Emotional Education for Children Exposed to Poverty and Living in Communities Vulnerable to Violence at the Mexico-United States Border
Mexico; College of the Atlantic (COA); Alejandra Morales Torres

Project Overview
This project will provide quality education about mental health directed to children who are exposed to poverty and live in communities vulnerable to collective violence at the Mexico-United States border, more specifically in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico. The project involves a summer course for children staying at the Senda De Vida Ministry—a support center and refuge for migrants, deported people, and homeless people. By the end of the course, the ministry will have a reading space with a collection of books about mental health topics for the children and their families to access anytime. By teaming up with two psychologists and one social worker, I will provide these children with knowledge about emotions, resilience, and coping skills to care for their mental health and foster well-being. I believe this can help these children achieve inner peace and be better prepared to face the environment that systemically puts them at a disadvantage and at a greater risk of mental health problems.

Peace Challenge and Project Inspiration
The World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Similarly, peace is not only the absence of war and calamity but is also a state of well-being in which people are physically, mentally, and socially thriving—they are not just surviving. The health and peace of individuals and communities are both greatly influenced by social determinants such as poverty. Growing research has shown that children living in poverty tend to be at least three times more likely to suffer from psychiatric conditions, including both externalizing disorders (ADHD or conduct disorder) and internalizing disorders (depression, anxiety or poor coping skills). A study done at the Mexico-United States border showed that children exposed to both poverty and collective violence—attributed to organized crime—had higher emotional and behavioral problem scores than those exposed to poverty alone. The children at the Senda de Vida Ministry, as refugees and/or migrants, have been and continue to be exposed to poverty and collective violence. Without proper education in managing emotions and developing positive coping skills, the consequences of these traumatic experiences can be severe and life-long; this is why I believe this project for peace will be life changing for the children and their communities.

I grew up at the Mexico-United States border in the city of Reynosa, which is a center of cartel territory disputes and one of the most dangerous cities with about 36 homicides per 100 thousand habitants. Although I was privileged to not be exposed to poverty growing up, I experienced anxiety and depression symptoms from an early age. After starting therapy at age 18—with psychologist Imelda Reyes, who I will collaborate with for this project—and learning more about emotions, resilience, and coping skills, I became inspired to be more knowledgeable about psychology and mental health. As an aspiring community educator, I have taken many online and college courses on psychology and education as part of my self-design major at College of the Atlantic (COA). I strongly believe that it is necessary to teach children—particularly those who have experienced trauma—about emotions, well-being, and resilience from an early age.

Project Breakdown and Timeline
I will be collaborating with psychologists Imelda Reyes Bosques and Milagros Rodríguez Armedáriz to create the content of the summer course and implement it for the children at the Senda de Vida Ministry. Social worker Abril Ofelia Bautista Moreno will also support us to implement the course. Reyes and Bautista have expertise working with children and migrants while Rodríguez has great experience in education and working with children exposed to violence. Their expertise and experience serving in Reynosa will greatly help me build the curriculum of the course as I use my knowledge and skills in education, universal design for learning, anti-racist pedagogy, and child development. At COA, I took courses on curriculum building, group management, sexual health, adolescent psychology, feminist therapy, and art therapy. I completed training for a domestic violence hotline and did my internship as a community sexuality educator at a public health clinic in Lerdo, Durango, Mexico. My education combined with my training and own experiences on
the subject matter of mental health prepares me to work on this project alongside experts. I believe that the content of the course needs to be delivered through a trauma-informed approach, which is why working alongside experts is of great importance to me. Although I have previously volunteered by myself in Casa Hogar MAMi—a children’s home in Reynosa—and taught Spanish orthography and reading comprehension to children exposed to poverty and abandonment, it is essential to have these professionals working with me during the implementation of this project. This way, if any topic of the course was to trigger a child’s trauma, they can get immediate help from a professional.

With Reyes and Rodríguez as mentors, I will start designing the structure, content, and activities of the course during the months of May and June. The complete course will have 6 lessons, starting in early July and ending in mid-August, one lesson each week. The specific content and topics are yet to be determined, but the focus will be on mental health, emotions, resilience, coping skills, and fostering well-being. By using universal design for learning, I will identify different entry points for the children to engage with the topic of each session while also trying to meet their varying needs or disabilities. The lessons and activities will be interactive, engaging, and age appropriate. Senda de Vida Ministry hosts about 400 to 500 children at any given time, so we will be focusing on teaching the children from ages 9 to 12—about 120 children. At this range of age, their cognitive abilities allow them to distinguish reality from fantasy and they are capable of ordering their ideas and thoughts; this is also the timeframe when puberty starts and emotions are running high. By the end of the course, children will be able to use different coping methods such as reading, physical activity, or the arts, which can redirect their emotions into positive action and decrease their chances of resorting to negative coping methods like substance abuse or self-harm.

At the end of June, I will travel to Monterrey, Nuevo Leon to browse and consult bookstores—as there is only one in Reynosa—to purchase a great variety of children’s and youth books on mental health. These books will become part of a collection of books about mental health that will belong to the ministry. Part of the funds of this project will be used in early July to furnish an area of the ministry to become a reading space for children. The reading space will have easily accessible bookshelves, comfortable seating, child-size tables and chairs, and a sofa for families to sit and read together. The children at Senda de Vida—who currently lack access to these kinds of resources—will have a dignified, welcoming space that can offer them relaxation and comfort, help them regulate their emotions through storytelling, and generate camaraderie when sharing their reading experience with other children and their families.

We will divide the children into four groups of 30 and emphasize small group work within each lesson to foster prosocial skills and attend to different needs, interests, and abilities. For each class, I will use project funds to supply the children with the materials needed for the activities—scissors, paper, markers, balloons, colors, etc.—any spare materials at the end of the class will be collected and saved for the next class or group. Any materials left at the end of the project will become part of the reading area for children to use and be creative at their own time.

Sustainability and Anticipated Impact

The migrant families tend to stay for at least three months and up to one year as part of the Senda de Vida community and have valued every psychological help they have obtained previously, so they are enthusiastic about the children learning about mental health during their stay at the ministry. The reading space will allow children and their families to learn more about mental health even long after the course ends. Reyes, Bustamante, Rodríguez, and I plan to stay in touch with the Senda de Vida Ministry to overlook the children’s reading space and help them find further resources.

Emotional education will give these children exposed to poverty and collective violence a chance to decrease their risk of developing further mental health problems and the ability to reach peace within their minds and hearts. If they have better tools to manage their emotions, cope with hard situations, and foster well-being, these children will be better prepared to contribute to social harmony and peace in their communities.