Emotional Education for Children Exposed to Poverty and Living in Communities Vulnerable to Violence at the Mexico-United States Border
Alejandra Morales Torres, Mexico, College of the Atlantic 2023, Li Po Chun United World College 2018

Summary
This project provided a summer course about mental health and emotional intelligence to 132 migrant children staying at the Senda De Vida Ministry at the Mexico-United States border in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico. We built and furnished a reading space, providing hundreds of children with access to children and youth books that tackle emotions, health, well-being, resilience, and values.

Project Description
Reynosa is a border city that has been greatly affected by collective violence attributed to organized crime, a city where thousands of migrant families arrive every year as one of the last stops in their journey to the United States. In the midst of the uncertainty with their migratory process, migrants become exposed to the collective violence that permeates the city. Throughout their journey, many migrant children go through harsh events and circumstances, such as leaving their pets and extended families behind or spending more than 30 hours in the back of a truck. Without proper psycho-emotional skills, these traumatic experiences can severely impact children throughout their lives, making it difficult for them to feel at peace in heart and soul. All children, particularly those who experience trauma, deserve to receive proper education in managing emotions, developing positive coping skills and building resilience and well-being. This Project for Peace aimed to tackle the lack of emotional education and provide children with the knowledge and skills to foster well being, resilience, and a good management of their emotions.

Senda de Vida Ministry, the host site for this project, is one of the centers that offers support and refuge to migrants, deported people, and homeless people in the city. One of the psychologists that was part of the project team already had an established relationship with the ministry administrators which allowed us to access the site and design the project based on the needs of the site’s population. Although different groups and organizations often visit the ministry to work with the families and children, emotional education for children was non-existent before this project. We think providing a course on emotional intelligence was the most effective way to provide the knowledge about emotions, coping skills, well-being, and resilience considering the advantages it had over one-on-one or group counseling in the context of the host site. While providing consistent counseling or therapy to each of the hundreds of children in the ministry would have been almost impossible to implement successfully, our approach to providing emotional education allowed us to immediately reach 132 migrant children with the course, and we expect that through the reading space this project will reach hundreds more children.

As we started the implementation of the project, we realized that migration processes were going faster than before, meaning that families would spend less time in the ministry than expected. Because of this constant rotation of migrants within the ministry, we designed and implemented the course as six lessons that could stand alone, meaning that the children didn’t need to have come to other sessions to get the most of the class. Despite this, we made sure that all lessons complemented each other and would still engage all the children who could attend many or all lessons. Out of the 132 children we taught, 112 children attended two or more lessons with only 19 attending five or all lessons. To keep track of attendance, we provided all children with individual name tags which also allowed us to address each child individually, increasing their engagement with the lesson and their comfort with our team.

The biggest ways that we had to adjust the project were regarding the reading space. The ministry administrator couldn’t provide us a space to furnish; instead, we were asked to build it. As we relied 100% on the Projects for Peace funds, we had to adapt our budget to consider construction expenses. Because of this, the misfortune of schedule conflicts that caused the social worker to drop out of the project became a blessing in disguise. One staff member less to pay, paired with a rigorous search to get the best deals for the stationery and learning materials, allowed us to decrease the course related
expenses from $3,265 to $2,068. After lots of negotiating with the ministry administration, we ended up partnering with Save The Children, an NGO that already had a space in the ministry. Their designated space was just a small terrace with a colored fence and lots of learning materials. They happily agreed to partner up with us as we suggested building the walls to close off the area in exchange for them to offer us a corner of the room for the books and other arts and crafts materials from this project. This partnership turned out for the better as this will ensure the sustainability of the reading space; there will be people looking over the space and taking care of the books and materials. The construction expenses took $3,476 out of our total budget while furnishing took $751. As we now did not have an entire room for the reading space but just a corner, we could only get a couple of foldable tables, bookshelves, storage lockers, and a few decorations, a much simpler space compared to what we had originally envisioned. I decided to prioritize having a good collection of books, so I did not shy away from the original budget for them, which ended up being $1,735. We also got a book embosser with the logo of this project to mark all the books.

I plan to occasionally volunteer with the team of Save The Children working at Senda de Vida to follow up on the use of the reading space and lead activities using the leftover material from this project. I look forward to continuing working with children from vulnerable communities in the future, particularly on topics of mental health and sexuality education; therefore, I am also looking for jobs with non-governmental organizations such as Save The Children, UNICEF, and Oxfam. To further my education in this area and better address this issue, I will be applying to do the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Programme in Resilience in Educational Contexts.

