davies (2010) defines youth work as "a distinctive way of approaching and responding to young people, and of prompting them to reach for more than they might have otherwise considered or even thought possible for themselves" (p. 1). For doing this, Bonnie Bernard (1991), suggests that "support, high expectations, and participation" (p. 14) must be involved. However, to me, a simple definition could be working to support the positive development of youth. To further develop this definition, there are many more words that I would like to include as the characteristics associated with youth workers: Patient, loving, opportunity, develop, positive, empowered, engaging, passionate...to name a few. Youth work is the investment placed in children and adolescents, which allows room for positive development and growth so that they can be successful, life-long learners and critical thinkers, breaking down barriers and creating change in their communities, programs and the institutions that intend to serve them.

---

## How it All Began

---

A nurturer by nature, I have always cared for and felt the need to be the support system for my peers, those younger than me, and anyone that I thought that I could help in

some way. As a child, I always felt a desire to help others, and somehow, I also knew that trusting and supportive relationships mattered. So I pledged to always be that support system for anyone that I believed would benefit or expressed the need for it. To that end, as a young girl growing up in New York City, I dreamed of creating a program where youth would be able to access a gamut of services that would allow them to be well-rounded, positive and productive citizens.

There wasn't much available to young people when I was growing up, so I spent a lot of my free time volunteering at daycare centers after school when I wasn't attending cheerleading practice, basketball, or football games. I knew then that I had to somehow fill in the gaps for those that came after me in order for them to have better opportunities. Later on, I would witness first-hand how the qualities that I tried to instill in them would transform these young people into confident and empowered individuals, sometimes allowing them to tackle what they initially thought they couldn't. For example, Zee, one of the young people I met while volunteering, went on to become a Licensed Practical Nurse after dropping out of high school and believing that she would amount to nothing because her family had given up on her. Another young person that I met (Taj) went on to graduate with an associate's degree, even though he had a rocky start. He lost his mom while he was very young, spent time in jail and in a mental institution, and believed that he would somehow end up back in jail due to his unstable milieu. It took a lot of hard work and dedication to get him back on the right track, but today he has decided to go back to school in order to pursue his bachelor's degree. In addition, children and youth always seemed to respond positively to me, and in countless difficult situations, I would always be the one to reach them when their parents couldn't. I knew that "youth work" was my purpose in life, and so I began searching for methodologies and strategies that would somehow enhance the qualities that I believed were already deeply rooted within me - the qualities that mattered.

During my teenage years, I started an organization for the youth on my block because I realized that there was a need. I recruited all those that shared in my vision and vowed to make a difference. My desire to establish a positive youth initiative had begun. Rather than spending the summers in front of the television, sitting on the stoop, being mischievous, or getting caught up in the drug game, which was prevalent at that time, I gathered them up and found positive ways to remain entertained. We were either starting a singing group, a book club,

teaching the younger ones to read, cleaning the backyard, or going on trips. I would further implement those processes that I had accumulated from the many books that I read and somehow found them fitting for my group. Looking back, I am amazed that the parents had allowed or even trusted me to venture distances on the subway with their children, being a child myself. However, I am now grateful for the confidence that they had in me.

Throughout my life, I have always been involved in youth work, either directly or indirectly, and I knew that I was destined to serve youth. Furthermore, I've always wanted the youth that I deal with to experience quality opportunities that were not readily available to them, and so I've been involved in the development of programs that exposed them to new experiences. I would even travel with them to places that they would have otherwise not been able to travel to until they were adults. In fact, I wanted to expose them to as much as possible so that they could see how limitless this world could be. I was also involved in providing support for programs, and my work with a funding organization allowed me to delve deeper into youth development issues and witness the positive impact that youth-serving organizations could have in their lives.

My work with youth has always given me great satisfaction and joy. From this point forward, I have decided to focus solely on my passion of assisting in the positive development of young people, emotionally, educationally, and socially, so that they, in turn, can become responsible and successful members of a just and egalitarian society. I realized early that equal access

to quality programs and opportunities for youth differed significantly across social classes, where youth from high socioeconomic status environments were exposed to and received high-quality opportunities and supports as opposed to those from low socioeconomic status environments. This injustice was rather disturbing to me especially when I strongly believe that all youth should receive the same opportunities and supports regardless of their position on the socioeconomic stratum.

