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Lumos Scholarship

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Final Report

Auliq Ice is known for the saying, “Things don’t always go as planned…” I find the quote in its entirety more fruitful. He goes on to saying, “But it’s when you make a plan out of the unplanned and make the best of the unlikely things in life.” Volunteering abroad inevitably calls for making plans out of the unplanned. I believe that deepening ones experience of being a human heightens the call to be a better humanitarian and social agent of change. At the root of social justice movements is the ability to empathize and create a collaborate space to learn and grow with one another. Of the many lessons I learned throughout my volunteer trip, this is one that will guide me throughout the rest of my life’s work. I traveled with a purpose – my unique purpose – and such has provided me a richer education than formal education alone.

For three months, I volunteered for Save the Children through Volunteering Solutions. I was stationed to work in an after school program at Colegio Ceip Gaspar Gil Polo, a primary school. I was assigned two classes. The first class consisted of 20 students that ranged between six to eight years-old. The second class consisted of 20 students ranging from three to five years-old. These children were from all over the world. Some were locals but majority came from other countries such as Pakistan, Nigeria, and Morocco. Majority spoke Spanish and a select few knew English. The program director and coordinator – Beatriz and Noelia – educated me on Spain’s financial trajectory since the 20th century to ensure that I understood the socio-economic issues affecting the children I worked with.

Beatriz and Noelia, as well as the teachers I worked closely with, were strongly committed to improving the lives of the displaced and underprivileged families in Valencia. During my tour of Valencia, the day after my arrival, Beatriz and Noelia explained that many of the families being assisted were greatly affected by the global economic crisis back in 2008. During the 1980-1990s, Spain's unemployment was around 20%. As the country's economy began to rise, unemployment dropped to single digits. Many families from Morocco, Pakistan, North Africa, and South India migrated to Spain for work. Unfortunately, when the global economic collapse of 2008 hit, Spain was hit drastically. The economic crisis resulted in foreign families unable to move back to their home countries due to lack of funds. Locally, Valencia was a city of brick and mortars. With the economic crisis came the fall of many small businesses. Despite its economic progress, Forbes (2019) states that 31.3% of minors in Spain (under the age of 18) are at risk for social exclusion immobilism. Further, of the 31.3% of minors at risk, 28.3% live in poverty (Forbes, 2019). The children I worked with are part of this percent. I was to be mindful of the children's socio-economic context and leave nothing up for assumptions.

On paper my basic duties were to tutor, organize learning activities, and assist the teachers with the children throughout the work day. In reality, I was called to provide a safe collaborative space for the children to, not only trust me, but to grow. Collectivism is a culture embedded in Spain. Where the U.S. is dominantly independent, with traces of collectivism, Valencia, Spain was dominantly collectivists with traces of independency. Collectivism, is also the desired culture for working with underprivileged children in the city of Valencia, Spain. As such, wellness and community building were main priorities for the teachers serving at Gaspar Gil Polo. Considering these children were part of the 28% of minors living in poverty in Spain, they needed to learn how to navigate their lives in a way that was empowering yet realistic.

Thus, Teachers worked collectively in creating a space where these children were given life lessons that may or may not have been taught to them at home. We worked to help students live through the life circumstances they've been given - how to work collectively while building autonomy for their own lives.

My emotional attachment to the school grew as I continued to adapt to their way of life. The teaching environment was much different than how I experienced it in the U.S. I'm not sure if it was a product of the collectivist culture, the fact that the teachers were emotionally attached to their work, or a combination of both. Regardless, I found it empowering and beautiful to watch teachers care for their students in a way that truly resembled how a caregiver or parents would take care of their own. It was more than just building a collaborative space for the students to trust and comfort to confide in them. Any time the teachers corrected improper behavior, it would remind me of how my mother would correct me rather than a teacher in school. The schools climate overwhelmingly embodied this motherly feel. Showing up was equally important to educating these kids. They needed to know that they could depend on us, and they did. Everyday students would have an hour of play-time outside before moving on to their after school classes. We taught math, reading, and language. In addition, I worked closely with Geraldine, the assistant teacher, in creating learning activities that promoted the importance of equality, managing emotions, and other life skills. After the last class, 30 minutes would be set aside to implement these activities. Consider my classes consisted of kids from 3 to 8 years old, the activities were not designed to be difficult. I enticed the children to act out emotions and behavior that were healthy, i.e. crying, empathizing, helping classmates. Other times I was called to share stories about my personal background. Interestingly, the teachers believed that my skin color and ethnic background would resonate with many of the students, and it did. A particular

student grew so attached to me that refused to let me go while balling her eyes out in my arms on my last day of work. I knew the moment would come when I dreaded living my children. However, I did not expect for the teachers to throw me a going away surprise - music and dancing with the children – which was not common for most volunteers. I did not feel that I deserved such recognition because I knew my time there was nothing compared to the teachers who are there daily. Nevertheless, I was grateful for those moments. I used that time to acknowledge the extraordinary work of the teachers at Gaspar Gil Polo.

Whenever, I reflect on my Lumos experience, I think of a line posted on the Lumos website, “Recipients explore, engage, and immerse themselves...to deepen their understanding of an issue, project, or idea that impassions them.” It is because of my background that I was impassioned to pursue this Lumos Scholarship. Personal stories that are part of social phenomena can be illustrated numerous of times but never truly understood or empathized until you’ve experienced it yourself, or have immersed yourself in such a setting. Looking back, my time in Valencia ensured me that I was on the right path in becoming mental health clinician.

Through a sociological lens, I was able to contextualize the socio-cultural and environmental factors that influenced personality, behavior, and mental health. Mental health and Wellness is the name of my graduate program at New York University. The emphasis on wellness is the reason I selected the program. The intersection of sociology and psychology deeply impassions me. I believe having the language to discuss and understand one’s own social and psychological context is a crucial part of learning to be with suffering and persevere, versus suffering internally and externally without hope of change. I am against creating hyper-realities and instilling false beliefs in children. They are more capable of learning to cope than given credit for. Children deserve the opportunity to be informed and make critical analysis of the

information given. They need guidance. They need to know that their physical and mental health are one in the same and they must understand the interconnections of working on both.

I understand that this was an experience that I could have had within the U.S. However, traveling has open my world much more. I believe I will remain a student for the rest of my life, whether or not I'm in school. Therefore, I'm more interested in the *what* and *why* aspect of my life's work. For example, what are my intentions and why? My intentions are to acquire endless sources of knowledge. I aspire to use my creativeness to help find solutions to combat mental health stigma, as well as promote mental health and wellness conversations and interventions. In addition, I am impassioned to help people move beyond their socio-economic circumstances and create a life that is healthy, sustaining, and unique to fit their personal needs. I believe the most difficult challenge in life is trying to maintain a persevering mindset while there are systems in place that leave many individuals feeling defeated. Such remains as the roots of my passion for becoming a therapist, social agent of change, and social psychologist.

References

Valdivia, Ana Garcia. (2019). The Alarming Child Poverty Risk in Spain Despite the Economic Recovery. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/anagarciavaldivia/2019/03/22/the-alarming-child-poverty-risk-in-spain-despite-the-economic-recovery/#4ea2bb95133b>