Leadership-in-Action Project Report

Laidlaw Scholars Programme - Casa Tres Patios

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Voice was a theme I kept circling back to, both in research and in practice. I was interested in how releasing the physical voice can open pathways to the social voice, allowing people to express themselves more fully. In society, we are trained when to speak, what tone to use, how loudly we may be heard, and even when emotions like crying or laughter are acceptable. For marginalized groups, this training goes further, shaping silence as second nature. Hooks (1989) describes voice as an act of reclamation, particularly for those silenced by systems of domination. What emerges from the body is never contained within it; it extends outward, shaping how individuals take up space, negotiate belonging, and engage in collective exchange. For me, this understanding of voice became both a theoretical framework and a practical tool for building trust, challenging silence, and making presence felt. Yet, we are trained in voice long before we even realize it. Taught what tone is acceptable, how much volume is tolerated, when it is proper to laugh, and when it is permissible to cry. These rules are not neutral. For those already pushed, like marginalized groups, the training goes deeper. The danger of internalizing it is that silence becomes second nature, a habit worn so tightly it feels like the only option.

As I prepared for the program in Medellín, voice became a central point of inquiry. In several preparatory meetings with the team before July, I recognized the challenge of engaging with migrant teens and creating an environment where they could feel at ease, despite my limited proficiency in Spanish, a language I had first begun learning in Mexico. This raised an essential question: how might trust be built across linguistic and cultural boundaries?

In working to build a bridge with the teens in Medellín, I confronted a further dilemma: how could empowerment be fostered in an environment already defined by structural silencing? In Colombia, armed groups, whether gangs, paramilitaries, or guerrilla organizations, have long exerted influence over what information circulates in the media, while journalists continue to face threats and violence (Rincón, 2019; Bonilla & Rincón, 2021). For young people, the risks are even more acute: attending school may place them in danger, and adherence to the demands of local armed actors often becomes a condition of survival in regions where the state has historically lacked

authority (González, 2017; Pearce, 2020). It is in these circumstances that media literacy and critical thinking skills become important. When gangs and criminal networks dominate local narratives, recruiting youth into cycles of violence, drugs, prostitution, and robbery, the ability to question, interpret, and resist information becomes a matter of survival. Vulnerable groups, particularly displaced or migrant teens, are disproportionately targeted because they lack stable forms of protection and are more likely to absorb messages that normalize violence or portray gangs as the only viable form of belonging (Hernández & Niño, 2018). As Livingstone (2004) argues, media literacy fundamentally is about recognizing how power operates through media to shape identities and choices. For these youth, strengthening critical media skills creates the ability to identify manipulation, resist coercive narratives, and imagine alternatives to the pathways laid out by armed actors.

When I arrived in Medellín around 10 a.m., I already had a meeting scheduled for 2 p.m. Walking through Centro on my way to the nonprofit's office, I was quickly reminded of things I had forgotten: people openly using drugs on the streets, and children stepping over them as if it were part of the everyday landscape. That afternoon, our team met with the psychologists from the partner organization to discuss the psychological realities of the teens we would be working with. The goal was to help me refine the program through a trauma-informed lens.

The meeting itself was difficult to digest. Many of the teens live with extended family members who have taken them in, or, in some cases, with people who chose to adopt them. About 90 percent of the teens are Venezuelan migrants, most of whom arrived in Medellín on foot. The psychologists described the health complications many of them face as a result of malnutrition and limited access to consistent care. Their families also come from informal employment, and their jobs aren't always recognized officially by the government. Yet one comment stayed with me: despite everything, their hearts are bigger than Medellín. At the same time, the risks they face are immense. Many gangs now recruit children precisely because the law does not punish them in the same way as adults. These groups not only extort families but also take advantage of the desperation that comes with poverty and displacement. In some cases, families themselves encourage their children to join because it is seen as an easier, more immediate path to survival, even if it ties them to cycles of violence. The goal of the organization, Pueblos de los Niños, is to prepare these teens for the future by helping them build the skills they will need to find work as they grow older. The program runs seven days a week, four hours a day, to keep them engaged and to give them the chance to remain what they are—kids who are allowed to dream. My job was to create a program with them that would help the teens in the years to come. But I wanted to aim for a bigger goal as well, one that went beyond skills or short-term opportunities. I wanted the program to give them tools to recognize their own voices, to think critically

about the messages that surround them, and to see themselves as more than the limitations imposed by poverty, migration, or violence.

But this came with many challenges. As I began working here, I realized that I would also be living within similar realities to those I was studying. On my second day, I was robbed at gunpoint. I had been walking to a bakery just a block away from my house, wearing blue jeans and a grey shirt, no jewelry. A man on a motorcycle stopped in front of a house a few meters ahead. As I approached, he demanded my phone. I froze in shock, and in that moment, he unlocked the safety on his gun and pressed it about three or four inches from my chest. When the directors of my organization called the police, they arrived four hours later. They told me they couldn't go after the phone, even though it was tracked on Find My iPhone, because the neighbourhood it was traced to was controlled by gangs. One officer admitted he would not risk his life over the phone. He added that, with the influx of migrants and the lack of state support, gangs were exploiting the situation: some migrants were forced into drug use to keep them compliant with orders. Before leaving, the officer told me I was lucky. If the man hadn't liked what he got from me, he could have just as easily shot me.

