

Lekeia in Colombia: An Examination of Self and Social Emotional Learning Through a Culturally Comparative Lens

Lekeia en Colombia: exploración del autoaprendizaje y el aprendizaje Socioemocional a través de un lente cultural y comparativo
Lekeia na Colômbia: Um exame da aprendizagem emocional próprio e social através de uma lente culturalmente comparativa

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Abstract

This autoethnography is a reflective essay that discusses the impact on the author during the educational excursion to Colombia, through the framing of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in youth development. Through examining oneself in relation to the Colombian youth engagement landscape, the author was able to contextualize her studies in the CUNY SPS MA in Youth Studies program while learning about a new, fascinating culture. This allowed the author to compare and contrast her experiences, both personally and professionally in hopes of deepening her understanding of the global landscape of youth-work and the profound effect it has on youth participants, youth professionals and the community at large.

Resumen

Esta auto etnografía es un ensayo de reflexión que presenta el impacto que tuvo en la autora la excursión educativa a Colombia, enmarcado en el aprendizaje socioemocional en el desarrollo de los jóvenes. A través de examinarse en relación con el panorama colombiano de participación juvenil, la autora pudo contextualizar sus estudios en el programa de Estudios de juventudes en la CUNY mientras aprendió acerca de una nueva y fascinante cultura. Esto le permitió comparar y contrastar sus experiencias, tanto personales y profesionales, con la intención de profundizar su comprensión del panorama global del trabajo con jóvenes y el efecto significativo que este tiene en los participantes, profesionales y la comunidad en general.

Resumo

Esta autoetnografia é um ensaio reflexivo que discute o impacto sobre o autor durante a excursão educacional à Colômbia, através do enquadramento do Aprendizagem Social Emocional (SEL em inglês) no desenvolvimento da juventude. Ao se examinar em relação ao cenário de engajamento dos jovens colombianos, a autora conseguiu contextualizar seus estudos no programa CUNY SPS MA em Estudos da Juventude enquanto aprendia sobre uma nova e fascinante cultura. Isso permitiu à autora comparar e contrastar suas experiências, tanto pessoal quanto profissionalmente, na esperança de aprofundar sua compreensão do cenário global do trabalho com jovens e o profundo efeito que isso tem sobre os jovens participantes, profissionais e a comunidade em geral.

Cómo citar este artículo: Judge, L. (2019). Lekeia in Colombia: An Examination of Self and Social Emotional Learning Through a Culturally Comparative Lens. *Revista Aletheia*, 11(1), 233-245.

Keywords

youth development; social emotional learning SEL; global education; youth engagement; self-study; comparative cultures

Palabras clave

Desarrollo juvenil; aprendizaje socioemocional; educación global; participación de jóvenes; auto estudio; culturas comparativas

Palavras-chave

desenvolvimento juvenil, aprendizagem social emocional, SEL, educação global, envolvimento dos jovens, auto-estudo, culturas comparadas

Self-reflection

It's been quite some time since I returned home from Colombia and I am still processing my experience studying abroad. At this point, I've handed out almost all of my souvenirs, looked through my pictures a bunch of times, retold the same stories to family and friends over and over again and uploaded the "obligatory" social media posts, yet I feel as though I am still comprehending where I've been and how it will affect where I am going.

Writing this auto-ethnography should help me digest my educational excursion. The reading, *Autoethnography: An Overview* states "autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist." (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010, p. 1). Because of this method, processing my thoughts should be less refined and restricted. Armed with my phone filled with pictures, espresso stained notes, the official CINDE itinerary, and a head and heart full of ideas and fond memories, I'll attempt to capture what the past week meant to me personally and professionally. Right now, as with most meaningful experiences, it is difficult to put into words. I find that the impact of my experiences hit me at the most unexpected times, days, months sometimes years after it has occurred. After all, I have only recently been able to accurately categorize all that has occurred during my history of working in youth development and that is largely due to the teachings and critical thinking exercises conducted in the CUNY Masters in Youth Studies program. With that being

said, I know that contextualizing Colombia is only the beginning of it seeping into my consciousness. It will take a lifetime for it to swirl around with my other transformative experiences before I fully understand its influence, which is fine by me. That's part of the tapestry of life. Sometimes we can't see the big picture, but we still weave together each moment with the faith that we are creating something bigger, something better, something beautiful. So here I sit, with my gifted CINDE mug full of Colombian coffee as I simultaneously dig deep and zone out, with the intention to discover how Colombia has meshed with my soul. I examine which experiences fit neatly into my expectations, which were outliers to my *ethos*, what transcended culture clashes and language barriers and what left me with more questions than answers. Therein lies the good stuff that I will be forever grateful for. I'll be processing this trip for a lifetime, but in the meantime, I will write about it.

