

Introduction

When I began planning my Leadership in Action project, the instruction to “make an impact” echoed continuously in my mind. The challenge was daunting. I knew I wanted to work in Buenos Aires, but how could one person alone make a difference in a metropolis of over 15 million people? Every programme that I had initially considered felt underwhelming - either too minor to make a difference or worse, performative, with an uncomfortable undertone of white saviorism. When I found Voluntario Global, I could immediately tell that they were more aligned with my own goals. With a holistic approach, focussing on personal development and mutual growth, they promoted an honest and realistic approach to volunteering, never selling the delusion of “life-saving” work. Their commitment to working *with* local communities, rather than for them, resonated deeply with me.

Arrival in Buenos Aires

I travelled to Argentina in May of 2024. I had a very general sense of what was awaiting me: I knew that I would be working in a nursery school, but I had no further details. I didn't know what to expect, and this uncertainty heightened my nerves about the entire experience. Travelling to a new city is always daunting, and the added layer of joining the Voluntario Global community only added to my nerves.

Immediately I was delighted by the vibrant displays of culture in the city. Upon waking up on my first morning, I stepped outside to be engulfed in a street market, the longest in South America. I found the general public so welcoming that I began to seriously reflect on how I responded to strangers in my life back at home. Everyone was beyond willing to offer a helping hand, and although I was alone, I began to feel less lonely thanks to the welcoming spirit of the city itself.

First Impressions

Upon arriving, I learned that I had been placed in a nursery school in one of the city's most deprived areas. The two hour long commute was gruelling: it involved taking a subway, a train and a bus, all in the early hours of the morning, in an unfamiliar city. I was so apprehensive that I asked to change my placement. Initially, even the basic logistics of the journey seemed intimidating. However, once the programme coordinators explained to me how important access to childcare is to the members of this community, I reconsidered. The school wasn't just for education, but it offered the lifeline of free childcare for the parents who worked long hours in the city. I convinced myself to set my nerves aside and make the effort of the journey at least once, before deciding to change.

It only took that one day for my perspective to shift. It would have taken a heart of steel to meet the children and still chose to turn away from the project. I was immediately touched by their energy and vitality, and I knew I couldn't leave. The school was open to children between the ages of two and six, with two separate classrooms in use. Despite the simplicity of the concept, the school was facing monumental systemic challenges. The teachers explained that government funding had recently been removed, resulting in significant cuts to their already limited salaries. One teacher explained that her wage now barely covered the cost of her daily bus transport. They relied on volunteers like me because they couldn't afford to hire additional staff. I felt comforted that I could be helpful. My tasks were simple; tidying the classroom, serving food and generally entertaining the children. And even though the jobs were basic, I felt a definite sense of responsibility. The teachers needed help, and even just a spare pair of hands seemed to remove a little of the pressure.

Overcoming Barriers

One of the most daunting aspects of the whole experience was the language barrier. Initially, having to work in an environment where no-one spoke any English was understandably difficult, as although I had some basic Spanish skills, I was far from fluent. My Spanish improved quickly, especially as I was taking online lessons twice a week alongside my time in the school. A surprising change, one that I didn't expect, was how much the language barrier helped to strengthen my non-verbal communication. The children couldn't understand everything I tried to say, but they were impressively adept at interpreting my non-verbal cues and my body language. I learned to communicate more intentionally with my face, posture and tone of voice. This whole learning process deepened my understanding of human connection, and proved to me how much can be said without ever using words.

Leadership Challenges

My time at the school was fulfilling and stimulating, but I often found myself wondering if I was completing the leadership aspect of my project. Most of the time, I worked under the direction of the teachers. Occasionally I was left alone with the children, and in these moments I had to step into a leadership role, using my leadership skills to supervise the busy classroom. For the most part I relied on the teacher for instruction, and for this reason I felt that my leadership skills weren't being tested.

When I voiced these concerns to Ele, a fellow Laidlaw scholar living in Buenos Aires, she helped me brainstorm ways to expand my role. She suggested we work together to deliver a mental health workshop. I was initially apprehensive. How could we introduce such an important and sensitive topic to the children at such a young age? But after discussing with both Ele and our Voluntario Global mentor, we agreed that early introduction to the concept

of mental health could be incredibly beneficial for these children. Research consistently shows that children from lower income homes are at a greater risk of developing a mental health condition later in life, likely due to increased deprivation and instability during their development (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997). We wanted to equip them with the tools to understand their own emotions, and hopefully plant the seeds of emotional intelligence, which would benefit both them and their community in the future.

