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JJCF Second Report

I have now been the Lead Youth English Teacher for Abriendo Mentes (AM) in Brasilito for about three and a half months. When I step back, three and a half months does not sound like much time at all, but my days and weeks are so packed that I feel like I have held this position for much longer. My time is divided primarily between teaching responsibilities, extracurricular activities, and collaborative work with other organizations.

Teaching

Teaching, my primary responsibility, continues to be equally a joy and a challenge. The children inspire me daily, sparking my creativity to come up with new ways to challenge them to grow academically and socially. One way the children inspired me actually stemmed from their distractibility. I noticed that the children kept gravitating toward the crate that held the few books we had in the classroom (while they were supposed to be doing other activities). After a while, I decided that I should not fight their draw to the books, but rather encourage and enhance it. I gathered an enormous, rolled up mat, a few blankets that had been donated and no one had found a use for in the 90 degree Costa Rica weather, and boxes of donated books that were sitting in the AM office unused. I cleared a corner of the classroom, shooed out a squatter—a frog who had taken up residence in the air-conditioned classroom, and created a mini-library. I have added both free and directed reading time to classes, and the kids seem to love laying down in their little reading nook with the books.

I have taken on a few other projects, as well. A couple weeks ago, my AM team members in Brasilito and I collaborated on a nutrition week. They visited each of the classes for the week to talk about leading a healthy lifestyle, and I supplemented their lessons with follow-up health-related activities. In addition, I am in the process of beginning a pen pal program with a close friend in the US who teaches third grade. My third and fourth graders will write a letter to her students once a month and receive one in return. I hope to have this project off the ground by the end of October and that it will improve literacy skills and encourage cross-cultural interest and understanding.

Extracurricular Activities

In addition to my responsibilities as the youth English teacher, I am involved with numerous other programmatic activities that my organization puts on. I have accepted the role as co-coach for our fall-session swim team, for example. I also assist with soccer practices for the girls' soccer team. I have been a chaperone for a party for a group that receives tutoring in a neighboring town and for a surf tournament. I also help facilitate beach/town cleanups that we hold about once a month and assist with any other parties or activities we put on for the kids, like movie nights. I love getting involved with extracurricular activities because it gives me the opportunity to get to know children in

the town who do not attend English classes and to foster my relationships with those who do in a more informal, playful setting.

Collaborative Work

Abriendo Mentes is a constituent of an umbrella organization called Casa Brasilito, which includes AM, a school called La Paz, and another nonprofit called CEPIA that focuses on the social needs of women and families. I have been working in collaboration with both of our partner organizations a fair amount over the past several months. For instance, I work closely with a psychologist from CEPIA who is based in Brasilito. I identify problematic behaviors or observations in children to her so that she can further investigate concerning situations with the children. I also co-plan and co-lead prevention sessions with her. Our most recent sessions centered on respect in an attempt to prevent bullying and create a more positive classroom environment. In addition, the psychologist leads a girls' empowerment class once a week, which I help out with if she is unable to attend or if she needs extra assistance. Lastly with CEPIA, I have begun co-facilitating sexual education classes that CEPIA recently began giving once a week in the public school.

Our other partner organization, La Paz School, has a mentoring program in which ninth graders mentor children in Brasilito once a week for a month. I co-planned and implemented two mentor-training sessions for the high-school students at La Paz and will supervise the tutoring sessions in the following month.

Finally, I continue to work closely with the public school in Brasilito. In the last month, that relationship has centered on the English and arts festivals that some of the kids competed in a nearby city, Cartegena. I had previously helped tutor and train the children for the Brasilito English and Arts Festival, and some of our children qualified for the regional festivals, so I continued to tutor and train them over the last couple months. The kids walked away with a third place prize in the English speech contest, a second place prize in international dance, and boosted self-confidence and work ethics.

Conclusion

Between teaching, extracurricular activities, and collaborative work with other organizations, my days have been busy, and I am filled with warmth and satisfaction from the work we do. My relationships with the children and their parents continue to grow stronger the more time I spend with them, and the children continue to inspire me daily. My goals in the coming months are to further foster these relationships, to grow as a teacher, and to find new ways to inspire the kids academically and creatively.