After we landed, I stepped off the plane in Bogota Colombia, not knowing exactly what to expect. Traveling to a foreign land is one thing. Traveling with a school group is another thing. But traveling to a foreign land on a school trip is next level. Next level learning. Next level interacting. Next level anxiety for me. See, I am an introvert. It was only as an adult that I was able to identify it. Growing up, I was just called quiet, shy, weird. I now realize that naming things is important. It doesn't change the nature of something, but it has the power to transform your relationship with it. Being an introvert in an extroverted world isn't easy, but it's all I know. And it has its advantages. It is the lens in which I see the world. And it has helped me tremendously when working with

young people. I connect with the youth that aren't connecting. Those that aren't the center of attention, those that are reluctant to ask for help. I understand that kid, I was *that* kid. Working as a youth worker is inextricable from my own youth experience. It's the biggest mirror in my life, reflecting my expertise and triggering my insecurities. That is why this work is so frustrating and it is also why this work is so fulfilling.

So I'm geared up and ready to go. At this point, I am approaching this experience as both a CUNY student and as a teacher of young people. My adult self is eager to meet with influential Colombian leaders in youth development and analyze everything with a critical eye, but the child in me is never far behind, looking at everything from the youth's perspective, or at least what I remember from my own personal youth's point of view. This duality is ever present. Sometimes both voices are in unison, sometimes they are at odds. But one thing's for certain, they always make an interesting argument for moving the field of youth development forward.

Day 1 - Day 3:

We spent the first weekend arriving and settling into our accommodations. The excitement from the group was palpable. Our surroundings were surreal. Mountains as far as the eye can see. My first day was a combination of adrenaline and fatigue. Problem is, for me, there is a fine line between adrenaline and anxiety. Sunday afternoon, we broke into smaller groups with one group heading to La Candelaria for the graffiti tour, and another group was taking a local tour of the neighborhood. I chose to keep it local. Walking around Bogota was a welcome excursion in attempts to clear my mind and prepare for the week ahead. During our walking tour, we stumbled upon an outdoor health market. There we found holistic remedies, teas and juices, oils and salves and a presentation on laughter therapy. Even with all of those relaxants at my fingertips, my mind still hasn't settled. By Sunday night, the unease of the unknown starts to set in.

After a long sleepless night, I emerge Monday morning both tired and wired. Our host organization, *La Fundación Centro Internacional de Educación y Desarrollo Humano*, or CINDE, invited us to their office for the first of many presentations. Going into this, I had a surface understanding of what CINDE offered as a youth development organization but witnessing them in action brought my expectations to life. I was immediately struck by the formal nature of our initial meeting. We

were buzzed in and out of the building and had to sign in each day. The women that worked there wore high heel stilettos. We were served refreshments while we sat. Our headsets were distributed in an organized fashion. I kept asking myself: "How would they be received if they visited my school?" and "What would their perception be of us?" I know for a fact that we would be way more informal. Maybe it is simply a cultural difference. Maybe it is the arrogance that comes with being American. As a culture, we rarely feel the need to have to impress people from other countries.

What struck me most about CINDE is how they became such an influential force in youth development in Colombia, where young people are at the center of such societal turmoil. In their own words, CINDE's missions "the promotion of the integral development of children and youth through research and development solutions, the education of human talent working with these age groups, as well as sharing knowledge through the dissemination of experiences, networking and influencing policies." (CINDE, 2018) Learning about the history and current socio-political climate of Colombia, creating and operating a youth program such as CINDE is an act of revolution and resistance to the corrupt forces that aim to use and abuse Colombian youth.

