

The Exploration and understanding of Forms of Organization and Youth Participation in Bogota

Context about the Exchange

In the late spring of 2018, the Youth Studies program at the City University of New York (CUNY) School of Professional Studies (SPS) set out to design a global learning experience that would widen the lens of matriculating students from across the field of youth development in the greater New York City area. Overwhelmingly, the graduate students in the program are full-time youth workers and program managers in community-based organizations, who are taking classes in the evenings to forward their education in youth studies in order to better serve the youth and communities where they work. The trip would be the first of its kind for this graduate program and was designed to promote immersive cross-cultural exchange around critical youth studies.

When deciding where to visit, the CUNY Youth Studies faculty conducted an initial field scan to gain a sense of the ways in which youth are self-organizing around the world to advance on social and political goals. In part, this involved looking closely at the work of Roger Hart at the CUNY Graduate Center alongside a number of his graduate students whose work was built around Article 15, the freedom of association, of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: "Children have the right to meet together and to join

groups and organizations, as long as it does not stop other people from enjoying their rights. In exercising their rights, children have the responsibility to respect the rights, freedoms and reputations of others" (Article 16). Hart's work identified numerous locations around the world where children and youth were self-organizing. In assessing the field, the Youth Studies faculty came across various locations around the world that were possibilities to locate the study abroad experience. When considering their long history of working with youth, their continued commitment to build up communities, and their location in a capital city with relative proximity to our home in NYC, we identified La Fundación Centro Internacional de Educación y Desarrollo Humano (CINDE) in Bogotá, Colombia as an ideal partner for an immersive cross-cultural study abroad course with the Youth Studies graduate students.

CINDE has among its purposes to train human talent through educational processes and social research to promote the integral development of children and young people living in conditions of vulnerability in Colombia, Latin America and the world due to social, economic and political contexts characterized by violence, state abandonment or lack of opportunities, through awareness processes with families, communities and educational institutions. Its approach is based on the generation of enriched environ-

ments in which they contribute the research and development of scientific and social knowledge, as well as the permanent and multidisciplinary reflective-critical exercise. The aim is to develop qualified skills that contribute in a relevant way to the diversity of contexts and recognize the variety of social actors in them.

Consequently, CINDE understands that effective participation implies recognizing, evaluating and enhancing the capacity of all social actors to influence their own lives and environments. In this way, the participation of children and youth implies recognition as subjects of rights and as citizens who can make decisions and expand their capacities to the extent that they actively participate in decisions about their situation and that of their families and communities. The emphasis of the internships organized by CINDE is always more on mutual learning than on teaching. According to the pedagogical model of CINDE, the subject and the methodology are adapted to the needs and knowledge of the interns. The development of the internship was composed of a component of participant observation to different experiences and in different scenarios. Subsequently, based on these experiences, daily individual and collective reflection was made that created the fieldnotes which guided the autoethnographies herein.

The Route for the Construction of an Academic Plan for the Internship

In a previous process of agreement between the students and the professors that would accompany the internship, areas of inter-

est and deepening aspects were identified around youth participation, especially those that occur as a result of grassroots social organizations and others with various purposes. In this way the academic program of the internship was projected on three main axes: (1) alternative youth leadership through art and culture; (2) youth participation strategies for social and community development; and (3) young people in the construction of public policies, democracy and political participation. To address each of these issues, an agenda was developed that was divided daily in two blocks of work: one with the visit to experiences of participation related to each axis, and the other with the contribution of theoretical and critical views related to what was observed, and discussed with the people who were part of the experiences visited.

It was also agreed about the importance of creating space for feedback of the experience among the students and teachers of CUNY SPS and the joint elaboration with CINDE. The projection and aspirations of the continuity of the process with the group in its present instantiation, as well as in the forging of future alliances and academic exchanges, was designed to develop a line of work on youth, development and citizen participation. The autoethnographies that are part of this dossier are the product of the reflections generated by the CUNY SPS graduate students throughout the course of the academic exchange.