---

### Rationale and Purpose of Immersion

---

Having been granted the opportunity to study youth work in Bogotá, Colombia, I decided to investigate how socioeconomic status (SES) affects the delivery of positive youth development services to underserved youth in marginalized communities. This cross-cultural comparison allows for a momentary glimpse into how this differed in Colombia and the United States, as well as figure out whether or not SES has the same underlying meaning in all ethnic and cultural groups. In the United States, socioeconomic status strongly influences an individual's experiences from childhood through adult life (Hackman, Farah, Meaney, 2010), and children and adolescents from low SES communities (mainly Black, Brown and Latino) are generally associated with poorer outcomes (Kolb and Gibb, 2015) as opposed to those from high SES communities, since they are unable to receive equal opportunities and supports.

After all, children and adolescents are our future, and the investments that we make in them now will yield high returns tomorrow.

To that end, this experience also investigates how I can contribute to bridging the divide that SES has created, and how I can use best practices and lessons learned in Colombia to be an agent of change. This leads me to reflect on the words of Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral (n.d.):

We are guilty of many errors and many faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the fountain of life. Many things we need - can wait. The child cannot. Now is the time his bones are formed, his mind developed. To him we cannot say tomorrow, his name is today.

We must deal with this disparity now. It is imperative that we provide high-quality opportunities and support systems for all our children regardless of their socioeconomic status. This, in turn, will enable more of them to benefit, ultimately creating more educated and progressive societies.

---

## Bogotá, Colombia

---



View from Monserate, 8/4/18

Infused with its alluring architecture, Bogotá boasts a rich history and a diverse array of art. Its endless museums in the Candelaria district, colonial houses, churches, and graffiti (which was once illegal and is now used to transform cities), is nothing short of breathtaking. In the example below, you will read how one group uses graffiti as a form of positive youth development. While taking a tour of the area with other members of my group, I couldn't help but revel in the majestic beauty



of my surroundings. However, it was a little disturbing to witness the presence of military personnel in the midst of the crowds.



First work by a female artist – 7/29/18

## The Fieldwork

Our host organization, CINDE (The International Center for Education and Human Development) was nothing short of remarkable. Their main focus is on promoting the creation of appropriate environments fundamental to the development of vulnerable children and youth in Colombia and throughout the world (CINDE International Internship Document, 2018).

Day after day, I was introduced to a variety of processes, pedagogies, and methodologies that aimed to assist me in answering my question regarding the delivery of positive youth development services to marginalized youth. I feverishly took as many notes and photographs as I could that I would later expand on, also wanting those lucid memories to remain for as long as possible. I must say that I was extremely impressed by the long-standing impact that

their programs appeared to have on the youth that they serviced. Oftentimes, youth that completed their programs would return to provide support for those that they had left behind.

## *Seres Sociales* at Las Villas School



Soacha municipality in South Bogotá

A discussion about Community and Family Centers (cfc) and a site visit to Las Villas School where the *Seres Sociales* (social beings) program was in full swing resonated and spoke volumes to me. The impetus for the development of this intergenerational program was to “contribute to the construction of adequate educational environments, to strengthen human development, critical thinking, and social skills, based on the



participation of the children, their self-expression, intergenerational articulation, and the relationship between school, family, and the community” (CINDE International Internship Document, 2018, p. 2). This program placed a strong emphasis on family, and on the fact that if adults did not have the possibility of developing themselves, they would not be able to help their children develop. I was deeply moved by the stories that were told by both student and adult participants alike. One mother discussed how this was the only place available to help her son who was diagnosed with an autistic disorder. Today, he is a vibrant young man, able to freely express himself and fully engage in activities. She also discussed how the program was able to help her discover her hidden math talent. As a result, she is now dedicated to the program and has continued to spread the word to members of the community, hoping that they too will grasp the opportunity to engage. Another mother, now turned teacher, discussed the gains that the program has brought to her family. All of her children have either gone through or are now part of the program. Her two oldest children are now attending university thanks to the program, which ignited their drive and the possibility that they could succeed despite their socioeconomic status.



Environmental project completed by students

The initiative (CFC) proves to be effective in that CINDE is able to support the development of local leadership and transform marginalized

communities and neighborhoods into sustainable ones. Although I was not able to see the work of other organizations, the program at Las Villas, implemented by CINDE, also allowed me to partly answer my research question to the extent that socioeconomic status does not affect the delivery of positive youth development services to marginalized communities. In fact, CINDE goes out into these distressed communities, empowers them, and allows them to create better developmental environments for themselves and their children, by creating elements that develop drive.

