



Calling the Shots: How Each Student Can Flourish with Freedom, Equity, and Community

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When Maya Angelou tried to define what it means to live with a purpose, she said, “You can only become truly accomplished when you do something that you love.” What a beautiful, transcendental opportunity to discover the reasons why you exist on this earth.

Every year in Peru, the lion’s share of our eight million students across the coast, the Andes, and our jungle get *educated* away from their purposes and from a life of accomplishment. After many decades of personal and societal liberation, our students still struggle to learn in a classroom where they are not receiving orders or being told what to do. Still others who know where they want to go and who want to speak out about the status quo of their own education are struck with punishment by authority figures.

As in many countries that have a troublesome colonial history, the foundation of our educational system is a set of rules that was originally

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L. F. Nathan et al. (eds.), *Designing Democratic Schools and Learning Environments*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-46297-9_14

designed to preserve segregation and disempowerment (of women, of people of color, of people of certain ethnic descent, of people in rural areas). Peruvians still carry on their shoulders the weight of two hundred years of a culture where students were trained to lower their heads and to silence their voice, rather than to participate in the making of our future as a society. In a country where eight out of ten fourth graders in rural areas cannot understand a simple text, for some students that possibility is as distant as the stars.

Enseña Perú is a non-profit organization created almost fourteen years ago to contribute to providing a great education. Our mission is to build a social movement of leaders empowered to transform education; we do that by finding committed and diverse individuals throughout our nation, developing and connecting them through leadership programs and then organizing them to innovate and scale innovation that will empower young people everywhere in our country.

We believe this approach can transform education. Our work is fundamentally a response to the institutional fragility that we have had since we became a republic, 200 years ago. Although in the last fifty years, we have had sixty-two ministers of education, in the last fifteen months alone we have had eight ministers of education! A few years ago the leaders of the 220 districts were appointed purely by political affiliation, not by merit. In the last five years, we have had seven presidents. Almost all of our presidents in this century are either in jail, on trial, on the run, or dead. As I write this chapter, we are again flooded in social conflict, as the streets are filled with the sounds of bullets, teargas, rocks, chants, interviews, road-blocks, police, protesters, hope, fear, despair, anxiety, anger, fire, and blood,¹ after yet another president tried to close the congress and is now processed for treason against the country. Peru is now governed by a new president who is not recognized by half of our people. Every day there are demands that she should resign. We have lost more than sixty lives, including some lives of young people. For some people in my country, these struggles represent a fight for stability; for others, it is the fight for justice.

¹According to the office of “Defense of the people” there were 219 social conflicts in Peru, most of them because of the political turmoil our country is going through: <https://www.defensoria.gob.pe/defensoria-del-pueblo-registro-219-conflictos-sociales-y-mas-de-mil-acciones-colectivas-de-protesta-durante-el-mes-de-enero-2023/>

It is in this context that our hope on top authorities and politicians (the formal positions of power) began having an expiration date. We believe that the future of education, and of our society, will be shaped outside of the public sector. We believe change will occur through the richness of talent in communities, which always existed, but have often been overlooked. Today, as I look around, I see entire regions where innovation is possible by uncovering a critical mass of existing leadership. Our communities have no shortage of leadership. The national gap is between our current and future capacity to unlock that leadership.

Through *Enseña Perú*, we have tried to narrow that gap. In our first seven years, we had leadership programs for adults: teachers, principals, and professionals from various fields. Through these programs we were able to find leaders of all walks of life that want to innovate as part of a movement to change education. The leaders came from across the political, religious, and socioeconomic spectrum. For example, a school principal who alongside her students leads an incredible project of community service for the elderly or a group of teachers who organize the whole community to empower kids to adopt healthy eating habits or the professional who helps students co-produce original documentaries about the challenges in their community. These were all inspiring individuals and groups.

However, it dawned on us: are we going to be successful as a social movement if we haven't explicitly made room for student leaders? After all, these are the very individuals who are experiencing so many inequities. It occurred to me—and this is how I explain it today—that it would be similar to a women's rights movement led by men. It makes no sense, right? That is why our last and most promising leadership program is for students from fourteen to seventeen years old, who have fallen in love with the purpose of transforming education and are willing to raise their voice and their actions on behalf of their schoolmates. A group of hundreds of Peruvian Malalas—if you will—is what we dream of.

