"Breaking Barriers, Building Bridges: The Mobile Bilingual Library"
Jardin-Colombia / University of Oklahoma / Juan Andres Tobon O. (UWC Dilijan)
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With a mobile bilingual library of resources, students, teachers, and other community members from Jardin, Colombia, have started exploring foreign language acquisition as a way to foster improvement in education, create spaces to foster meaningful cultural exchanges among locals themselves and with tourists, and develop a competitive edge.

The Issues and the Strategies to Address Them

As a member of the community of Jardin, I have seen how it has transformed in the last couple of years, and especially, in the aftermath of the 2016 peace agreement in my country. All throughout my secondary education, I experienced two predominant issues in my town. The first one was the weakened foreign language acquisition curriculum in public schools and the second was the rise of the foreign centered tourism industry, for which the town was not ready, and for which is still adapting in many ways. I saw Projects for Peace as an opportunity to contribute to solving these issues through a systematic proposal involving my community, partner non-profit organizations, and myself. Additionally, given I am a member of Jardin’s community, I saw an opportunity to use my connections to build mechanisms to increase the chances of capacity building and sustainability in the long term.

Although I had planned to start developing my project early in June, there were some delays in the disbursement of the grant’s financial resources. As a consequence, while me and my partner non-profit organization (Smile Education Foundation-SEF) started working with the community to do a needs assessment, we had some action-implementation delays as we waited for the resources to be available. Although this process took longer than we expected, it also represented an opportunity to think about what specific actions we could develop to address the needs we identified with the community. Additionally, it gave us the time to seek other partnerships with institutions and organizations that could contribute to the project’s long-term sustainability. As we sought these partnerships, we started thinking how we could meet the community’s issues based and starting off from the mobile bilingual library of resources that we had brought as a starter for the project. By the end of July and with the community’s input, we develop a set of holistic community programs that encompassed the mobile library, which was named as “Chiva Bilingüe,” teachers trainings, story time hour in English, and programming for the project’s continuation in Jardin.

These programs were built after meeting with different focus groups such as high school students, teachers, parents, the local government, and representatives from the main economic sectors. All focus groups expressed a common interest in contributing to developing a holistic proposal that could address some of the issues we talked about. For instance, the school system unpreparedness to have a proper and uniform English curriculum. Focus groups were key in providing a diverse set of perspectives and ground information that might escape mine or my partners’ knowledge. It was in this process that the community decided to name the mobile library as “Chiva Bilingüe.” Chiva being a traditional transportation mode in the rural areas of Colombia.

Project Description and Reflections

Given the delay in financial resources, bringing a volunteer for most of the summer to support the project’s programming was no longer an option, so we started working with local talent and with our own resources. This turned out to be beneficial, as I had not previously thought what it would mean bringing an outsider to collaborate. Having local talent meant having someone who already knew the social dynamic in the region, how to navigate structures, and solutions to potential issues. When SEF professional volunteers and I came together to meet with the focus groups in June, one of the greatest concerns was either the dated or poor-quality formal training teachers received to instruct English lessons in their classrooms. Although in bigger schools English teachers have English degrees, in smaller rural schools, English has to be taught by teachers with degrees in other fields. Many of them disclosed their feelings of apprehension and unpreparedness to teach English. Starting off there, SEF and I decided that
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providing workshops for teachers to improve their language skills and methodologies was a good starting
point. By using SEF’s network, we identified a Colombian passionate and experienced ESL teacher who
offered to volunteer in this project by contributing her professional expertise. Starting the last week of July,
she has made two visits to town to carry out workshops and do sample English classes for teachers in
charge of the English curriculum. Additionally, she held a zoom session to further contribute to these
efforts and reach teachers who could not attend in-person workshops. Another zoom session is to be held
in mid-November and, hopefully, a new in-person visit will happen in January 2024. As of now, she has
expressed her interest in continuing to work with the community and consequently, SEF and our local
partners have been working to include her in the long-term sustainability of the project.