At first, I thought this was something that happened mainly to tourists, especially since my facial features make me stand out. But when I went back to the organization and shared what happened, I was shocked to learn that this was considered normal. Most of the parents in the community had been robbed several times in their lives. Later, when I visited friends I had made years earlier, they echoed the same response: "At least they didn't shoot or stab you." For them, robberies, gang raids, and turf shootouts were everyday occurrences. Crime, I realized, had become normalized. I was angry with the police and found myself comparing their response to my experiences in Canada and Vietnam, where officers are highly visible and quick to intervene. In Medellín, the reality was different: you could not trust the police. For many, the police were absent at best and complicit at worst. Their refusal to pursue the theft of my phone was not an exception but part of a broader pattern where state institutions had long ceded ground to gangs and armed groups. In neighbourhoods where police protection is unreliable, people adjust their sense of safety around the authority of gangs rather than the state. Silence, avoidance, and compliance become survival strategies. For migrants and the urban poor, who lack the networks of protection that wealthier Colombians or, depending on the barrio, may access, this normalization of crime deepens the feeling of being abandoned.

That's when the question struck me: how can you hear, if you cannot see?

This is the reality for most Colombians. They've just become numb to the crime. It was in that moment that I began to recognize the value of my research thesis from the

first summer. I returned to it and looked more closely at the psychological effects of living in a state of liminality. Caught between belonging and exclusion, between visibility and erasure. They occupied a space where they were neither fully integrated into Colombian society nor entirely detached from it, suspended in a kind of in-between zone that shaped how they were seen, how they were treated, and ultimately, how they came to see themselves. Here in Medellín, I could see how these dynamics converged. The normalization of crime and the silence imposed by gangs reproduced the same conditions of invisibility I had studied in the disinformation surrounding Venezuelan migrants. The state's absence did not simply leave a void; it actively shaped how migrants were positioned as suspects, exploitable, and perpetually on the margins. Within this space, voice becomes precarious. To speak is to risk visibility; to remain silent is to dissolve into erasure.

My goal was to ensure that I could connect with the teens, or at the very least, show compassion for their experiences so they would know that I truly saw them. To do this, I researched ways to make each week of the program relatable to their lives, particularly through the lens of social media. I spent several days immersing myself in the meme culture, music, and popular trends shaping the teen demographic in Medellín. At the same time, I shared universal emotions and personal experiences as a bridge: that my family is far away in the Philippines, that yelling makes me feel stressed, and that I find joy in writing and learning. From there, I revisited the original program that Casa Tres Patios and I had agreed upon. I quickly realized two issues: it was too ambitious to complete in six weeks, and it was too vague to be truly effective. To ensure the program would have an impact, I began by conducting a quick quantitative analysis of content circulating in news outlets and Facebook groups using three key terms: Medellín, gang, crime, and Venezuelan. I then researched Medellín's history as a site of marginalization and displacement, linking those patterns to current realities. I examined crime rates and how they intersected with local politics between 2023 and 2025, and I studied the structures of gangs, guerrilla groups, and paramilitary organizations that continue to exert control over the city. This approach helped me better understand the realities shaping the teens' lives and guided me in designing a program that spoke directly to the struggles they face every day.

In the second week, I introduced an exercise called the map of their lives. The goal was to help the teens see that their stories did not always need to be explained in words, that the simple act of expressing them visually was powerful in itself. An audience might try to interpret their drawings, but ultimately, only they could truly understand what they had created. This taught them that meaning does not always have to be translated for others to be valid. Their lived experiences, memories, and emotions carried value even if they resisted explanation. For many, this was a shift from the pressure of constantly having to justify their existence, especially as members of

marginalized comunas. At the same time, the activity created a collective moment of recognition. The teens began to see parallels in their experiences, and that recognition helped build trust within the group. I had originally planned three exercises for that day, with the first one scheduled to last only fifteen minutes. Instead, it stretched into an hour. From this, I learned that each child's background affects how they process information, and that activities often require more time than expected. Moving forward, I knew I needed to be more mindful: rather than trying to pack in multiple exercises, I would focus on one or two, giving the teens enough space to fully explore their thoughts and emotions.

By the third week, however, the dynamic shifted: at least 15 new kids joined, along with 10 returning from the previous week. I hadn't anticipated such a large turnover, so I quickly had to bridge the gap by reviewing what we had learned before as a refresher. It was also during this week that I realized just how much media the kids were consuming. To meet them where they were, I made sure that the workshops were more conversational and began gamifying the activities. I aimed to encourage them to voice their thoughts openly and to emphasize that there were no right or wrong answers, only the value of speaking up and being heard while understanding what they're seeing and hearing. The focus was on artificial intelligence: what AI is, the problems it raises, and how it is already shaping the media they consume. We talked about issues such as how AI can generate content that "sounds right" but is misleading, how it can imitate voices or produce images that blur the line between truth and fabrication, and how these complications matter in contexts where disinformation is already common. At the same time, I wanted to show them that AI was not only a threat but also a tool. Used mindfully, it could be harnessed to their advantage.