May 27, 2022.

I am pacing inside my apartment in Lima at 2 p.m., having a conversation through my cellphone, taking a turn every three steps. "I have based my character on my mother," says Mileydy, my seventeen-year-old student from Ayacucho—a region in the Peruvian Andes—"but now I can't move forward with writing the story because I'm afraid that I will write something that will betray her," she adds. "This is part of the process," I say while raising my shoulder and tilting my head. "Why don't we go back to your original purpose? You decided that your project would be to write

and publish five stories that would mobilize people to think differently about education, right?” I say walking toward my couch. “Yes. Maybe I could try to find my characters by drawing them?” she says not without a bit of hesitation. I stop pacing. “You know who did that as part of her writing process? Remember in February when we were learning about the skill of inspiring others through creative writing? Margaret Atwood sometimes hand-drew her characters in different situations, to get to know them. Remember, she said that writing is like going into the darkness, finding something, and bringing it into the light,” I say with enthusiasm. “Yeah, I can do that. That sounds good,” she says. “Awesome,” I say, still standing. “How about if we talk next Friday at the same time? I say. “Good,” says Mileydy, “thank you, professor.”

I met Mileydy last year, thanks to the universe. She came to a seven-week virtual module where we brought together students between fourteen to seventeen years old to grow as change-makers for Peru. After finishing the module, all students received an invitation to apply to take the next step, which was to apply to a one-year student leadership program.

In December 2021, I received her application. “My family told me that there are some students that like education and some that don’t, but I know there is more than that,” she wrote. “I feel I am close enough to the classroom to see the many burdens that students carry. I had a friend who had to help at home, take care of his cattle, and also study. He was labeled as a bad student because he did not get good grades in math and literacy. There was a lot of criticism but little help, and he ultimately left school. I tried to help by giving speeches and stuff, but I don’t think I had enough strength to help people think differently and make changes. I haven’t given up.” Mileydy was accepted into our program.

The leadership program consists of two phases over the period of one year ranging from January to December. Phase one is called the Summer Residence (January and February), in which students plan powerful projects to change education in their communities while learning twenty-first-century skills that are valuable for them as change-makers. Phase two occurs throughout the rest of the year (March to December); during this time students get to challenge themselves to lead changes in education through their projects and learn from their own personal experience.

On January 14, 2022, Mileydy started the Summer Residence. During this six-week-long virtual space, she met hundreds of participants from all

of our leadership programs.² From March until December, approximately eight million Peruvian students were expected to go back to classrooms after a two-year school shutdown. The leaders in our programs intended to positively impact the lives of some of these young people.

The Summer Residence consists of two components for our student leaders. The first one is a curriculum of learning experiences, organized in four-session or two-session modules with a weekly group reflection of the cohort of student leaders. This residence is much more than a series of modules. In our experience, the opening residence is an act of empathy and love.

The strength of my purpose is like the strength of an oak tree. I am grateful to say that after fourteen years of work, there is nothing and no one that could suppress my purpose in life. I will keep working tirelessly for kids around the planet in my next thirty years of life. But my kids are still finding themselves, as change agents, and as teenagers. We are in different places of our citizen, personal and biological lives. And that requires careful attention and esteem. That is how we run our residence (and the whole year, for that matter).

Here is a progression of what they learned during the first five weeks, in an environment full of love, community, empathy, and autonomy:

- Week one:
 - Leading competency-based education
 - Understanding educational inequity
- Week two:
 - Inspiring others through creative writing
 - Creating safe learning spaces
- Week three:
 - Managing personal wellbeing
 - Genuine communication

²Enseña Perú, a non-profit founded in 2009, offers leadership programs for educational leaders of all ages, walks of life, and sectors. It has the mission of building a national movement of leadership that fights for a transcendent education.