In June, SEF professional volunteers and I worked to curate a series of materials and books that could be
used in different classroom settings to address the needs of the student and the community in their
English acquisition journey. With the first batch of materials that we brought to fill the “Chiva Bilingüe”—
flash cards, language games, posters, short story books—, I carried out workshops in different schools
across town to get students interested and have teachers observe alternatives and strategies that they
could use in their classrooms. During my visits to approximately 6 schools, I went over basic vocabulary
with students by using flashcards, we used music, body movement, and we read short stories from books.
Students were always engaged and happy to learn in ways that differed from those that teachers
traditionally use. Throughout my visits, I had the opportunity to get to know my territory better, as most of
the schools I went to are in rural areas I had not previously been to. The challenges that teachers in
Jardin face every day are huge. Lack of resources and personnel like counselors, nurses, and
effective/visionary administrators, force teachers to be creative and find new ways to deliver the best
possible quality education to communities across town. That is when I realized that Projects for Peace
was really contributing to fostering peace in Jardin. By buying books and materials and providing spaces
to foster education, we were making a small contribution to start closing the existent gaps between public
education in the urban and rural areas, and between private and public education in Colombia. Urban
private schools have access to resources way out of reach for many rural public schools. Many rural
schools do not even have a proper library or a computer laboratory.

My thoughts crystalized even more when after leaving back for the US, I kept in contact with the group of
teachers who volunteered to steward the “Chiva Bilingüe.” They were not only sharing the responsibility
for the library, but they also became leaders to promote interdisciplinary working committees to develop
curricular responses to some of the issues we identified by using the Chiva’s resources as a starting
point. While this is still in the early stages of development, it is a dialogue space that I believe invaluable
in the peace building process. If we are able to provide the resources to increase the quality of education
that children receive, it will be easier for them to have the tools to improve their academic performance
and their chances of getting into higher education. Moreover, they will feel empowered to learn in diverse
ways and take the lead of their life projects.

In addition to the teachers workshops and the “Chiva Bilingüe,” “La hora del cuento (Story time hour in
English)” was also introduced based on the community’s feedback through the parent focus group on how
to best build a program for English language learning that engages parents and families. “La hora del
cuento” is a space where small children can come to read short stories and learn English. This is a space
that is open to children and their parents. Parents shared they were also scared of learning English and
that having a space where they could bond with their children, while also learning alongside them, would
be an awesome opportunity. Consequently, instead of starting a program from zero, we sought to build
relations with an after-school initiative (Cultivarte) with long term trajectory in town to introduce and
integrate “La hora del cuento” in their usual programming. That way we would have a local partner to help
us maintain and keep the project going for at least until Summer 2024. Although both SEF and I are
conscious that no one becomes bilingual in such a short time, we fully believe that providing these
interactive spaces will allow people to have new tools to encourage them to learn about the world, share
their own experiences as locals with visitors, and start developing a competitive edge in the tourism
sector and further positively impact Jardin.
Final Thoughts & The Future of the Project:

Throughout the development of the project, both SEF and I have tried to work with effective institutions within the community both in the public and private sectors. While we have found invaluable partners in the private sector to work in the long-term sustainability of the project, for instance, UNICA University, a specialized private university in English education teaching, we have also found many challenges when working with the public sector. Since we are working with the public schools in town, both SEF and I have been forced to balance individual and institutional interests, legal requirements, and the bureaucracy of the public sector. While it has not been easy, constant communication with the community and with SEF board members has been key to be able to make decisions about the courses of actions, always having on mind the transcendence of the project beyond individuals for the community’s good.

After several discussions, it was decided with SEF that our original plan for this project drastically changed. Especially after meeting with the community focus groups and getting to know what their concerns were. Therefore, it was decided that to better invest SEF’s donation to the project, SEF funds would be repurposed to build a solid and strategic plan that would expand Projects for Peace’s impact even further. SEF is working with UNICA University to develop a long-term sustainability initiative that will bring a resident teacher to live in Jardin to manage, alongside the community, the “Chiva Bilingüe.” Furthermore, the resident teacher will also provide training and formal education spaces to local teachers, students, and the community in order to take advantage of the resources in the “Chiva Bilingüe”. This will be financed with the $5,000 donation made by SEF. But to run this program effectively one year, the cost is much higher. Currently, fundraising efforts by the community and SEF are ongoing. As of 10/23/2024, SEF and the community have managed to raise an additional $8,530 that will go toward financing the long-term sustainability of the project. The program is expected to kick in December and fully function by January 2024.

Personal statement:

“Breaking barriers, building bridges” has been an eye-opening opportunity for me and a way to give back to my community. I hope to see the mobile bilingual library we provided become a reference point that reminds people the power education has to transform lives. Language acquisition is just one of the many ways that education provides people tools to open their eyes to a whole new world of experiences. Language and education pave the way to foster a dialogue that leads to exchanges of knowledge and intercultural understanding. I hope the mobile bilingual library will be a synonym of intellectual curiosity and a thirst to learn from other people and their experiences. Thus, contributing to the global peace building project.