The Importance of Mental Health Education

In recent years, the topic of mental health is becoming a more mainstream discourse. It is encouraging to see the stigma start to shift, and it is becoming more commonplace to openly discuss our feelings and emotions. Public interest in mental illnesses and disorders has grown significantly, as evidenced by recent Google Trends analyses (Google Trends, n.d.). This increasing awareness paves the way for a critical next step: integrating mental health education into our school systems. Interestingly, the UK public appears to agree. A 2021 study revealed that 87% of parents supported mental health education in schools (Parentkind, 2024). Disappointingly, despite the overwhelming public support, a different survey found that over half of UK teachers were not confident in supporting their students' mental health (Casebourne, 2021). The gap between demand and preparedness is concerning, and with this in mind, I approached my Leadership in Action project from two angles: I wanted to target both the children and the teachers.

Designing the Workshop

To make the workshop accessible to the young children at the nursery, we focussed on simple, age-appropriate activities. We developed and designed a colouring exercise to help the children identify and name the six big emotions: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust. We used diagrams with facial expressions and asked the children to assign a colour to each expression. We also designed an instructional leaflet to hand out to the teachers, with the hope that they would display it in the classroom.

I found it incredibly interesting to see the range of understanding within the class - some children could interpret facial expressions while others struggled to assign emotions to diagrams. I think this gap in ability highlighted how important it is to teach emotional literacy from a young age.

Delivering the workshop in Spanish was an additional challenge for me, but it also served as a personal benchmark for my language skills. As the workshop took place in the last week of my project, it felt like a perfect opportunity to personally assess my improvement. I was able to speak confidently and understand the majority of the children's questions. I can honestly say I was proud of my language development in such a short space of time.

Personal Growth

Reflecting on my experience, I find it difficult to single out the most valuable lesson learned. However, I can confidently say that I have returned home as a much more self-assured and adaptable person. I lived completely outside of my comfort zone for over six weeks, and this immersion forced me to develop a new level of resilience. As a result, I find myself more at ease when navigating unfamiliar scenarios. Whether it was overcoming my fear of a difficult commute in a new city, or stepping up to lead a workshop in a foreign country, I had to rely on my adaptability and problem-solving skills every day.

One of the most critical skills I developed during my time away was patience. This is a necessary virtue for anyone working with young children, especially when they are struggling with big emotions. I quickly learned that remaining *visibly* patient - using a calm voice, soft tone, and gentle hand movements - was the most effective way to communicate with the children during their outbursts. This response encouraged the children to calm down, allowing them to more easily identify and express their emotions. I believe this approach will also be effective when communicating with adults that are frustrated or overwhelmed. As I am currently working in hospitality, and will one day be working in healthcare, it is imperative that I learn how to remain calm when being challenged by people who are struggling to regulate their own emotions. Patience, empathy, and the ability to navigate emotional dynamics are skills that I will carry with me long after this project.

Beyond emotional development, my time in Buenos Aires allowed me to foster new interpersonal relationships. I made some life-long friendships that played a crucial role in my personal development. Arriving in a new city, vulnerable and a bit lonely, being thrust into a situation where I didn't know anyone. One of my first priorities was to make friends. I was fortunate enough to be placed in a dorm with seven other girls, one of which was Michele, a sixty-year-old Belgian lady, who had been working for Voluntario Global for the past five months. Her placement was in a soup kitchen, and she had diligently been working there every weekday, from 7am to 3pm. She became my mentor and close friend, taking me under her wing to show me around the hostel and the city.

Michele's routine of walking me to the subway station in the morning, as well as her small acts of kindness - like leaving fruit on my bed after long days - helped me adjust to the challenges of volunteering. Her zest for life and commitment to the community were inspiring, and her attitude encouraged me to give my all to my project. Witnessing her long-term commitment to serving others reminded me that impact isn't always about grand gestures; it often lies in consistency, empathy, and the small, thoughtful ways we interact with others in our daily lives. This friendship became a foundation of support, and her lessons will remain with me as I continue my time in medicine.

Aside from Michele, I formed a friendship group with two of the other volunteers - Ele and Izzy. They were around my age, and objectively very different people, but I had lots to learn from both of them. From Ele, I hope to embody her unwavering empathy and her desire to

improve the lives of all those she encounters. From Izzy I hope to gain her relentless optimism and ability to smile through any difficulty. Some of my fondest memories of the trip involve exploring the city with those girls.