- Curiosity and research
- Building the curriculum of our dreams

- Week four:
 - Ethical decision making
 - Facilitating the session of our dreams

- Week five:
 - Creating my own growth plans
 - Introduction to adaptive leadership
 - Educational innovation: design-driven methods

For every learning experience, each student leader created a small product of their own choice and inspiration to share with his or her peers. Students had the freedom to choose the format in which they shared. Some used text, some used the online design tool Canva, some used spoken word, and others used live materials, such as physical art drawings or objects they manufactured on their own. My students and I agreed on a couple of rules. The first one was “No grades, no rankings, just growth.” The second one was that positive feedback is called giving a star, while a comment for improvement is called sharing a wish. Usually during each presentation, our students filled the Zoom screen with reactions of hearts and stars while listening, to show appreciation and encouragement to their peers. We closed every session by asking ourselves, “How are we ending this session?”

For Mileydy, the creative writing learning experience was especially impactful. We discussed how words are something to take care of and how they are powerful leadership tools to help both youth and adults understand the unspoken realities of children in education. Through each session and each activity—modeled after writing workshops at Harvard University—all of the eighteen students in the module were in awe of their own creative abilities. They chose, word for word, how to render different scenes related to education that made obscure places come to life. Many of them said, “I didn’t know I had a writer in me.”

On Friday, January 28, the final session of creative writing arrived. Mileydy, who always kept her camera off, said in her soft voice: “I would like to say something before I start. What impacted me from the first

session was the quote from Gabriel García Márquez—the Colombian writer—who said, “when I want to write something it is because it deserves to be told. Moreover, it is a story that I would like to read.” Then, while letting out a gentle laugh, she said, “I’m a little nervous.” Then she read to us her piece. A short story called “Kaori: even kids face and grow through pain.” During those eight minutes, not a star, nor a clap, nor a heart appeared on any screen. I can only assume that, just like me, the other student leaders were also holding their breath. The session ended, and an avalanche of stars and well-wishing took over the screen. The story written by Mileydy will stay with me for the rest of my life.

In these five weeks of learning experiences, as with Mileydy, I witnessed how each student flourished with freedom, equity, and community. They chose freely from this initial array of tools they had accessed. Anglley, from Ancash, was a masterful facilitator and in a fifty-minute session was able to convince eighty adults to listen to their students’ voices to change education. Iris, from the Amazon, created a beautiful portrait of the scientist Marie Curie and masterfully mapped her areas of competence and habits of mind. Kerlly started researching about María Enrique, one of the first Peruvian women who had access to school. Almost always, our sessions ended with me leaving someone as the host of the call because they wanted to continue to share within a safe environment.

The other part of the Summer Residence was the portfolio, which extends through the whole year. Starting in January, student leaders were asked to think of a group of impactful projects in education they would like to develop during the year. We shared with them that planning and implementing these projects was the core of their experience from March until December and that four times a year (February, June, August, and November) they would create an inspiring presentation about the growth of their leadership for education.³ We also shared that every decision about their projects—including the why, what, how, who, with whom, or even changing a project itself—would be their own decision as long as their passion was still alive. To support them through this journey, they had access to one-to-one mentorship meetings with me whenever they wished⁴ to evolve their planning and implementation; connections with national

³ Students choose the format of presentation and their specific date. Flexibility is applied when students have aggravating circumstances that prevent them from presenting.

⁴ All of my students have access to my calendar through Calendly, and they choose when to have a meeting and for how long (from fifteen minutes to an hour).

and international educational leaders in whom they sought additional advice about their projects and leadership journey; and twice-a-month sessions where they would gather with their cohort to talk about the challenges of exercising leadership in education. During these meetings we talked about courage, happiness, leading with dignity, and other topics all centered on leadership.⁵

