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Building an Understanding of 'Children at Risk' in Latin America

The six weeks I spent volunteering at Centro Abierto Santa Adriana, an open center for children in Santiago, Chile, played out much differently than I originally expected. I had already spent a semester abroad in Santiago, so I knew the area, the transportation system, and had a good group of friends. I had even volunteered at the same location I would be researching upon my return, so I did not have to worry about establishing a contact or figuring out each bit of background information. With all this in mind I was extremely excited to return to Chile and get right into the swing of things.

I arrived on a weekend so I caught up with friends, enjoyed some Chilean cuisine, and did some sightseeing. Then came the day to make the hour and a half commute to Santa Adriana. I was not very enthused about the crowded trains and four transfers, but at least I did not have to worry about being a lost *gringa* amidst the experienced Chilean commuters. When I finally arrived at the center, the director was out of the office and no one else really knew what to do with me. Because I had been there before, I knew my way around and just tried to throw myself into the chaos that is the center's playground. Some of the kids running by stopped to say 'Good afternoon' while others completely ignored me. I sort of just stood there for a while, not really knowing what to do or who to talk to.

Eventually it was time to go to the classroom to begin the afternoon session, so we all headed in and sat in a circle. My group's instructor had me introduce myself, and I was fairly nervous. Even though I had studied abroad in Chile and was accustomed to hearing the Chilean accent, I was definitely rusty when it came to speaking the language. It was certainly not

encouraging when my friends in Santiago laughed at how I had become “super gringa” all over again. With time I got used to speaking Spanish, but that first week was quite a challenge.

After some introductions and the opening conversation and prayer, it was time to work on homework. It was at this point of the day over the remaining weeks when my patience was tested again and again. The kids are used to doing almost whatever they want, and they do not have much experience with discipline or real enforcement of rules. If José started fighting with Matias over who got to use the eraser, any requests, commands or begging from my direction went in one ear and out the other. For the first two weeks I really struggled with not being taken seriously by the kids. Children from any country can be a handful, but when you do not have a complete grasp of the language and have to think for a while before you can shout out “Do not put him in a headlock!”, it is hard to be seen as an authority figure. I wanted to earn the respect of the children, but I found that difficult to accomplish since I was also there to spend time with them as a friend. Giving eight piggyback rides in a row is not the way to build up a tough reputation in the classroom.

Although a number of challenges left me exasperated at various points throughout my experience, the tiny victories I accomplished along the way really meant a lot and made my trip extremely rewarding. Over the course of the six weeks I spent volunteering, I ended up establishing a great relationship with the majority of the children. There was one boy who was a real bully to a little girl that was always being picked on (she can be somewhat of a troublemaker herself). One day I took him aside and told him how it made me sad to see him treat her that way, and I asked if he could please act like the young gentleman I know he is. I do not think I can put into words how great it felt when the following day he came up to the swing where I was standing with that little girl and said, “I am not going to be mean to her, right *tía*?” The fact that

he had listened to what I had told him and actually followed through with it made me overjoyed. Even though other boys continued to pick on her, the fact that I had made an impact on just one child was so rewarding after hours and hours of feeling useless as a *tía*.

Not only did I make connections with the children, but I became really close with the other *tías* as well. They told me again and again how helpful it was to have me there and how much they would miss me when I was gone. They are all amazing women that arrive each morning with a smile on their face and leave each evening completely exhausted, even though it is likely that there is not enough money in the budget to pay them. Seeing all of the hard work they put in with minimal to no monetary compensation was so inspiring and such a motivation. They all realize how important this organization is to their community and work incredibly hard to keep it running with what little funding they receive.

When I originally created my research proposal, I did not foresee just how attached I would become to the children and the *tías*. Even though not a day went by without some sort of chaos, the center, which serves as a sort family for its community, definitely made me feel at home. On my last day they threw me a going away party complete with singing, dancing, gifts, and some delicious *sopaipillas*. The children, with the help of the *tías*, had made a banner for me covered in their handprints, thanking me for sharing my time and myself. I was so touched by the effort they had put in and the little speeches they made praying for my safe flight home and hoping that one day I could return to visit.

Those six weeks in Santiago had a huge impact on me personally, as well as intellectually. My research opportunity has expanded my knowledge of Chilean culture and children at risk, and it has deepened my interest in Latin America and marginalized populations, especially those involving children. I am currently enrolled in a Directed Research course in

which I will carry out additional research that will complement the data I collected in the field so that I can produce a paper reflecting all that I have learned. I will present my findings in December at the annual American Anthropological Association (AAA) Conference in Philadelphia. I am extremely excited and honored that I will have the opportunity to share my research and my passion with others from my field. I also look forward to continued communication with Centro Abierto Santa Adriana in which we can discuss possibilities for improving their effectiveness and hopefully increasing their funding. Maybe one day I can return to Chile and see my *niños* all grown up, but until then I will always have their drawings on my wall and the memories in my heart.