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Volunteer Report

I. Introduction

400 years ago, the school system in Eastern Europe began to change with the birth of Pious institutions. Pious schools are characterized as a religious order of the Catholic church. In fact, the Order of the Pious Schools was the last religious order to be approved by the church in the 17th century. The pious school institutions were vowed to be built on the Piarist principles of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Saint Joseph Calasanz, the essential founder of these schools also believed an important fourth vow to Piarist belief would be that of education for the youth. Essentially, all the members of the Order of the Pious Schools would vow to dedicate themselves to the education of the young people.

Saint Joseph Calasanz had an important role in the introduction and maintenance of these institutions. The ideals he had are much the same today as they were 400 years ago. His goal with this religious order was to give free education to poor children. He successfully began breaking down barriers for education that once seemed to only be obtainable by families that were well-off. While he was not the only person to believe in the education of poor children, he was the first to adapt and advocate for preventative behavior, which many preceding educators followed. The belief in preventative behavior is as follows: "It is better to anticipate mischievous behavior than to punish it." In this way, he developed a milder form of punishment, keeping in mind that it was necessary in some circumstances. In hindsight, these ideals were quite progressive and created a solid model for the future of religious institutions in Eastern Europe and the greater world.

Colegio PP Escalapios Calasancio Hispalense has two main symbols that represent their day-to-day mission. The first is more representative of the government regulation laid out in LODE¹ in 1984 and is visible upon entrance to the school, it is as follows: "*La comunidad educativa y la asociación de padres de alumnos al Colegio Calasancio Hispalense con motivo de su primer centenario.*" LODE transformed the amount of parental involvement which has been previously almost nonexistent. This mission statement represents the drive of the school to involve and

¹ Ley Orgánica del Derecho a la Educación

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maintain a relationship with parents to increase all-encompassing involvement in education decisions. The second symbol is more exclusive to the school itself. It is printed on flags, posters, and billboards all around the school. It is the symbol of a man kneeling to a child with the words: “educar, anunciar, transformar”². As shown in the image, it is evident that this school is determined to build well-rounded students who feel competent and respected as individuals. They are encouraged to find themselves through the ideals that the school teaches on religious grounds. This is evident through their studies which vary from learning English to reading from the bible each day.



II. Expectations

Before I began tutoring at Colegio PP Escalapios Calasancio Hispalense, I judged what was to come based on what I had heard. My professors, host parents, and friends alike all warned me that the “Spanish way” was much slower, and this was no exception for professional life. I remained hopeful and sent an email introducing myself, as well as expressing my interest in volunteering during their English block. Patiently waiting for a response, I began anticipating what it would be mean to work with children who are five and six years old. Based on my experience with children, I knew that my standards would have to be relatively low to start. That way, no matter what happened, I was always presently surprised with any growth. With that in mind, I expected to have very implicit instructions about how to work with the children, what questions to ask, etcetera. I also imagined that I would have to speak to the children the same way that people speak to me in Spanish- slow, a lot of body movement, and often in ‘yes or no’ question form.

When I did receive an email, I was relieved to see that the teacher was emailing me in English and expected her English to be decent upon arriving to the school, but I was surprised to learn that she did not speak English that well, which made communication a bit harder. Especially because the children had a lower level of English than that. After some difficulty

² “Educate, Announce, Transform”

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finding the school at all, I ended up in the front office where they had little to no knowledge what I was doing there in the first place. I had to point out the sign-up sheet I saw laying on the desk and proceeded to show him where my name was and eventually I made it to my classroom. I hadn't expected the teachers to have more power than the administration but it seemed to me that they ran things at this school. It was a quite simple process, I showed up and went to my classroom week to week, never letting the office know I had arrived, besides the fact that they buzzed me in.

Walking into the classroom, I still hadn't given up on structure because in my mind, surely, my teacher *had* to have some idea of what I should be doing week to week. At first, I was convinced that I would have a list of tasks to complete each class or at-home preparation requirements. Neither were presented to me. I was introduced to the class and simply watched the teacher work with the children, occasionally piping in with corrections or to tell the children to listen. I left the school that first day wondering what value I had to the students, but remained hopeful that the following week would be different. When it wasn't, I realized I needed to take matters into my own hands if I wanted to have a real impact on the students. My expectations were met in this instance, as I was given full leeway to do whatever I wanted with the children for the rest of my volunteer experience.