Addison, a sixteen-year-old from Junín, provides a good example of how this system works. During our first mentorship meeting of the year, in January, I said enthusiastically, “Hey, Addison! How are you doing?” She quickly opened her microphone and said, “Good, Franco,” and then promptly muted the microphone. I could only see the screen with her middle name, Yadhira. After a few minutes of warm-up, I asked, “So, have you given any thought to the projects you want to implement for your portfolio?” “I don’t know,” she said hesitantly. “Maybe you could give me some guidance?” she added and immediately muted her microphone. “Well, why don’t we start by this?” I said while laying back on my chair, “What really moves your heart when you look at education in your community? What is it that you would like to change?” This time the microphone did not unmute as fast. “Well, there is a lot of cutting,” she said. “What do you mean?” I said. “I have some of my peers who *do cutting*,” she said while I realized that she was referring to students who engaged in self-harm. “I wish every student in my region had access to emotional support.” It was the birth of one of the projects of her portfolio. In this program, our students are in command of their learning experience. The curriculum is the collection of their individual and collective purposes for common good and manifests as their projects to upend education as we know it today. These projects are disruptive for many adults, first of all because they are led by students themselves (in contexts where everybody is used to having adult-led innovation), and second because they are ideas that try to remake how learning happens. That implies that we as adults must be prepared to be partners on their journey to try to make education better with their own hands. Sometimes this implies lending a pair of helping hands, sometimes it implies letting go and allowing them to lead.

⁵All sessions are adapted for zoom but also for Whatsapp to make it accessible for student leaders who live in rural areas and do not have strong access to the internet. Students can advance in the sessions at their own pace, but they do have to reflect on the material of at least seventy-five percent of the fourteen leadership sessions from May to November.

Our program is adaptive, with flexible structures. We want our leaders to have a transcendent life experience. We refuse to force students to adapt to our program structures, where the only thing that might transcend is the lack of empowerment. Here is an example.

The first area of flexibility our students access is about the “what, where, and why.” Each student selects their own original impact project, the population and place where it will take place, and why the project matters to them personally. We work at “intersections”: the intersection between environment and early childhood, the intersection between teenagers and cybersecurity; the intersection between student voice and data use. Any crosspoint gives birth to a project that will change lives here and now. They just have to comply with one requirement: that the project ignites the “fire” within each of them to give their best in service to a group of students. If they want to change one of their projects, we pivot rapidly and decisively to preserve the “fire within.”

The second area of flexibility is about the “who.” While we have one mentor for every twenty students, they have our entire network at their disposal. When they need to receive specific advice about their projects, or even if they are wondering about their future, we help them have transformational conversations (without us). You want to know about girls’ education? We’ll get you that meeting with a cool expert from Spain. You want to know what are your options to build an interactive story? We’ll get you that meeting with the experts. You want to write a book about education? We’ll get you a meeting with an editor. We can do that because our network at Enseña Perú spans sixty-one countries and more than sixty fields of expertise. We want them to go out of the program with a more diverse and more consolidated network of relationships that will be allies for them in the future of their efforts. We generate the link; they decide when and how to meet.

The third area of flexibility is about the “how and when.” The curriculum of the twenty-first-century skills can be delivered in three ways: “live” in modules, asynchronously through Whatsapp, or in conversation with the mentor (phone or videoconference). The objective is for them to access and use the skills and do so in a manner that is empathic with their life situation. We have students in rural areas with low access to the internet, with many family responsibilities, in the midst of applying for that valuable scholarship, and this flexibility removes barriers to flourish in the program. On the other hand, they each decide autonomously when to apply and exercise the skills, and the projects provide perfect and

personalized opportunities for that choice. Finally, their portfolio presentation dates are decided by them, so they can choose a time when they are emotionally and cognitively ready to present and do so to the best of their abilities. Again, it is not about our times, it's about theirs.

Our mentors are DJs of skills, Bridges of people. Their words echo as a gentle breeze that takes care of emotions. And their energy is the seed that mother bird plants inside her hatchlings, to help them take those first leaps.

It is June 29, 2022. Their first portfolio presentation, and they each share with all their peers how they grew during their leadership toward education.

