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JJCF First Report

The first few sentences of any report are always the most difficult to produce. Stress over where to begin and how to frame the content inevitably lead me to social media within a matter of minutes, and an hour later I still find a blank page before me. Today, the first few sentences—or, to be honest, words—of my report took as long as ever to type. This time, however, my procrastination was not at fault, but rather three high-pitched, raspy voices shouting through my window, “Maestra! Maestra!” This is my life as the lead youth English teacher in Brasilito, Costa Rica. I would not have it any other way.

My first month and a half in this small, coastal town in the Guanacaste region of Costa Rica have been packed with trials and errors in teaching, collaboration with the Brasilito School, involvement with my program and extracurricular activities with the children, and of course getting to know the community in informal settings and making friends. My time here to this point has been a whirlwind, but an overwhelmingly positive experience overall.

Trials and Errors in Teaching

Ironically, I have no formal training as a teacher, so being the lead youth English teacher has brought its fair share of challenges and has been a process of trial and error, with mixed success. Each age group brings with it its own challenges and joys.

My preschool class tends to be the most chaotic. Some days I leave the class feeling inspired and totally enamored with the children, while other days feel more like I just survived a tornado. In these classes, my objectives include teaching basic English vocabulary, fine and gross motor skills, recognition of colors and numbers in English and Spanish, and creative exploration. Though a few of my lessons have been flops, I am immensely proud that over the month and a half that I have been with the kids, those who regularly attend class have learned six emotions in English and are beginning to recognize body parts. I also created an interactive book of emotions for this group, which, after several weeks’ worth of work, I was ecstatic to find they enjoy.

The first and second grade class can be a bit chaotic, too. While I see the preschoolers four days a week, I only see the other age groups twice a week, so progress learning English is much slower. In this group, we not only work on the English vocabulary that children are learning in school, but also on basic literacy skills. Some children in this group still cannot read or write even their names, while others are more advanced. I try to plan activities that are appropriate for different levels of competency, which typically means giving a large amount of individual attention. I have experimented with this class with group games, which seem to be a hit and get the kids speaking English words, despite the difficulty in controlling behavior.

Attendance was quite low when I first began teaching the third and fourth grade group, and the fifth and sixth grade group’s attendance faltered when I began. I experimented and found success in combining the classes and discovered after the first

couple of weeks that this group loves competitive games. Attendance has risen, and we have begun a routine of completing an art project, a competitive game, and English games on the computers if time allows. My main objective with this group is simply to provide a supportive environment in which the children feel safe. English is certainly important for these children's futures given the tourist-based economy in Costa Rica. However, because of the level of poverty in this town and its consequences, including a high prevalence of drug, alcohol, and domestic abuse, the social wellbeing of these children comes first. I still have a long way to go in reaching out to these older children, but I have made progress.

Collaboration with Casa Brasilito

Abriendo Mentos' Brasilito site (Abriendo Mentos also operates in Potrero) is part of a larger organization called Casa Brasilito, which is comprised of three organizations aimed at supporting the Brasilito community. One of the organizations, CEPIA, addresses the social needs of community members. Abriendo Mentos works in close collaboration with a psychologist at CEPIA, who comes to Brasilito several days a week. The psychologist began coming to one class a month after a few instances of child abuse came to light in the community, so we work together in that capacity. I have also helped with and led the girls' empowerment class that the psychologist offers once a week. I hope to become more involved with the psychologist and CEPIA over the course of my time here.

Relationship with Brasilito School

The free English classes that Abriendo Mentos gives are after school and meant to supplement the English courses the public school—pre-K through sixth grade—offers. In order to effectively do that, I have continued the previous youth English teacher's tradition of going to the school once a week to help out with classes. In addition to leading and helping out with a few English classes, I spent much of the past month tutoring some of the kids for an English festival that the school held this past week. Through the process of preparing the children for the festival and serving as one of the judges for the spelling bee and speech sections of the festival, Casa Brasilito's relationship with the school has become much stronger. I hope to continue to foster and build that relationship now that the festival is over.

Miscellaneous Abriendo Mentos/Casa Brasilito and Community Events

The rest of my time has been filled with meetings, gatherings, and fundraisers for Abriendo Mentos and Casa Brasilito, along with other involvement in the community. We have hosted a movie night and started a girls' soccer team. My teacher aide gave a few ballet classes, which somehow led to teaching the kids the line dance to the "Cotton-Eyed-Joe," which somehow led to me practicing at least once a day with a group of kids who decided to perform the dance at the English festival. The town is so small that I run into a minimum of three students and several parents no matter where I go, so just walking to class feels like community involvement sometimes.

Conclusion

Though being the lead youth English teacher in Brasilito has brought its fair share of challenges, overall the experience has been unbelievably rewarding and simply enjoyable. I felt like a part of the community after an extremely short time because of the size of the town and my role in the community, and as I continue to foster relationships with members of the community and make friends, those feelings of comfort and belonging grow stronger day by day. When a quick trip to the grocery store—or even just sitting in my house attempting to write a report—entail shouts of, “Maestra!” and showers of hugs, the acclimation process is much smoother than I imagined moving to a new country would be.