Leadership Training

The leadership training provided by the Laidlaw Scholarship equipped me with the theoretical foundation and knowledge to implement my Leadership In Action programme effectively. From the leadership sessions, I learned a great deal about my leadership style. My DISC profile was a strong D (dominant) personality, meaning I thrive when challenges are results orientated. This insight allowed me to structure my project in a way that aligned with my strengths. I set myself specific goals for the workshop, such as ensuring that all the children could identify at least three emotions by the end of the session. This helped motivate me in the planning and development stage, and also made the completion of the workshop that much more satisfactory.

In addition to goal setting, the Laidlaw leadership training also helped me cultivate skills that went beyond practical project management. I noticed a tangible improvement in my ability to reflect critically and identify areas for improvement. Prior to starting Laidlaw training, I often struggled when my course required reflective pieces. I found it difficult to objectively assess my actions and strengths and weaknesses, often finding that I was either too critical or not critical enough. During the Leadership training sessions when we practised self and peer reflection, I was equipped with the tools I needed to write meaningful and insightful reflections.

This growth and development is invaluable to me for a future career as a doctor. I know that for a career in medicine, the ability to reflect is one of the most important skills. A doctor should not be afraid to identify their own weaknesses, as this is one of the easiest ways to improve patient safety and satisfaction. I am grateful to the Laidlaw scholarship for giving me the space and time to develop these skills, as they will undoubtedly make me a better doctor in the future. I built a tight-knit and reliable network of scholars, who I know that I could contact in years to come.

Networking

An unexpected, but very much welcomed, benefit of Laidlaw was that it taught me the importance of building a strong professional network. As a medical student I was under the false impression that, as I would eventually end up working in the NHS, networking was not particularly relevant to my career. I thought that my medical qualification alone would secure my position in the professional world. However, the Laidlaw scholarship taught me that networking goes beyond just career advancement - it offers mentorship, collaboration and support through one's professional life.

Being a Laidlaw scholar has afforded me countless networking opportunities. I was introduced to countless scholars, mentors and academics who offered me insight into several career trajectories that I had never before considered. One particularly impactful connection was my advisor, who introduced me to several key figures in the field of medical research at St. Andrew's, including the Head of Medical Research. These relationships helped me understand the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in the advancement of medical science and patient care.

My time in Buenos Aires was in itself a networking experience of sorts. I created professional bonds and personal friendships with the Voluntario Global staff, and as a result they offered themselves as a reference, should I ever need it. The experience taught me the value in networking outside your own personal field, across different industries and cultures.

Giving Back

As I reflect on my time as a Laidlaw Scholar, I feel a deep sense of gratitude for the experiences and opportunities that this scholarship has afforded me. It has been nothing short of transformative, shaping both my personal and professional development in ways that I could not have anticipated. I will always look back on the two years with extreme fondness and I truly believe that the skills I have learned - to lead, to reflect, to network - will be indispensable in the future.

Because of the impact that the Laidlaw Scholarship has had on my St. Andrew's career I feel a strong responsibility to give back. In September I will be delivering a speech about Laidlaw to first year medical students, with the hopes of encouraging more medics to embrace this opportunity. I want to highlight how Laidlaw has allowed me to grow and flourish outside of my studies, offering lessons that are just as valuable as those that are taught in any of our lectures. As medical students, we become too focussed on academics and often overlook opportunities for personal growth and development. Doctors should be well-rounded individuals, able to communicate effectively and maintain strong team bonds, as well as deliver an excellent standard of patient care. Additionally, paid research as an Undergraduate student is incredibly rare. Combining this fact with the opportunity to travel abroad means that the Laidlaw scholarship is, in my opinion, one of the best scholarships available at St. Andrew's.

I am incredibly thankful to Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw team for creating a scholarship that fosters such comprehensive personal and professional development, all in a safe and supportive environment.

Bibliography

Brooks-Gunn, J. and Duncan, G.J. (1997). The Effects of Poverty on Children. *The Future of Children*, 7(2), pp.55–71.

Google Trends. (n.d.). Google Trends. [online] Available at:

<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=mental%20health&hl=en>.

Parentkind. (2024). Mental health and wellbeing in education report - October 2022. [online] Available at:

<https://www.parentkind.org.uk/research-and-policy/education-policy/policy-reports/mental-health-and-wellbeing#:~:text=Including%20topics%20around%20bullying%20and>

[Accessed 12 Sep. 2024]

Casebourne, J. (2021). Half of UK teachers don't feel confident helping pupils with their mental health. [online] Early Intervention Foundation. Available at:

<https://www.eif.org.uk/press-release/half-of-uk-teachers-don-t-feel-confident-helping-pupils-with-their-mental-health>.