Who: Melissa Aybar 2014
Where: Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

What: Esperanza: Bridging gaps in education and community

Esperanza is a special education literacy program for students with learning disabilities. The lack of special education programs and resources for this population of special needs children is a great cause for concern. In the Dominican Republic, there are no special needs classes or programs available. Approximately forty students will be able to benefit from resources that are currently nonexistent, such as appropriate books, sufficient learning materials and a proper facility that will function as an adequate and helpful learning environment. I aim to make this project sustainable and replicable across towns in Dominican Republic. I have been planning this project since my first year at Amherst College, and have worked with the students on multiple occasions. This project is in need of financial backing, but it has all of the commitment and dedication it needs from invested individuals like me.

When: Fall 2010-Present

The Need
The Dominican Republic’s education system is comprised of public schools, private schools, and religiously affiliated schools; none of these options offer special education. The Dominican Republic has no established special education programs, which leaves an estimated 1,750,000 children without the support they need to succeed in school. Often, schools find themselves with a shortage of teachers and a lack of facilities or funding to meet the demands of the population.

For a number of students, public school is barely affordable when the costs of books, uniforms, transportation, food, and many other things have to be covered by the family. The entire budget for public education in DR is a baffling 2.3%, so it is not hard to imagine why none of it is set-aside for children with learning disabilities. There is also little informative data to guide policymakers and nonprofits, and what little there is available is grossly outdated.

Education is the solution to many issues within countries of fewer resources. Our goal is to provide these students with the opportunity to reach a level in their education they could not otherwise while integrating them into activities they have been marginalized from, even though it means they will need to work a lot harder than their peers. These students are pushed along the system and graduate without the necessary skills to enter the world prepared to improve their socioeconomic status. The negligence of their academic needs also induces a reduced sense of hope, which is a great cause for many of the behavioral issues that accompany nearly all of these students.

Goal 1: Improve the education of special needs children

Esperanza aims to improve the education of special need children in three concrete ways: increasing the reading level of all students to decrease the gap between them and their peers, teaching children to write critically and think analytically through non-traditional methods, and increase the rate at which special needs students graduate from high school.

We will make this happen by providing hundreds of books and textbooks. We will have personalized education plans. These education plans will include having a record of each student in which volunteers, staff and parents can provide information about the child’s improvements or setbacks. We will be working on a “workbook” which students can use to practice what they have been working on outside of the facility as well. As usual, we will be recruiting more volunteers and staff members. This time we are going to create a teaching opportunity for those ready to enter the field. This includes graduating college students and volunteers – like Amherst College students. It also includes other current teachers, and parents willing to learn as well.

Goal 2: Provide resources and equipment to improve facilities
Esperanza will provide resources and equipment that improve the facility. This includes bringing another 350 books to the center. I was able to bring hundreds of books to Dominican Republic since the start of my project thanks to Reader to Reader. We will also replace old desks with newer safer desks; buy two computers and appropriate software. A colleague of my professor works with special needs students and says she has seen improved literacy and math skills in her students after all of the educational materials they started using on the computer. I would love to offer the students the same thing. They are also lacking other basic educational supplies and spaces that could help them increase their social and academic skills.

**Goal 3: Motivate students to work hard and continue their learning**

Esperanza will provide students role models and mentors that care about their education. All of those involved with Esperanza will be dedicated to advancing the education of these students. These students will be surrounded by individuals who demonstrate how much their education matters. Esperanza volunteers and staff members will have a small cohort of students that are specifically their mentees. Staff will need to interact with students outside of academics. This will provide students new and motivational relationships.

**Goal 4: Bridge the gap between special needs individuals and members outside of that community**

Esperanza will host a number of community-building activities throughout the year for participating students, parents, and their community members. For example, students showcase a talent and their new work, or parents meet to suggest improvements to Esperanza, as well as be each other’s support network. Events like these will start bridging the gap between all community members, with and without special needs.

**My Partner & My Expectations**

I have been working with Reader to Reader for two years. They have helped me with fundraising, grant writing, general support, donations, and invaluable education about how to work within, create, and build a non-profit. Reader to Reader is dedicated to bringing books, free of charge, to under-resourced schools and libraries across the United States, and now the world. Reader to Reader has projects in sixteen countries, including Myanmar, Nigeria, and Haiti. They have donated millions of books to support the efforts of thousands of schools, libraries, and after-school programs in and out of the United States including my own. They are the only source of new reading and teaching materials and their efforts are greatly appreciated by all of the students and teachers involved. Reader to Reader believes that every child deserves the resources and opportunity to learn and grow, and this project takes on this same belief with a very important group of children that has not been addressed before. This organization is delighted to bring its efforts to the Dominican Republic with Esperanza, the first attempt to provide special education support.

Working with Reader to Reader for the past two years, I have been able to develop my ideas and implement them in a way that has been well thought out and paced. I expect to encounter certain difficulties when I am on the ground because I have encountered them in the past. For example, I have faced administrative issues when planning events and have had to deal with a different conception of time, among other things. Yet, I have learned how to work with others that know the system much better than I do and to think well ahead without constraining my plans. By the end of the summer the students will have a fully equipped educational facility, will have been integrated into their community in various ways, and will be on track to gaining new skills and relationships. This facility will create a space for these students to learn the value of education while allowing others to see the value in them; it will promote a new perspective on education and unity, two factors that have for a long time been lacking in the lives of these children and in the communities of Santo Domingo.