



Global Special Study Experience in Colombia

Elise Matatall

University of Michigan School of Social Work

MEDELLIN & MANIZALES, COLOMBIA

Medellin is the second largest city in Colombia. Despite its harsh reputation from the 80's, it is considered the economic center of Colombia and is currently known for its progressive urban and social planning. Medellin is also the capital of Antioquia, a region disproportionately affected by the decades long armed conflict. Thus, Medellin provides many of the services for individuals who have disengaged from the conflict.

Manizales is the capital of Caldas, the coffee region of Colombia. Manizales is considered a university town, with numerous public and private academic institutions. Manizales is also known by travelers for its eco tourism but many families displaced by the conflict have sought refuge in the northern neighborhoods of Manizales.

WHY COLOMBIA?

Wherever I go I seem to connect with social service professionals. In 2013, I spent two months in Colombia, where I was fortunate to meet two amazing individuals: the supervisor at my internship and my host mother. My host mother was a therapist for a classroom of youth who had demobilized from the armed conflict. My supervisor, an educational psychologist, and I became close through many conversations and shared experiences. When she learned I was returning, she invited me to volunteer with her organization, Colombianitos, and stay with her while I was in Colombia.

COLOMBIANITOS MANIZALES

Colombianitos seeks to better the quality of life of children, young people, and their communities through sport, based in training in values, recreation, education, and health. They serve Manizales' most vulnerable northern neighborhoods.

PROJECT INFORMATION

Prior to my departure, I conducted research on:

- The psychosocial supports available for youth who have demobilized from the armed conflict in Colombia, often called "child soldiers"
- Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs
- Critical theory analyzing how these youth are conceptualized in international law

I hoped to understand the role that service providers play in shaping the services given to youth. I split my trip into ten days in Medellin attending community events about the peace process, meeting with academics, and practicing my Spanish; and ten days in Manizales shadowing my old supervisor at her organization Colombianitos.



OUTCOMES

I used the opportunity as an exploratory trip to build relationships and better understand the context. I met with academics in Medellin and service providers in Manizales. Two key findings:

- Conflict involved youth are given services based on when they demobilize, not when they are recruited.
- The peace process will likely change the landscape of the DDR process in unforeseen ways.

SKILLS UTILIZED

- Throughout my trip I reflected on how to practice cultural humility as a visitor, researcher, and social worker.
- I made use of my research skills to better understand how context informs practice, particularly in Colombia which is currently in the middle of a complex peace process.
- Similarly, I practiced critical thinking while observing the organizational context of Colombianitos.

LESSONS LEARNED

Among many things, I gained greater insight into:

- The importance of respectful relationship building across cultures.
- Creative interventions to reach communities and reluctant youth.
- Cultural humility as an ethic and practice.
- The complexity of regional politics and how that affects service provision.
- Comparative international studies, especially in terms of social welfare systems such as child welfare.

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

As a Child Welfare scholar, I take many classes focused on positive youth development and trauma-informed practices. I appreciated seeing how the two could be combined.



CAREER CONNECTIONS

- The jefa (boss) at Colombianitos, a social worker herself, helped me apply for a Fulbright research grant to return to Colombia with her graduate thesis advisor as my institutional sponsor. Furthermore, I was able to improve my Spanish language skills, which will allow me to work with underserved Spanish speakers in the future, especially in Michigan.

ADVICE

- Participate in daily life, while being cognizant of where you might be overstepping or appropriating another's culture.
- Purchase travel insurance so you aren't afraid to ride on the back of the motorcycle.
- Make small gestures to show your gratitude wherever possible (e.g. cleaning, taking the dog out, translating pamphlets into English, etc.)—it shows you appreciate someone sharing their home, country, and life with you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to Reuben Miller for advising my project, to my supervisor, Adriana Muñoz (pictured left), for allowing me to stay with her and carting me around the city on the back of her scooter each day, to the rest of the staff at Colombianitos (above) for providing such a welcoming and informative experience.