**Reflection**

In my proposal I defined peace as not only the absence of war and calamity, but also a state of well-being in which people are not just surviving, they are physically, mentally, and socially thriving. After implementing the project, this base definition remains the same but I would add to it that arguments and conflict can exist within the context of peace. To me, peace does not mean homogeneity of ideals, beliefs, perspectives, or opinions; rather, within the context of peace, dialogue is used to solve conflict, resulting in growth. Growth that is needed for humans to thrive.

For this project, we also considered peace to take place in the children's hearts and minds not only as the absence of distress (or a good management of it) but also as the fostering of well-being and positive emotions. We incorporated stories in each lesson to talk about feelings, allowing the children to relate and reflect on their own experiences and emotions. The children learned how to identify and manage their anger, fear, frustration, sadness and stress; they shared some of their inner conflicts through storytelling and artmaking. Some of the kids shared experiences about being inside of a box trailer for 36 hours, being separated from their dads who haven’t even had a chance to meet their newborn siblings, struggling with language barriers, and missing the pets and family they had to leave at their hometowns. Not only did we validate their feelings as we listened to their stories, we also equipped them with strategies to cope with those feelings in a healthy manner. After teaching them coping skills, such as meditation, scribbling, yoga, and painting, the children shared that they had learned how to feel calm and at peace. One of the girls that came to five of the sessions would keep bringing up meditation and yoga as skills she learned to keep herself calm even when her mom or brother would make her angry.

The children seemed to particularly enjoy the lessons about feelings like happiness and love as well as values like perseverance and respect for oneself and others. Together, we shared the things that made all of us happy, had a laughing competition, and painted community posters about love. At the end of each lesson, the children would excitedly ask us to come again as they really enjoyed the activities. Some children would also ask to borrow some of the story books to take a look at them while we cleaned up the area where the classes took place. As we introduced the reading space to the children, many of them seemed excited and eager to use the space once it was ready. Many shared their desire to read more and how happy they felt that they could have a chance to do that with the new space. Through the
reading area this project will continue to reach hundreds of migrant children every year, allowing them to use storytelling to learn more about their emotions and mental health and ways they can reach peace within their minds and hearts.

Because of a sudden increase in migrants, the ministry administrator couldn’t provide us a space to furnish the reading area, so we had to look for alternatives. One of them was to build an entire room from scratch; after looking at our budget we realized that we couldn’t afford that so we looked for other options. In the end, the Reynosa team of Save The Children agreed to share with us the space that they had been provided with at Senda de Vida. It was an open space with a tin roof, so we decided to build the walls around it. Throughout the construction process, there was conflict with the administrator as he would keep complaining to the construction workers. We tried to reach the ministry administrator several times, but he was never able to meet or talk with us until the last day of the construction when he did not allow our workers to finish their job. We finally met and discussed what the main issue was and it was because he had expected us to renovate the tin roof for something safer for the children.

During the discussion, I realized that there had been major miscommunication between our team, the ministry, Save The Children, and the construction workers. While we thought Save The Children had already received approval to use that roof safely and would chip in for the air conditioning, the ministry administrator thought that our team had agreed to renovate the roof. Meanwhile, Save The Children thought that we had agreed to put air conditioning and that it was clear they would eventually renovate the tin roof. After a few discussions with all the involved parties, we cleared up the miscommunication: our team would finish the walls and provide air conditioning, while Save The Children would renovate the tin roof to ensure the safety of everyone using the space. From this particular conflict, the resolution was simple as we all wanted what was best for the children and the space. I realized that much of the miscommunication was probably due to the messages passing through one or two middlemen before reaching me. From this particular experience, I would like to learn how to communicate more effectively with different parties without having to stop delegating some of these responsibilities to my team members.

Implementing this project challenged me in many ways that have changed the way I see and value life. Before this project, I had never fully acknowledged the privilege that I have had growing up middle class in a border city. From listening to the stories of these migrant children and learning about their dreams, I felt incredibly privileged for the life and education that I have received. Even though my own dream is not in the U.S., I got to fully appreciate the dreams of these children and their families and the life they hope to have on the other side of the border. As I lived on my own during the project, I got to learn what the cost of living is and how much one spends on basic necessities such as groceries and utilities. I also had to adjust to a decrease in the purchasing power of the U.S. dollar in Mexico, as our economy gained strength. This meant good news for my nation, but it also meant that our project had less money than when we originally budgeted for it. Some things were cheaper than what I expected, but the opposite was true as well, so I had to become very good at managing my expenses for the project to make sure that I could do the best with what we had. After this project, I have confirmed that doing community education is what I enjoy doing the most, so I will continue to look for opportunities to do this kind of work in the future.

Personal Statement
This project provided more than a hundred migrant children with quality education about emotions, resilience, and wellbeing as well as access to a reading space to hundreds more children. At the same time, this project provided me with the opportunity to acknowledge my privilege and use it to help create change where it is needed most. – Alejandra Morales Torres