It is Addison's turn to present. Her camera is turned on. Through the screen, she shows a presentation colored in pink, and portrays landscapes with cartoon bunnies and bears, and with her name displayed in kindergarten playing blocks. At sixteen years old, one of her projects was changing her school's use of data to improve instruction and classroom climate for everyone. She wanted to lead the creation of a student-led system that would gather data directly from them. Next she analyzed the data and then discussed the findings with the teachers and her principal about the kinds of improvements that could be implemented in the classroom. She took a commonly used teacher tool for classroom management and gave it a different use: "This is my second project. What you see in front of you is the image of a traffic light, a device typically used on us students to evaluate our behavior during class. You get a green light if you are behaving well. I thought, *what if we, the students, used the traffic light to evaluate our own teachers and make improvements? What if my whole school had a system for improvement?* I talked to my principal and to other students, applied the skills from our program, and now we have a system in my school where students tell me weekly how much they loved the class—green if they really loved it, yellow if they liked it so-so, and red if they did not like it. My role as a student leader is to gather the data, discuss it with teachers and the principal and then reach agreements on how to improve for everyone. Through this system, we found out from students that they were afraid to speak their minds during lessons and were also afraid to embrace their mistakes as opportunities to learn. So, for the first time in my school, me, a sixteen-year-old student, was asked to conduct a workshop for the forty-three teachers of my school to help them provide a better experience for students. Here is a picture of me training all the teachers of my school! " Avalanches of hearts and stars.

Up next is Mileydy, also with her camera turned on. “Things didn’t go as expected. I did not write a great story. I wanted to write to change peoples’ minds about what students really live through narrations that generated awareness in the readers about the lives of teenagers. I worked hard in the hopes of studying animation, but instead, I was accepted to study hotel business administration. But I remembered the session about leadership and courage and decided to act courageously and turn to my origins. My mother has always supported me, but my father ... my father has always been ... has always had a temper at home. I decided to spend more time with him during these weeks, get to really know him, and try to value him. I never did that. I understand now that they both have contributed to how I face adversity and embrace education. I understood where he came from, the why of his virtues and his shortcomings. I wish more students could go through this process of self-knowledge that made me grow as a leader. I remembered the quote from the lady, I don’t remember her name, in the learning experience of creative writing, who said that part of this journey is going to dark places and bringing them out into the light. I think I have done that in these weeks. To pay back this learning, I decided that this July I will become a student guide and advise eight teenagers through their journey of self-discovery in the virtual sessions that I lived, less than a year ago.” Avalanches of hearts and stars.

It is Sunday, July 10. The last day of the second portfolio presentations. I open Zoom, and Mileydy comes in first, with her camera turned on this time, and Camila, another student leader joins in. I asked them both, “So how was your first session as a student guide?” Mileydy doesn’t say anything. She puts a heart on the screen and opens her arms wide while smiling as if embracing the universe.

With each passing month, I grow in my belief that a truly democratic education is within reach of humanity in the next two to three decades. But there are some ingredients that have to fit into the design of educational programs around the world. First and foremost, every adult involved in developing democratic education with teenagers has to unlearn all their previous notions about the role of students in education. No magic will happen unless adults are able to see each and every day a young person as a leader for today’s world, not—as people like to say—the future of our society. This is a profound shift in mindset that impacts all planning and implementation of education.

The second ingredient is that the curriculum has to be composed of the choices of students themselves, accompanied by relevant skills for them to

thrive, learn, and love the journey. What would happen if each student truly pursued growth in activities that gave them purpose? How much inspiration and motivation would we witness from each of them?

The third and last ingredient is that with this approach of learning, based on purpose and a mindset of student leadership, a whole country can almost “overnight” discover thousands of inspirational leaders for their nations. In these months, we have received over three thousand applications from teenagers across the twenty-four regions in Peru. There is not only enormous hunger on behalf of teenagers to do good for others, but I’ve come to believe that there is an excess of leadership in each of our classrooms that need not remain unseen.

Whenever I think about democracy, the history of nations like mine, and education, I recall a line from a beautiful poem by the activist and writer Maya Angelou, which says: “history despite its wrenching pain cannot be un-lived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.” This cannot be more true for education. There has been a pain in the hearts of students, especially teenagers, and I believe that with courage we can heal that pain and rekindle the love for learning—and life—in millions of students. I know we can.

In my experience, democratic education is based on the belief that in classrooms today, there are people capable of making decisions to positively impact others, to participate in society, to keep their head up, their words powerful, and their deeds purposeful. Those are our students; let’s honor their potential.

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