



# ADOLESCENT LIVES THROUGH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Experiences and Resilience



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# Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has put adolescent resilience and tenacity to the test in Latin America, the Caribbean, and all throughout our region. During these trying years filled with new experiences, health conditions like depression and anxiety disorders have increased significantly within the adolescent population. Moreover, due to the crisis generated by the current health situation, many of these adolescents have experienced less satisfaction from the activities they previously enjoyed.

Local restrictions, mass closure of schools, education from home, and limitations regarding physical contact with other members of the community have had a great impact on the mental health of Colombian adolescents. Without a shadow of a doubt, millions of them have adapted and changed their way of living and have acquired new habits by staying positive

and healthy to continue enjoying one of the best periods of their lives. They've also become supportive agents in many families, passing on their new habits to their loved ones. It must be said that, globally, each of our homes has become a new space for the writing of stories and experiences of which adolescents have been the authors and protagonists.

During the last few years, the creative arts and their related participatory projects have gained importance as strategies for promoting mental health and wellness in adolescents. These initiatives encourage the building of resilience among these communities, promoting their emotional well-being and empowering them in the search for solutions to common problems that affect society. The benefits of these interventions endure over time, break cultural and language barriers,



and extend to the building of trust, leadership, and identity, as well as improving self-esteem, mood, and symptoms of stress and anxiety that adolescents might experience.

Taking into account this new reality brought on by the pandemic, the BRiCs research project “Building resilience in adolescence – Improving quality of life for adolescents with mental health problems in Colombia,” established by the Pontificia Javeriana University and the Queen Mary University of London, we are delighted to introduce the outcome of the collective efforts of a group of six adolescent leaders and mental health researchers from Bogotá, Colombia. These adolescents have found an interesting way to face the new challenge brought on by the pandemic through written and photographic artistic expression and social-emotional learning, and, additionally, have been

inspired to record the coping mechanisms against emotional stress of many of their peers.

We invite you to read carefully through each one of these stories and photos that describe the experiences of Colombian adolescents during the pandemic; their fears, weaknesses, strengths, and ways of managing emotions during these difficult times. Each one of these ways is unique, authentic, and has a special meaning. The objective of this book is to bring attention to the experiences of Colombian adolescents, as well as share them as widely as possible. Additionally, we hope that it will further contribute to our understanding of young people’s mental health and inspire targeted actions to address their needs.

Carlos Gómez-Restrepo

Victoria Jane Bird

# Methodology of the BRiCs Study's Participatory Arts-Based Project

The BRiCs study is a three-year-long research program, funded by the UK Medical Research Council (MRC). BRiCs is a collaboration between two research groups from the Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) and the Pontificia Javeriana University of Bogotá. The main objective of the study is to improve mental health conditions for adolescents dealing with depression and anxiety in Colombia through the adaptation of an already-existing effective intervention.

The Participatory Arts-Based Project corresponds to Phase 4 of the BRiCs Study. Its objective was to strengthen the creative and communicative abilities of

a group of six adolescents through a basic technical training in audio-visual creation and writing in order to promote the expression of their sensibility towards emotional and mental health issues, thus boosting their leadership skills. This project was approved by the Research and Ethics Committee of the Pontificia Javeriana University's Faculty of Medicine. Once it was approved, six adolescents between the ages of fourteen and eighteen with an interest in research, the humanities, and the arts were invited to participate.

The adolescents' main task was to interview eleven to fourteen young people between the ages

of twelve and twenty-one about their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on these testimonies, each adolescent would then write a short story and take a series of pictures with the purpose of sharing the experiences of young people in the midst of lockdown and uncertainty. Each adolescent was assigned a semi-professional camera and a voice recorder to execute these tasks. In addition to the stories and photos, each adolescent would write about their own experience during the pandemic and about what they learnt during the project. Finally, the group

of adolescents would actively participate in the creation of a short film that resulted from their creative process and what they learnt throughout the project.

The project was led by two facilitators: Camila Malaver Garzón (in charge of audio-visual creation) and Sara Valdés Morales (in charge of the writing part). The project lasted six months and had three components that were executed simultaneously and progressively: 1) seven artistic workshops; 2) interviews; and 3) personalised consultations.