The afternoon site visit to the school in Soacha struck a personal chord unexpectedly. I entered the school to learn about the *Seres Sociales* (in english, social beings) program and was greeted by a room full of children of varying ages. *Seres Sociales* is a youth organization in partnership with CINDE that develops leadership skills in its

youth participants through educating them about the environment, using art as a tool. During the introductions it was revealed that the young lady that was sitting next to me created drawing entitled *La Soledad La Acompañada* (Loneliness follows me wherever I go); the drawing illustrated the back of a young girl's head facing a big city alone. I stared at that drawing in awe and connected with it on a deep level. There goes that mirror again, reflecting my own struggles. That loneliness represented the isolation of anxiety that I have been dealing with since I was a child. It's the loneliness of being misunderstood as an introvert. A loneliness that is all too familiar even as an adult, that has now been exacerbated by being so far away from home, far away from my comfort zone. Although it may sound like a sad realization, connecting with this drawing was actually a beautiful, validating moment that reminded me how much I can learn about myself through the expressions of young people. At that moment, I felt my anxiety begin to subside. Once again, I am reminded of the importance of naming what you are experiencing. By creating space around it, it is easier to release.

Day 4

I love Donald Trump. He's doing a great job of getting rid of criminals. I hate criminals.

Idiota extraño

Regardless of where one travels in this world, the stench of colonization and white supremacy is inescapable, and it sucks. On Tuesday, we visited an ICBF (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar) facility, a child protection service similar to ACS (Administración for Children's Services), to participate in

a Hip Hop therapy session with The Ayara Family and Artistic Foundation. This facility was essentially a group home for young people that were removed from their family because they were living in an unsuitable environment. We spent the day in the girl's section, which was substantially more populated than the boy's section, by a large margin. After a presentation by the Ayara team, we broke into rap, breakdancing or grafitti groups. I joined the rap group and experienced one of the most transformative exercises of my professional life as a youth worker. Creating and performing my own rap was fun and fulfilling on a personal level, but witnessing the warmth, strength and vulnerability of the participants was nothing short of incredible. The theme for our song was Love. The hook was:

I'll be there for you
Eres un inspiración
Eres el amor
I'll be there for you
Cuando hablo amor
Es mi pasión

Writing this song with these young women highlighted the complexities of love, especially given their circumstances. These are women that have been ripped from their families, that might have experienced a "love" that was harmful, that was abusive, that was traumatic. Or maybe they haven't experience love at all, at least not in the traditional ways. In that space I was ultra-aware of how love and pain are so closely related.

Singing the hook, even to this day, I am reminded of the challenge of "being there" for those young women. What do those words mean to them? Is it a comfort of knowing they have a place like ICBF to call home, even if it is only temporary? Is it The Ayara Family letting them know that they will continue to work on behalf of them? Is it supposed to represent the girls signing to one another, forever bonded by this shared experience? Or maybe it's just a song, like a million songs they've heard before, empty and detached from their reality. Another question that arose after my day with Ayara was "What is the day to day programming like?" Given that the girls wear the same uniform, aren't allowed to leave, are housed behind bars and can only see their loved ones on visiting day, how do they distinguish this facility from a prison? Although our visit was filled with joy and love, I couldn't help

but wonder if it always feels like this to the youth residents.

So how, one might ask, did this day connect to white supremacy? Well, there are several ways. First, the irony of Americans visiting a group home where Latin American children have been separated from their family is hard to escape. We are coming from a place where separating children from their families is a policy and practice that has the support of many conservatives, racists and bigots in our country. Although the terms of separation might be different, the trauma that is caused to both the child and the family is equally horrific.

Secondly, during the day, before the activities began, we were in what seemed to be the common area, when a classmate pointed out to me a chart that detailed the hairstyle requirements for each girl depending on the day of the week. The day we visited, a Tuesday, was pigtail day, and each participant's hair reflected that day's requirement. Upon seeing that chart, I immediately thought of the anxiety the Black girls with 4c texture hair may experience if their hair doesn't cooperate with the designated styles. See, hair is a HUGE issue in the Black community in ways that White people do not have to think about. This goes beyond the simple styling. Historically, Black women's hair has been rejected by mainstream society. Hair in our natural state is still seen as a rebellion. There is a billion-dollar industry that thrives off of Black women hating their hair. There is also a lack of products that are designed to treat our hair in its natural state. Let me provide an example for you. I visited a spa with a classmate and struck up a conversation with a Black woman who works at the front desk

where we discussed how it is difficult for us to swim regularly because traditional swimming caps don't accommodate Black hair. She divulged that she has to order hers from Africa. Yes, Africa. That means it never occurred to the standard manufacturers of swim caps, that it doesn't accommodate people with natural Black hair, or dreadlocks. That might seem insignificant to the average person, but multiply this oversight by everything hair related and you can begin to understand the exclusion Black women face when dealing with matters of the hair. Seeing that chart was a reminder that when your attributes aren't considered, although it may be a well-intentioned oversight, is a painful and embarrassing form of exclusion.