When we, CINDE and CUNY SPS, decided to work together and began to focus on our study abroad, we knew that our initial focus would be on the notion of youth participation as conceived broadly across youth-cen-

tered and intergenerational spaces. Much of the work we focus on in our Youth Studies program is anchored around ideas of youth-adult partnerships, cultivating ways for young people to genuinely take leadership and drive change across local, school and neighborhood contexts as well as pushing wider systemic and policy shifts. This involves an emphasis on youth participatory action research (YPAR) to reorient the expertise of youth as central to the work of cultivating community spaces for collaboration and growth.

The exchange, then, was based on the purpose of continuing to contribute to the generation of reflections on the need to educate, from the postgraduate programs, professionals with the capacity to broaden their understanding in relation to the meanings granted by young people in the Colombian context - to their forms of organization and the choice of channels of expression of their interests, their views of the world and their contributions as citizens in the matters that involve them. In part, this learning was refracted through their youth work experiences in NYC.

Generating knowledge in this perspective goes beyond the necessary theoretical revisions. It also applicates an experiential approach to the daily dynamics of the young people in their own contexts and to their involvement, in such a way that the reading that is made of those processes, be it from a perspective of horizontal interaction everyone learns from everyone. Although this process began by centering the conversation around the youth that the CUNY SPS graduate students work with daily, it inevitably and

necessarily became grounded in reflections on themselves as youth workers, as former participants, and as learners perennially seeking justice.

Both in CUNY SPS Youth Studies and at CINDE, we are convinced that postgraduate training programs are successful and fulfill their purposes if they have the capacity to generate changes in the professional and personal life of those who are part of them. Ultimately, if they can contribute in this case, in the social transformations that relate to the affairs of youth organizations.

Youth Participation as Axe of Social and Human Development

The three prioritized axes are based on the fact of conceiving participation as a crucial factor that promotes human development, the exercise of citizenship, the construction of collective forms of understanding and the creation of joint action horizons that give meaning to processes of collective conscience of youth. All of these, in the framework of the societies in which they live and of the whole community, through critical reflection and the promotion of associative and organizational forms that facilitate the common good.

The processes of youth participation are closely related to the processes of construction of subjectivity, while as human beings we build ourselves in relation to ourselves, to others and to the environment. As CINDE (2017) affirms, thinking about subjectivity requires an open approach to the incorporation into Critical thinking of the multiple dimensions -politics, ethics, aesthetics,

spirituality- and the way in which a Subject creates and recreates life forms, from their individual and collective interest, and the ways in which they look for vital links of existence and Transcendence.

As affirmed by Martinez (2013), subjectivity is a field of action and representation and a capacity for interaction based on intentionality and negotiation that is always present in the experience of the subjects throughout life and that allows us to talk about the own, the alternate, the different and the other. It is the capacity to constitute itself as an individual based on language, interaction and interpretation.

As a result of the particular searches that young people have made throughout history, they have been characterized by their societies in many ways. In general, the representations that society has made of them have been subject precisely to the set of common interests that have converged within them and at particular moments. It can not be said that there is only one way of understanding what young people represent, since well beyond the particularities of the moment of life in which they find themselves, what constitutes the "young" category is associated with all that complexity that is to the basis of the construction of their subjectivities.

According to Lozano y Alvarado (2011), in the 1980s youth mobilizations in Latin America were centered around the political concerns of nation building for the countries of their region. An interest that was no longer evident at the beginning of the nineties so they were associated with social and political apathy and being assumed as a marginalized and excluded group, which leads them to be

located on the margins of society, perceiving themselves as the center and assuming that adults are the ones who must understand the cultural hybridization that they foster.

According to the author, in the 90s young people are known as the "generation of discounts" subsumed by consumption. However, it is pointed out that the issues of their political participation have nothing to do with them but with the ways in which such participation in societies is understood.

From this argument it can be affirmed that the issue is not that young people lack interest and sensitivity in relation to social and political issues. Rather, it should be understood that they have generated other forms of participation, enunciation and action in the social, which has created new ways of being and exercising as citizens, which are often interpreted with distrust on the part of adults, because they do not respond to social expectations, and because they do not find an echo in traditional forms of participation, such as voting.