In comparison to community building initiatives in the United States, most organizations do not incorporate the aspect of “families” into schools unless it is part of a parent-teacher association or parent-teacher organization initiative. Parents are rarely encouraged to come into schools for free expression. Our ancestors often practiced community development, where people come together to create a better future for themselves and their families, but we have somehow failed to hold onto those teachings. It is apparent that this community of Soacha has held onto their culture of building community, and with the help of organizations like CINDE, will transform into one that is healthy and sustainable in the near future.

---

### Ayara at ICBF

---

According to Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), ethnographic participation requires “going out and getting close to the activities and everyday experiences of other people” (p.1). Similarly, Geertz (1973) and Goodall (2001), state ethnographers become “participant observers” by taking field notes of

and engaging in “cultural happenings” (as cited by Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2010). Fortunately, I was able to experience this sort of immersion with our visit to the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, ICBF (Institute of Family Well-Being), a temporary care facility for youth that provides protective services for ages 6 to 18. ICBF’s partner organization Ayara provides social, artistic, educational and productive activities to residents via the Ayara High Impact Methodology (rap, breakdancing, graffiti, and other art forms), which focuses on strengthening the life skills of vulnerable youth so that they are able to better function in society. Ayara’s facilitators are considered youth (jóvenes) and recognized artists.

Activities for the day included rap, muralism and graffiti, and breakdancing. I chose graffiti because it appeared to be less active and less vulnerable than the other workshops offered. I also believed that it would give me a better chance to observe the real experience of the other participants that I had to work alongside. As we assembled at the three tables set out for us amidst stares and whispers, undoubtedly because strangers were now amongst them, one brave girl touched the seat next to her and motioned for me to sit beside her. She requested the same in her native Spanish, which I was unable to comprehend, but I was able to understand her gesture, to which I obliged. For that, she gave me a warm smile. She appeared to be one of the leaders of the group. This was evident in the way that she took control, handing out papers and markers, and passing on instructions as if she too was one of the facilitators, and in the way that the other girls seemed to follow her every move.

As we immersed ourselves in the activity, I would occasionally glance her way only to be welcomed by her warm smile. After a few minutes of the activity, she became comfortable enough to begin to engage in conversation. At that point, I had to ask our translator Claudia for assistance because I was unable to understand even her gestures. By then the other participants also appeared to feel comfortable because our table was alive with girly chatter and giggles while we continued with the activity. Claudia eventually had to pull up a chair and sit with us because these girls asked lots of questions from wanting to know my name and if I had any girls their age. I decided then that it was safe enough for me to also begin asking questions, being careful not to pry. We talked about their artwork (some of which was magnificent by the way), their ages, the way they styled their hair (there was a recommended style for each day), food, language, and whether or not they enjoyed being at the facility. Some of the girls seemed to treat it like a second home, but one girl in particular, with sadness in her eyes said that she did not like it because she didn't belong there. At that point, the facilitator came over to introduce another step to the activity, so I decided not to ask her any other clarifying questions.



Translation: Let everything flow and nothing influence.

It was interesting to witness the encouragement, care, and support that the facilitator expressed when working with these girls. In fact, they seemed to generate the same qualities amongst each other. They encouraged those that had difficulty engaging and traded smiles and laughs at the work that we produced. The facilitator, knowing more of their background than I did, proceeded to tell them that they could move on from whatever happened in their life and that they had the power to transform any negative situation into a positive one. With

that said, he instructed us to release our negative emotions on paper, using that as a channel to connect with our creativity. From this exercise, I was able to tell how severely some of these girls had been affected by the trauma that they had experienced, because in releasing their negative energy their papers had been destroyed. As a follow-up, we were then instructed to trade papers, and outline any images that we were able to see, using that as inspiration to create a positive message. It was amazing to read the words of encouragement, hope, support, and dreams that emerged from such a simple activity. The end result was a beautiful mural with a message of hope for all to see.

This activity was so empowering that I have decided to incorporate it into my toolbox of activities for youth. It allowed me to realize that in a group setting, with one person willing to place their insecurities on paper, all the participants become engaged and willing to do the same. No one was afraid of the consequences.

---

### **Misión País Colombia's Community Building Efforts**

---

Another initiative that resonated with me was Misión País Colombia, a volunteer group run by university students (some indigenous themselves) that "seeks the transformation of Colombia through respect and care for the common home" (CINDE, International Internship Document, 2018, p. 11), that being the community. I was genuinely impressed and somewhat emotional to see the powerful and influential work that these young people were doing. One of their objectives is working with and transforming socially challenged

communities. They travel to communities with indigenous groups, youth, and other marginalized people, teaching them how to be self-sufficient, making sure to leave an impact. Each community is unique, and it takes an understanding of its factors to create effective opportunities. To that end, students go through a course of action prior to the implementation of any project, making sure that it includes community voice.