**The combination of these three components resulted in the compilation of stories and photos included in this book.**



# 1

## Artistic workshops

The workshops were run following a methodology based on Social-Emotional Learning. This methodology focuses on the development of social-emotional skills such as self-knowledge, self-confidence, self-control, empathy, motivation, and social awareness. The structure of the workshops was articulated through six stages:

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① Overview: Presentation of the goals of the workshop and the proposed activities.

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② Body activation: Participation in sequences of motion that encourage the recognition of internal sensations and prepare the body for action.

③ Group recognition: Participation in group games that focus on the development of group listening skills and that encourage empathy.

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④ Introduction to concepts: Presentation of the theoretical part of the workshop.

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⑤ Implementation: Application of the theoretical content to group activities with the aim of encouraging significant learning.

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⑥ Final thoughts: Reflections on the initial objectives, learnings, and final questions.

## The workshops and their specific objectives were as follows:



### First workshop: Planning work throughout the project

Objectives:

- Recognise ourselves as a group and establish an understanding of how to relate to each other.
- Design the field diary or logbook where the stories and photos will be kept throughout the process.



### Second workshop: Interviewing and writing short stories

Objectives:

- Reflect on how to listen to a testimony, recognising the aspects that can be narrated.
- Understand the structure and basic elements of a short story.
- Identify the relevant ethical aspects of conducting interviews.



### Third workshop: Introduction to photography

Objectives:

- Become familiar with the cameras by identifying their parts and main functions.
- Learn about the basic tools of photography.
- Learn about the photographic language and its possibilities.



#### Fourth workshop: The field of audio-visual creation

Objectives:

- Understand the basic elements of image composition.
- Familiarise ourselves with the tools of photographic editing.
- Identify the main aspects of audio-visual creation.
- Learn about the cinematographic language for the expression of ideas and content.



#### Fifth workshop: Our process as interviewers

Objectives:

- Share our experience as interviewers.
- Interview each other in pairs and reflect on that experience.
- Build a testimony based on an important object.
- Create a video in teams that narrates a particular experience.



#### Sixth workshop: Consciousness regarding the content intended to be expressed

Objectives:

- Reflect on the content of three songs.
- Create a video in teams that reinterprets the content of one of the songs.
- Analyse the manner in which a series of books present their content.
- Provide ideas for presenting the contents of the book about the project.



#### Seventh workshop: Collective audio-visual creation and retrospective reflection on the project

Objectives:

- Reflect on the experience throughout the project.
- Learn about the different elements, roles, and tasks during a recording.
- Record different group scenes that represent the experience throughout the project.

## 2

### Interviews

Each adolescent interviewed between eleven and fourteen young people aged twelve to twenty-one. The interview was loosely structured and was based on the following four questions:

- A. What activities helped you manage your emotions before the COVID-19 pandemic?
- B. What activities have helped you manage your emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- C. How has the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on your life?
- D. Have you looked for emotional support?

In addition to these questions, the adolescents had a series of instructions about how to broaden the responses to each one of the questions. During their personalised consultations before the interviews, they had moments to practice in which each adolescent could ask questions about their role as an interviewer and receive feedback.

## 3

### Personalised consultations

From the second workshop onwards, the two facilitators started to meet weekly or fortnightly with each of the adolescents in the team. The initial personalised consultations on writing and photography focused on providing a set of tools and creative challenges so that each adolescent could start developing their content creation process. Once the first tasks were assigned and instructions were given regarding the photos and writing of the stories, the consultation sessions started to focus on the material that each adolescent handed in weekly. In the first part of the consultation the adolescents were asked about their experience creating content during that week. Secondly, the texts and photos were revised, identifying the strengths and the opportunities for improvement. Thirdly, the adolescents were provided with a series of precise technical tools in order to advance in their learning and improve in the aspects already mentioned. Finally, they were assigned specific tasks to guide the creation of the material for the upcoming weeks.



# Qualitative Insights

Adolescence is one of the most enriching stages for any human being, where one has left childhood behind and is venturing into adulthood. The BRiCs study's Participatory Arts-Based Project represents an invaluable mental health promotion strategy, whose execution and results will positively impact the millions of Colombian adolescents that were emotionally affected during this pandemic.

Along with the coordinator of this project, I was able to witness the progressive gain in confidence through each of the workshops, as well as the skills, both personal and artistic, of the group of six adolescents who were able to reach their goal successfully through the construction of a collective force. Likewise, I am pleased to know that this project represented an opportunity for them to acquire leadership in mental health, a critical attitude towards the everyday problems

in Colombia, and a great interest in capturing the voice, feelings, and thoughts of Colombian adolescents in each of their writings. I hope that these new skills will provide them with a good future as great citizens of our country.