Young people have found in art, culture and its multiple manifestations, an infinite universe to create and recreate their opinions, their ways of being in life and appropriation of the physical and symbolic world. In there where their interests must also be interpreted and recognized as legitimate manifestations of their voices and their modes of organization.

From this perspective, youth participation can be understood as a possibility to democratize social institutions, which are key to human development, in such a way that they cease to be assumed as properties of them

(family, school, communities) and are seen as interlocutors valid from their languages, expressions and meanings of life, which in the words of Beck (2006) represents:

Distinguish two ways of making the spirit of democracy become the spirit of a society: on the one hand, socialization (schools, universities, parents' education, television, etc.); on the other, the actions, that is, the experience of political freedoms through its practice and exercise.(p.).

Marientes (2018) affirmed in one of the conversations, that the street is a natural setting for youth expression and graffiti, a way to reclaim the street as a space to be young in Colombia, to take the street from an apolitical approach, as a reinvention space for the young person and the city. According to the author, young people in Colombia were part of a generation that had grown up and experienced the armed conflict, the mechanisms of oppression and criminalization of young people for being young, where the spaces to express themselves were few or conditioned.

In this context, they permeated the worldwide Street Art boom and began to paint the streets through murals that expressed how they understood the world, their neighborhood, their country, participating in public life by appropriating the street.

An important visual impact was generated in the city and in the youthful environment of the time in such a way that it managed to articulate with more institutional scenarios, such as the Bogota City Hall and carry out a contract for the dissemination of public youth

policy, making around 40 murals in the 20 locations of the city. There were also exhibitions, montages of murals in other cities such as Medellin, Barranquilla, Manizales and exchanges with other contemporary graffiti artists worldwide, giving young people a place in the cultural scene.

Now, one of the main challenges at present at local and global level, is the need to strengthen democracy and consolidate an active citizenship in such a way that promotes the development of transformation processes in social contexts in general and in the most difficult in particular, where violence, internal conflicts of countries and lack of access to the effective enjoyment of rights, is a permanent reality. Young people in particular experience these problems and in different scenarios they demand greater participation in decision making, the recognition of their proposals as legitimate initiatives and the renewal of ways to build and implement public policy, in such a way that opportunities are real to live a decent life.

Youth have often been excluded from their ability to act when it is reduced to the reason of adult centrism, which ignores the multiple possibilities they have to take part of the issues that concern them and interests them with proposals from their reality. For Garzón, Pineda, and Acosta, (2004) this political invisibilization falls as damage to the autonomy of children and young people, denying the identity of their human condition and creating what Plato would designate as a small adult.

According to Manrique (2018), in the contemporary world, the current debate on participation has been reduced to a juridi-

cal and procedural reflection while leaving aside a fundamental issue: participation is “being part of” a territory, a society, a family, a political party, an organization and from this place, how we manage to influence these scenarios. You live in a world where apparently only part of the market, life is just another commodity and ideals revolve around being rich, powerful and famous quickly, no matter what you have to do on the road for this purpose.

This is how conceptions such as solidarity, a fundamental element for participation, are distorted in this perspective of the world as a merely instrumental action of the individual and individual exercise, losing its deepest essence, that is, participation understood as the search for a utopia, of the common good, of a nation project.

Young people in Colombia have opened and continue to explore new forms of organization and participation according to the way they consider they can affect the course of social life, either through social demand or through an approach to actions of the daily life of educational or social communities with great disadvantages, or of the reflections of what it means to be young in rural and marginal urban contexts, among many other concerns, as reflected in the articles that make up this dossier.

Locating the Trajectory of the Auto-ethnographic to Understand Participation

From across all that is occurring in the current political climates in Colombia and in the U.S.A, there is much to raise concern about and yet the writing enclosed in the pages

of this journal exude a sense of hope and possibility. Through deep consideration of identity, power and practice across a range of sub-sectors of the wide field of youth development, the essays herein present an appraisal of learning from/through/with the collaboration with CINDE in this early stage of cultivating a long-term partnership. The experiences of the writers are distinct, yet themes related to reflection, reclamation and healing loudly echo across the pages.