The third reminder of white supremacy came as a shock to me. It was pointed out that at the girl's group home, a small swastika was drawn on a poster in the hallway. Now what does this mean? Honestly, I don't know. Was this a symbol of hate put on display by a student or staff member? Possibly. Was it a drawing of the Mayan symbol that looks exactly the same but is completely unrelated? Maybe. Or was it someone copying a symbol they have seen but may not fully understand its implications? Perhaps. Either way, that symbol of hate is a reminder of the ever present influence of white supremacy that can rear its ugly head in the least expected places.

The last reminder of white supremacy took the form of an obnoxious tourist that shared his love for Donald Trump while we were eating dinner. He walked past our table, struck up an unwanted conversation and before he left, proclaimed he thinks Donald Trump is doing a great job ridding America of

criminals and that he hates criminals. His political views reek of privilege, racism and ignorance. Even in a Latin American country, a White man feels empowered to voice his political views that are directly oppressing Latin Americans and other people of color.

Day 5

Many environmentalists have never watered a plant

Panelist Alfredo Reyes

On Wednesday, our focus was youth participation. In the morning, we visited Pontificia Universidad Javeriana to meet with representatives from Misión País Colombia, a Jesuit volunteer organization that aims to assist underserved Colombian communities through collaborative projects. Above all, I learned facts about the various Colombian ethnicities, economy and agriculture that painted a more well-rounded picture of what we already learned about this beautiful and complex country.

The afternoon panelists discussed the intricacies of youth participation and how to foster a participatory spirit in our programs. I chose the quote about environmentalists watering a plant to signify the importance of walking the walk and not just talking the talk. I challenged myself by asking, how am I participating in my school? Am I setting the example or do I expect more from the youth than I am willing to contribute? How will I create an inclusive environment that is conducive to youth participation?

Panelist Alfredo Reyes preached about the importance of inclusion and creating space for all participants to be heard and respected for their identity. He added, "How can we be included, if we can't be ourselves?" I am choosing to use this question to remind myself about the importance of my actions aligning with my intentions. When that does not happen, especially in youth spaces, trust is lost. When there is no trust, the young people cannot be served in a meaningful way.

I am reminded that creating youth spaces for participation means *handing over the mic* and letting the voice of the young people take center stage. In order to uplift the youth, I have to hand over the power while maintaining confidence and support. In many youth organizations, this is the step that is often underutilized. In short, this day I learned, don't hog the mic, don't speak for others, don't assume you are the expert, don't underestimate your audience and don't forget the importance of practicing what you preach.

Day 6

We are the future of our ancestors
Loreith Macias, Abya Yala

On Thursday we learned some sobering facts about what young people in Colombia face and what *Colombia Joven*, the dependency of the Administrative Department of the Presidency of the Republic, plans on doing to combat these pressing issues.

That afternoon, we were visited by members of *Abya Yala* whose mission is to bridge the gap between city and rural society and bring resources to indigenous cultures. During World Cafe, we had the opportunity to speak with members of these organizations to exchange ideas and comparisons between young people in Colombia. The day concluded with a performance from Loreith, using a traditional indigenous instrument. It was a wonderful way to end the day.

This day was reminiscent of the reading regarding decolonizing research methods. The reading *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, by Linda Tuhiwai Smith states, "The idea of contested stories and multiple discourses about the past, by different communities, is closely linked to the politics of everyday contemporary indigenous life." (cited by Mcdonough, 2013, p. 33) It would be interesting to further compare the methods of Abya Yala with this reading to see where their methods meshed with other documented indigenous projects.

Day 7

What does it mean to be young in Bogota?
Bogota Mayor's Office, Secretary
of Social Integration

Good question. I can't pretend that after a week, I know the answer to that, but from what I can gather, being young in Bogota is the presence of additional complexities during an already difficult time in development. Many of the professionals that we met with throughout the week spoke of how young people are heavily recruited during their adolescence: Recruited by the military, the gangs, the guerillas and the drug dealers. Young people represent the vitality of an organization. Like pawns in a game of chess, the youth of Colombia are on the front lines of some of the most dangerous facets of society. Similar to the United States, the youth with the lowest socioeconomic status are the most susceptible to manipulation and abuse. It must also be discussed that the future of a young person in Bogota is also largely determined by gender. While the boys are heavily recruited by different organizations, young women are vulnerable to being used for their body. The statistics of teenage pregnancy and the sex trade epidemic prove that there is much room for growth when examining the sexual health education and initiatives for women and girls. These are reasons that youth development programs are critical to the thriving and survival of Colombia's younger generation.