III. Description

While it was slow going, I started conducting my own lessons about the 4th week of volunteering. Each class had a different focus, but I still wanted to include some repetition of what they had been learning before I got there. This meant that each day I would ask them a series of questions. To begin with, I would ask how the weather was that day. Often, they would reply with, "It's sunny," even if it was not in fact sunny. I would then go over basic classroom items which they seemed to grasp a bit better- rulers, scissors, pens, etc. Eventually we extended to answering in full sentences and adding color questions. For example, the first week they were simply saying, "It's a pencil," whereas now they are saying sentences like, "The pencil is blue." The constant repetition has helped because they are building on their knowledge and becoming more confident week to week. To finish up with review I would ask them their name as well as

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their age to get them to speak in full, complete sentences. This worked out well because it allowed the teacher enough time to set up the projector so I could begin my lesson.

Many of my lessons were conveniently outlined by the holidays in the United States. It was beneficial to the students to learn more about a holiday that isn't necessarily celebrated by them because it allows them to associate language and culture simultaneously. Most of my lessons were a sort of half lecture, half activity structure. One week in October I presented about Halloween and how it is celebrated in the United States. After the presentation, I had the students draw a picture of what they would want to dress up as if given the opportunity and had them share in English what they had just drawn. At least, that was the goal. It ended up being a sort of guessing game where I would show each student's picture and the students would have to guess what their classmate had just drawn. The improvisation in many cases made for a better learning opportunity because they helped show me their level of understanding and I adjusted for them. Another week we discussed Thanksgiving, which was particularly interesting because the teacher had been teaching them things that weren't necessarily staples of Thanksgiving in the US. It was fun to teach them how to make turkeys with their hand, as I had done when I was in elementary school. My favorite presentation, however, was about me and my family. I hadn't intended it to be, but they were far more engaged during this presentation than any other which made it much more fun to teach and interact with the students. Overall, my weekly tasks were to ensure that the students were learning as much as possible about the English language as well as the culture that surrounds it through lessons, activities, and songs.

Each week we ended the class with *The Goodbye Song* which was arguably what they looked forward to all day. It was so entertaining to watch them sing this song because it was the best interpretation of what English they did know. I would often leave the classroom with this song stuck in my head and by the end of my volunteer experience I could sing this song solely based on memory.

IV. Issues

The issues that surrounded this experience are meant to be taken worth a grain of salt because the pros substantially outweigh the cons of my time at Colegio PP Escalapios Calasancio Hispalense. The issues that I faced were also seemingly positive because it taught me a lot about

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how to handle children and challenge myself in ways I never expected to. To start, the class size made it hard to keep their students' attention. The number of students combined with their young age made it almost impossible to get through every student when asking questions. To resolve the issue, I often asked group questions that they could shout out or I called on the front half of the class then the back half of the class interchangeably.

There was also a teacher change halfway through my experience that through me for a loop. At first, I had a teacher that I could semi-communicate with and who had a better vision of how to control the students and assist me in my lessons. While she often interrupted my lessons, an issue all on its own, I found myself wishing she was there towards the end because suddenly, and without warning, I showed up to the school one week and there was a new teacher who spoke no English at all. It was kind of an oxymoron to have a teacher in an English class who spoke little to none, but I worked with it. I often had to plan extra because I needed to ensure that I could ask for whatever assistance I needed in Spanish. In the end, it helped me grow my understanding of the language.

The last problem that is important to point out was the slow start we often had. Whenever I entered the room it was filled with a five-minute (minimum) greeting of hugs, kisses, and compliments. I would never complain about this, because I looked forward to their kindness, but I would then have to wait for technology to get going and for the students to settle down so we often started class about ten minutes late. I never worked up the courage to ask the teacher to set up the projector, before I got there so this problem was never resolved even though it could have been. Unfortunately, this often meant that activities from a previous week were continued into the following week, pushing the preceding activity off. It was essentially a domino effect of unproductivity that led to me cutting out certain things at the end that the students would have thoroughly enjoyed.

V. Personal Enrichment

Volunteering at Escalapios will forever be one of my favorite memories. What I gained from this experience is incomparable to anything I've done while being abroad. There is truly nothing like helping people and I couldn't imagine a better way to do it than to be able to teach children a language they are interested in learning. Watching their faces light up because they remembered

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something new was fulfilling in itself; knowing I was behind that, however small, is unforgettable.

