Esperanza: Bridging Gaps in Education and Community
Dominican Republic
Amherst College
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Section I
Summary: The goals of Esperanza were divided into four interconnected categories: improving special needs education; providing the necessary resources to equip the educational facility; motivating students to continue their learning and hard work; and ultimately building a relationship between our students and the community. The initial intent of this global literacy project was to provide a safe and adequate environment to educate special needs students in Santo Domingo, while integrating them into the general public. As the project progressed, I wanted to add to these goals to include sustainability of the program and ability to replicate it.

Esperanza is an effort that started long before the summer of 2013. I began developing the idea for Esperanza during the fall of 2010 when a literacy organization on the Amherst College campus, Reader to Reader, offered students a chance to launch self-initiated literacy projects with its help. Its fund-raising efforts have been helping ever since. With their help I learned how to look for and write grants, how to ask for donations from individuals and how to execute the plans for an organization of my own. Over the past few years Reader to Reader has donated money and hundreds of books to Esperanza. Concretely, these resources allowed Esperanza to move into a safe and spacious facility and supported the first batch of educational supplies, reading material and curriculum support for our students. Because of these positive responses to my fund-raising, Esperanza was able to move from an idea to a possibility.

Though I had to attend to unexpected challenges throughout the summer, it was a great journey and the project ran relatively smoothly. The differences in the concept of time were really hard to adjust to in a professional setting. I have been used to the lifestyle in Dominican Republic because I have been immersed in it, but the challenges that come with switching to a professional mind-set was difficult because I suddenly had a problem with things I never did before. Because I wanted to succeed I had to meet deadlines and work in a timely fashion. I needed to complete projects with the students, meet with the parents and the community and build relationships in a way that would allow me to unite them. These are things that as an American I would be very accustomed to accomplishing easily, but I had to figure out ways to change the way I would do things with the ways those helping me wanted to do them. Meeting with parents didn’t mean sending out invitations with a date and time; it meant calling parents, chatting, seeing when everyone was free and then coming up with a date and time that seemed like the best for everyone. This is just one example of things that I learned to work with and ultimately helped me build those relationships that matter so much.

Another issue for me was that the nature of the work itself was challenging. Working with children is incredibly rewarding but it is also very difficult! I think managing the logistics of events and lessons with thirty children at a time was very hard, but it has helped me gain a set of unanticipated skills as well. Planning outings, thinking about safety, transportation, budgets, chaperones, educational relevance and other aspects were very useful challenges to face, overcome and learn from. Now I feel like I can confidently lead and supervise a team, motivate a group, delegate work, communicate and maintain discipline.

Among the difficulties were also things that worked magnificently well. For example, because I was used to working with much smaller budgets in previous years, the funds that the Davis Foundation provided Esperanza, allowed me to do a lot more for the organization than I was previously able to do. This meant that the students were able to benefit from experiences that were entirely new to them. They were able to go to the zoo when we learned about science, animals, and storytelling. The children talked about different habitats, used the animals as the focus of their art projects and were able to experience a part of their community they had not been to before. I also got to equip the facility with resources it didn’t have before, and provide materials to keep the facility sustainable for some time to come. The students had
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brand new books and textbooks, curriculum plans, school supplies, desks, art materials, backyard activities and a lot more!

Another thing that worked really well in this project was the connection I built with those on the ground, and in the community: teachers, parents, and those surrounding the Esperanza facility. My relationship with those involved with Esperanza became strong enough that I improved immensely on my ability to delegate work. Often times the difficulty in delegating work comes from my lack of trust that the work being executed won't be done, or will be done with less effort than I would have done myself. The persons involved in this project are fully invested and have proven their commitment and dedication to this project and their efforts were nothing less than exceptional throughout the entire summer. I think the way in which project leaders build relationships with community members is incredibly important for the success of a project.

The people who end up benefitting from projects like these are not just the students, but the leaders as well. This project reached out to forty students this summer through the efforts of three teachers, and three volunteer staff members including myself. A lot of the students still in the program have been involved since the start of Esperanza when it became a more formal project three years ago. Some of whom have been working with my aunt in her school years before I began to help her. Other students are members of the community with similar needs, as well as students that have been recruited by parents and staff members.

Esperanza is now fully implemented. This sounds very final but what I mean by this is that it is really ready to begin. When I had a vision for the future of this project three years ago I imagined it as it is today. It is ready to begin a long journey to help an underrepresented population of students and it is ready to grow and mold to the needs of these children. This project will reach out to more students as time passes, will complete the goals it has set out to accomplish and will be the start of what I hope to be many successful attempts at eradicating an unequal treatment of students with serious needs.

Section II

Everyone has his or her own definition of peace. We often think of peace as an eradication of violence, or a stop to all conflict but it encompasses a lot more. For me, and what I hoped to demonstrate through this Project for Peace, was that the harmony defined by peace comes through unison. With my project I hoped to bridge the gap that existed between people who have experienced both sides of marginalization. The unison of communities that belong to seemingly different worlds is my definition of peace.

Esperanza allowed for this unison by allowing collaboration between our underrepresented special-needs students and their advantaged peers. This will last a lifetime for those involved, and with the continuation of this project will fortunately spread to many more students and community members. It changed the way that I think about my involvement in the world, and the involvement of those who are more fortunate than others – often by nothing more than pure luck. I really thought a lot this summer about the ways in which I can give back; and I now know how the skills I have gained leading a project with as many moving parts as this one can be put toward efforts that I am equally passionate about. Furthermore, it has taught me the value of passing that knowledge on to others so that they can also further the development of projects that promote peace in whichever way they personally define it.

This project was supposed to be my way of offering a service to people who I think deserve more than they have because they got dealt an unlucky card in life. Esperanza ended up broadening my views on where I stand in our world, how even the smallest actions can foster unison, peace and lifetime connections.
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