Friday was the last day of our international internship with CINDE. First we learned about policy, then we partied! The party was

the highlight of the day because it was a joyful merging of two cultures. Watching my classmates dance with CINDE staff was one of the highlights of this trip. It is also a reminder that the best parts of life don't require translation. Good music, good food, Beats, rhythm, smiles. We have more in common than they want us to believe. Our separation weakens us, together we are strong.

Day 8: Bogota Graffiti Tour. Art x Expression x Opinion

Hitting the streets of Candelaria to see the graffiti of local artists was incredibly insightful as a researcher. Our tour guide Carlos, punctuated each piece with a story about the artist that contextualized the significance of the artwork. For example, the story of the false positives and the peace agreement. The false positives represent the thousands of innocent citizens that were killed and then deceptively dressed as guerrillas for financial reward for the military. This heinous act of war was funded and perpetuated by the US government. Learning about US involvement from the perspective of another country is an enlightening, eye opening experience.

Graffiti is where art, political commentary and freedom of expression meet the street. This tour is reflective of the Ayara workshop that we participated in on Tuesday. The prevalence of hip hop culture as a vehicle for self-expression and cultural catharsis draws parallels between the beginnings of hip hop in New York and the current socio political climate in Colombia. Hip hop culture encompasses its various forms of expression through rap, breakdancing and graffiti. It has always represented artistic rebellion with a purpose. It would be interesting to delve deeper into the pervasiveness of hip hop with the younger Colombian generation. My guess is that there is a correlation between societal struggles and the emergence of hip hop and its various interpretations.

SEL and the city

I chose to examine the prevalence of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in the programming of the sites that we visited or during presentations. Channeling my younger self, I chose SEL because I connected deeply with this teaching method. I referred to this image of the SEL chart from the website learningsel.com, as a reminder of what educational properties I am investigating.

My assessment leads me to believe that aspects of SEL is occurring in these programs, although they are not formally labelled as SEL. What I observed in many of the programs including *Seres Sociales*, Ayara Family and Abya Yala is a holistic approach to participation, with an emphasis of social awareness and self-awareness through artistic expression. Also, aspects of relationship building that was exhibited in these programs, when witnessing or hearing how the young people interacted with one another. The emphasis on intergenerational connections that was discussed throughout the internship could represent relationship building as well. Self-management and responsible decision making, however, were less on display in the capacity that we observed. Ultimately, I concluded that we didn't have enough access to the actual programming to determine to what extent SEL is being implemented. I am also beginning to question whether it is an American tendency to label trends, whereas in other cultures practices may be implied, but not explicitly named. Going forward, I will remember that when it comes to pedagogy, practice is more important than theory. Studying youth engagement in Colombia has proven that SEL comes in many forms of teaching and participation, regardless of how it is categorized. Much like the term "youth development" which also wasn't mentioned in our studies abroad, SEL was never defined the way that I was expecting. But that doesn't mean that either term wasn't happening in innovative and exciting ways. Deconstructing concepts and bringing them to life is vital to my professional and educational growth.

Searching for SEL in Colombia has taught me that pedagogical practice doesn't fit neatly in a box. It is sometimes messy, unorthodox and undefined, yet still pervasive and effective. In essence, if I look too hard for what I think I should see, I just might miss the magic of what it actually is.

This educational excursion to Bogotá, Colombia has been one of the most profound professional experiences of my life. This was largely due to the complexities of Colombia. Witnessing the hope, optimism and joy of the youth we came in contact with, juxtaposed with Colombia's brutally violent and corrupt political history leads to an interesting foundation for youth development. I fondly refer to Bogota as pretty and gritty. The inherent beauty of the people, the culture and the landscape is undeniable. But there is also a solemnity to this city that comes with the struggle of a nation that is emerging from dark times. I can appreciate this as fertile ground for the potential greatness as well as a metaphor for the youth that many of us work with. Colombia embodies the notion that our struggles only add to our depth, beauty and grace. This trip will be one that I will remember for those very principles for the rest of my life.

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