I have always had a love for children, they have this uncanny ability to change your whole day around without even knowing it. I could be having the worst day but walking into the classroom often took all those negative feelings away. These students are so kind hearted and fond of me, as I was of them. It was truly what I looked forward to every Tuesday. When I first started, I was worried that I wouldn't be able to capture their attention or earn their respect fast enough for them to see me as an authority figure- I was immensely surprised that I could. Week to week they proved to me that they looked up to me enough to want to show me all they were learning. It eventually turned into healthy competition between the students about who could answer in English first and everyone always wanted a turn to talk. It amazed me because I still struggle with having the desire to talk to people in Spanish for the fear of not being good enough so to watch them be fearless was inspiring.

I learned a lot about myself through this volunteer experience, too. For the last few months I have been playing with the idea of being a teacher and this opportunity to teach solidified that short-term goal for me. These students brought a joy to my life that I will never forget because it wasn't just that I was helping them, they were helping me as well. They taught me more than they will ever know. Every week they challenge me and through it all, I gained more patience than I ever imagined possible. I learned how to discipline in a way that demanded respect but wasn't intimidating. I furthered my own understanding of the Spanish language, which was an added bonus because I never expected that to be the case when I initially began. But ultimately, I discovered the pure joy that is helping people who want your help. It is one of the best feelings in this world to feel like an asset to someone and these kids made me feel that way without ever having to say it. It shows you just how much actions truly speak louder than words.

VI. Spain vs. USA

School systems in the United States are inherently different from each other because they are run by each individual state. Further, each school district has its own set of guiding principles, followed by the school's personal identity. That being said, there are a lot of discrepancies between schools in the States, which only means that comparing school systems in the US to

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another country would share even less in common. Volunteering at Escalapios in Seville, Spain proved that to be true.

In the United States, I have worked in a few primary education schools, so I have a proficient background with the school system there. One of the schools I volunteer in happens to be with the same grade and age as I have been with in Spain. As such, I have gotten a good grasp of the differences that exist both in the classroom and in the school in general. With the school as a whole, I noticed that there was a clear difference in security. In the States, while I didn't have to have a background check, there were far more precautionary steps taken to ensure that the school was as safe as possible. When I would arrive each week, I was required to buzz in at the door and tell them who I was, proceed to the front office to sign in, and obtain a badge that denoted me as a volunteer. In Spain, I don't think I would have even had to go to the front office that first day had it not been for my lack of direction to my respective classroom. Escalapios was far more relaxed than any school I've been to in the US. In the classroom, I noticed the biggest difference to be in the role the teacher took. In my classroom in the US, I was more of an assistant. I was given a set of tasks each week and a list of students that I needed to focus on. The teacher was very direct with what she wanted me to do and I abided by her guidelines. In Escalapios, however, the teacher initially told me to walk around and listen to the students, correcting them if I heard something wasn't right. After two weeks of feeling useless, I asked her if I could maybe do my own lesson. This turned into her taking a step back completely where I was having to plan the entire allotted class time without guidance. As my lessons rarely took the entire length of the class, it required extra planning at home so that there wouldn't be a lull in their time with me. It was very different adjusting to the lack of structure I received at Escalapios, but I took it in stride and used it to improve my personal skills.

Both classrooms did have some things in common, though. The first being the enormous class size. A rough estimate would be that both classes sit around 30 students, which is large to any standard. In the US, the school is comprised over lower income families which means that they don't have the resources to have smaller classes- I am not sure if this is the case with Escalapios. The other similarity they shared was the language barrier. While on extremely different levels, I had a bit of difficulty communicating with both classes. At Escalapios in Seville, it was difficult to communicate because their first language was Spanish and I was trying

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to teach them English. They had little grasp of the language as the practice they had was during this 45-minute block every day. In the US, some of my students spoke Spanish as a first language and had little grasp of English language as well. The difference here was that they were learning English every day just being at school so they could understand much more than my Spanish classroom. While these schools are on opposite sides of the ocean, it shows that school systems do have things in common no matter where they are.

VII. Sources

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Calasan_z

<http://www.calasanciohispalense.org/>