Chanira Rojas’s essay takes the reader into something akin to travel writing. Each of the authors translated their auto-ethnographic fieldnotes into a final product and Chanira did so with extraordinary depth and vulnerability. The personal is central, political, powerful and transformative across this essay which ties arriving in Colombia with family histories of arriving in New York, foregrounding cultural (mis)understandings and continual exploration of one’s self-identity in order to generate high impact with others.

Similarly, Alejandro Lázaro-Román’s auto-ethnography illuminates the benefits of cultural immersion to promote self-reflection professionally and personally. Shining a focus on leadership and community development as it relates to working with youth, Alejandro’s piece also illustrates the profound negotiations that one must go through while exploring rich culture, history and language. Channeling the power of art and highlighting the creation of safe spaces through inter-generational participation, this essay is a testament to the self as a subject of study throughout a process of learning the cultures that surround us.

Lekeia Judge’s self-study through a global lens centers around a discussion of social

emotional learning in the context of youth development. The immersive experience in Colombia presented the author with an opportunity to deepen professional understandings across the landscape of youth work globally while reflection on her own communities at large and the role she plays in them. Lekeia's essay reads as a poetic rumination told through her discerning New Yorker eyes.

Diane John's auto-ethnography provides a lens on the journey of entering and sustaining a career in youth work. This essay offers an analysis of whether or not socioeconomic status affects the delivery of positive youth development services to youth in marginalized communities in Colombia as is so often seen across youth work in the United States – particularly in NYC. Diane's piece weaves reflection on her own motivation in this sector with deep learning from CINDE around what youth work means to practitioners in different corners of the world.

Traciz Geraldo's essay focuses on themes of pride and inclusion, providing a deep analysis around racial, ethnic and indigenous identities in Colombia in relation to her personal and professional analysis of these same identities in NYC. Looking back on her own experiences as an Afro-Latina youth and adult while looking forward to call for further changes needed in the field of youth development, Traciz offers up a powerful analysis that cuts across gender, race and history to discuss topics including the complexities of colorism and the practices of inclusion observed in Colombia and back home in New York.

Casaundra Broadus-Foote's auto-ethnography discusses what she calls the "rebirth of a worker." Using the context of an international immersion trip with CINDE, Cassie moves between her observations abroad and her deep reflections of her work back home. She positions the dysfunction of capital as squarely central to many of the concerns and considerations in front of youth workers around the globe and unpacks the personal and cultural as she narrates an analysis across colonialism, capitalism and community participation.

Finally, Andrea Canova's focus on "Bienestar" and grounds her essay in a deep reflection on mental health across the U.S. and Colombia today. This auto-ethnography offers a strong analysis of the ways in which mental health continues to be interpreted differently across various contexts and the implications that holds for purposes of focusing on wellness as an intentional priority for youth as well as youth workers. This piece offers important insight into breaking the taboos around discussions of mental health widely across the world. The deep reflection that is offered, combined with a critical comparative analysis of practices across contexts, makes for an important read to forward more dialogue around historically stigmatized discourse spaces.

For the CUNY SPS Youth Studies graduate students, their learning during their exchange with CINDE deeply impacted them as youth workers who are growing the local knowledge base to further professionalize the field. What you can see across their series of auto-ethnographic articles are the

theories, theoretical frameworks, and practices of these youth developers confronting their own identities and practices while they learn from youth and adult partners in Bogota. These auto-ethnographic reflections illustrate how this work, and this process of deep reflection cultivates continual development of self in social justice spaces – and how this impacts ongoing identity construction, specifically for people who are working with youth every day toward ever more full participation in social, political, civic and ecological life. What these essays teach us is that the path toward understanding of others and the cultivation of spaces for learning, growth, collaboration and healing, necessarily start with a willingness to understand ourselves in relation to the other. Only such inward understanding can cultivate the simultaneity of external co-construction and collaboration in order to further cultivate youth-led and intergenerational spaces for positive change in Bogota, in New York City, and everywhere.

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