I want to thank the BRiCs project and all the people in both teams at the participating universities for allowing me to be a part of this fruitful experience. Moreover, I hope that this complicated health issue, and each of the stories captured in this book, will set the tone for a new generation of resilient health professionals who are more sensitive towards the importance of contributing to the emotional wellbeing of our adolescents from the primary health care sector.

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José Alejandro Rumbo Romero

The Participatory Arts-Based Project of the BRiCs study presented itself to us as a great opportunity to meet with people again after quarantine, but, above all, to think carefully about the way we want to relate to each other. From the beginning, we wanted each activity to transcend the mere transmission of content. With each exercise, we looked to provide spaces that allowed each adolescent to express their own perspective of the world, tell their stories, and cultivate their sensitivity.

Being a participatory project, our main objective was the construction of a safe space in which we could form a mutual support group with the six adolescents during their learning process. We distanced ourselves from the competitive dynamic, insisting on the importance of collaborative work, and advancing the development of social and creative skills. The collective work done throughout the seven workshops generated an environment of trust that gradually consolidated an assertive group.

Throughout the journey towards building trust, humour was a fundamental tool for free expression and recognising the personality of each participant. Through laughter, the games allowed us to bring together the adolescents and facilitators and to find the possibility of error and expressiveness. Theatrical improvisation games allowed us to portray our funny sides, our vulnerabilities, and our capacity to connect through our gaze and actions.

From the beginning, we wanted to know the expectations and interests of the group of adolescents in order to propose content that could contribute to the development of skills pertinent to their life projects. The diversity in

age, trajectories, and lifestyles made each personalised consultation a singular space in which each adolescent led their own process while strengthening their previous skills and acquiring new knowledge.

Each adolescent, with their ambitions and particular motivations, gave themselves the opportunity to conceive this project as a space to strengthen their leadership skills and find their full potential within the research environment. The main task of this project allowed the group of adolescents to lead a space of sensitive and careful interaction. Asking other youths about their experience during quarantine increased their capacity for empathy and broadened their perspective with respect to the various ways of tending to mental health.

With each writing and photography exercise, thoughts emerged regarding their learning process and the way that the project could contribute to it. One of the major challenges was to foster a different relationship with the creative challenges, preventing the fear of error that would jeopardise creative development. In this sense, the consultations provided a safe space to identify strengths and improvement opportunities from a questioning perspective. Thus, each adolescent led a learning process at their own pace, articulated with their own questions and nurtured by their creativity.

With time, the team of adolescents lost their fear of making mistakes, and different writing styles started to emerge. In parallel, the photographs increasingly revealed the particular gaze of each adolescent. The editorial work of their own

photographs consolidated a creative process in which each image had a particular way of managing colour and texture. At the end of the process, the empowerment with which they ended their writing pieces and photography editing was evident, a fact that fills us with satisfaction as a team and as a project.

Personally, this project gave me the possibility of opening myself up as an artist and as a person, allowing me to reacquaint myself with dancing and share with the team an important part of the way I am with myself. During the photography and video exercises, I started to move so they could capture images of a moving body, until I slowly started to dance. Dancing was something that I used to only do in private and it transformed into an opportunity to connect poetically and expressively with the team. Likewise, each participant of the project shared fragments of their personality, and this generated an environment of camaraderie in which each person was given the chance to be themselves.

By having the possibility of accompanying the learning processes of the group, I could attest to the way in which the arts contribute to the development of social-emotional skills like self-confidence and empathy. This project invited us to look inward, appreciate our way of being, and generate active listening in order to feel with other people, getting close to their reality and giving value to their testimony. It was in this way that the arts provided us with the tools to create new bonds, strengthen the ones we already had, and contribute to the weaving of a common fabric. Amid this painful, anguishing,

and uncertain situation caused by the pandemic, artistic practices gave us back a closeness that we had lost.

I finish this process with profound gratitude towards the Pontificia Javeriana University and the Queen Mary University for opening these learning and participative creation spaces which involve young people that actively contribute to the strengthening of our social bonds. I am convinced that projects like these will contribute significantly to Colombian society in its journey towards generating a greater awareness of young people's mental health and the multiple ways we can promote their participation.

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Sara Valdés Morales