According to Smith (2008), "it is much easier for researchers to hand out a report and for organizations to distribute pamphlets than to engage in continuing knowledge-sharing processes[...] this is what is expected of us as we live and move within our various communities" (p.16). She would be proud to know that these young people work from the premise of memory and identity, where they recover the knowledge of the communities where they work in order to maintain their culture. They believe that they must live the experience in order to provide support, and so their time in the community is spent understanding the culture. Once they implement a project with the assistance of the community and know for sure that residents can work towards their reality without additional help, the students leave them with total control to move forward. According to the students, "we transform communities, but they also transform us."

---

### **Conclusion**

---

My search for relevant information revealed that positive youth development is at the heart of nearly every Colombian that I encountered. This statement may, however, be somewhat limited because I did not meet

a diverse group of individuals during this experience. My conclusion may or may not have differed if I had visited a greater number of organizations and met more youth workers. However, Colombians seemed true to their underlying mission to create change in a country that had a history of infamous drug wars, political and social conflict, and paramilitary groups. They believe that change begins with the youth. To that end, the framing for many discussions was around youth participation, where, according to Martha Sofia Ardila Simpson, a lawyer from the National University of Colombia, "participation should begin from birth, and it should be in conditions of equality." As a result, young people are deeply involved in the creation of the new youth policy, which aims to improve the quality of life for all of Bogotá's youth. If youth can advocate for themselves, they can begin to eliminate and rectify some of the social issues that they inevitably tend to fall into as adults.

In answer to my research question, it is evident that the delivery of high-quality opportunities and supports is not affected by an individual or community's socioeconomic status. Organizations will be able to bring programs directly into the communities that need them with consistent funding. Although I draw on three examples in this reflection, time and again, I saw proof that opportunities for transformation are brought directly into communities with vulnerable populations. This experience has allowed me to somewhat reconsider the structure of the youth programs that I plan to operate. Along with creating an easily accessible space for underserved youth, I would now like to go out to vulnerable communities, not only in the U.S. but internationally, in order to provide youth with high-quality services that will benefit them as they grow into adult citizens. This programming will also integrate services beneficial to the family unit, because as it was evident in Colombia, positive youth development is strengthened when the entire family is invested in it, developing together as a whole. This experience transformed me, and it has amplified my passion for supporting the positive development of youth.

As I headed back to New York City, I reflected on my experience in Bogotá and how impressed I was with the exposé of youth escalation – their energy, presentations, and interactions. I returned home with wonderful thoughts, and a renewed spirit, knowing that I am an agent that helps youth come into their own, not allowing them to be misguided by the falls of society. The following poem sums up my experience in Bogotá.





Graffiti in Bogotá

### Untitled

In search of light  
 I travel to sight...remarkability,  
 It's clear to see  
 Art in full beauty  
 The youth thinkers with graffiti.  
 Divinely impressed  
 To meet the test  
 Of a journey that is near complete,  
 As I stroll in time  
 Engaging minds  
 As my spirit is awoken from sleep.  
 Be it as it may

This glorious day  
 Upon my return to New York,  
 I am charged to be  
 Excited to see...Youth  
 At the table  
 With their own knives, spoons, and  
 forks.

---

### References

---

- Bernard, B (1991). *Fostering Resiliency in Kids: Protective Factors in the Family, School, and Community*. San Francisco: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development.
- CINDE. (2018). *International Internship Document. Youth Development and Participation in a Global Context*. Bogotá, Colombia.
- Davies, B. (2010). *What do we mean by youth work? In What is Youth Work?* (pp 1 – 6). Exeter: Learning Matters.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T., & Bochner, A. (2010). Autoethnography: An Overview. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1).
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hackman, D. A., Farah, M. J., & Meaney, M. J. (2010). Socioeconomic status and the brain: mechanistic insights from human and animal research. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 11(9), 651-659. doi:10.1038/nrn2897.



Kolb, B., & Gibb, R. (2015). Childhood Poverty and Brain Development. *Human Development*, 58(4-5), 215-217. doi:10.1159/00043876.

Mistral, G. (n.d.). *Goodreads.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/537897-we-are-guilty-of-many-errors-and-many-faults-but>

Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. London: Zed Books.