The value of speaking up and being heard was also explored further when I held a training session for teachers and facilitators. Tony, the founder of Casa Tres Patios, had asked me to lead a session on critical thinking skills. At the beginning, I posed a simple prompt: Is it okay to always believe what others tell you? One of the directors responded by sharing that, growing up, it was considered wrong to question teachers, parents, or any authority figure. That dynamic, he explained, is still very present today. In reflection, teachers described a culture where questioning authority was discouraged. On the other hand, I witnessed how silence and fear operated on the streets, where even asking a simple question about children's photos carried risks. Both revealed the same underlying structure: a society where compliance is enforced, whether through cultural norms of respectability or through the coercion of gangs. In both cases, critical questioning was dangerous.

This reminded me of the time I was walking through Centro on my first day, and I had noticed shops with binders full of children's photos, each labelled with their names.

At first, I asked if this was for fashion or something similar. The shop owner replied vaguely: “For fun.” I pressed a little further and asked why? He told me not to ask again, warning that he could get in trouble. It became clear that gangs were involved. Now that I had placed myself in the perspective of a local living in the less wealthy comunas of Medellín, I became curious about how experiences differed across the city. I spoke with around forty residents from wealthier comunas, and their responses revealed a stark divide. Half admitted they were afraid, acknowledging that violence had increased significantly over the past year. The other half, however, felt secure, explaining that they were protected through family ties with certain groups who exercised control in their neighbourhoods.

I also spoke with about twenty foreigners in El Poblado, Medellín’s wealthiest district, and their perspectives added another layer. Many of them openly stated that they were drawn to the city for drugs or even underage prostitution. This revelation was quite unsettling, but it helped me see the wider ecosystem that sustains cycles of violence. Foreign demand feeds local exploitation, while marginalized youth are left most vulnerable to being pulled into gangs or coerced into crime.

But with this thought, I felt conflicted about bringing the topic into focus during the fourth week with the teens. I had been told to keep the sessions stress-free so they could simply feel like kids. I didn’t want to remind them of how difficult their situation was, or reinforce the idea that such realities should be accepted as normal. At the same time, I knew that for them to feel genuine agency, the issue couldn’t be ignored. What mattered was finding a way to frame it, potentially introducing awareness of the challenges they face, while also guiding them to imagine ways of overcoming them, even if that process began only at the level of mindset and perspective. Instead, I shifted the focus toward the media itself. Specifically, how channels, depending on where they fall on the political spectrum, can twist messages to serve a larger narrative. This gave us space to talk about structures without directly placing the burden back onto their personal hardships. I began with examples from Medellín, where vulnerable populations are often portrayed as problems rather than people. From there, I expanded outward, sharing similar cases from other parts of the world. This was important because it reminded them that they were not alone. As we discussed headlines and stories, they began to identify patterns: who gets to speak, who gets silenced, and how narratives about crime, migration, or poverty are constructed.

By the fifth week, I wanted to bring everything together. The biggest project of the program. With everything we had learned about how media is created, how stories affect our lives, and how AI can multiply them, I showed the teens that they could create change now. They were all going to become journalists. At first, they were shy, hesitant to approach strangers, but after the first interview, they couldn’t stop. They started to

notice who was safe to approach and who to avoid, they learned to ask meaningful questions instead of filling the time with fluff, and they realized the weight they carried when listening to and writing someone else's story. That's when I saw the lessons from the past weeks, around voice, agency, and presence, really come alive. Though this week showed me the importance of role models and communities.

Because this was a group activity, I could not manage it on my own. In the earlier weeks, I had relied on José and Isa to help facilitate and maintain order when sessions became chaotic. But during this week, the project required a fully collective effort. With seven groups of three to four teens, seven facilitators were needed. Everyone from Pueblos de los Niños stepped in to support, ensuring that the youth were guided, safe, and encouraged as they conducted their interviews. I provided the overall game plan, but it was the collaborative effort of the facilitators and staff that brought the activity to life. The presence of multiple facilitators distributed responsibility, creating a horizontal dynamic where authority was shared rather than centralized. In turn, the teens experienced a model of collective agency: just as facilitators worked together to support them, they themselves learned to collaborate in approaching strangers, developing questions, and listening to stories.

This experience in Medellín will continue to shape my leadership practice by reminding me that leadership is less about directing and more about creating spaces where others can reclaim their voices. I learned that trust is built through presence and listening, and that meaningful change happens through collective agency rather than individual authority. Moving forward, I will strive to lead in ways that are participatory, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive. Above all, Medellín taught me that leadership requires courage: the courage to face structural silencing without reinforcing it, and the courage to believe that even in the most precarious contexts, young people can redefine their futures when given the chance to be heard.