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IE3 Final Report

On August 29th, 2005 I began an eight-month internship at Instituto S.P.A.C. in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. From the first day, I took steps to ensure that I would be an asset to the organization so that my internship would be beneficial to me both personally and professionally. I hoped to learn more about the Mexican culture and Spanish language as well as gain experience working with children who have Down syndrome and other language disorders in Spanish. Although I faced a few challenges, my internship exceeded my expectations. Not only did I gain valuable experience in my field of study and profoundly improve my Spanish, but also my experiences challenged my ideas about the Mexican Culture and taught me more than I could have ever expected.

On my first day of work, rather than being received with a warm welcome and introduced to the students, I was met with confusion and sent off to work with little explanation of my responsibilities. I arrived at the school at 7:00 am. I spent over an hour introducing myself in both Spanish and English to various people who had no knowledge of my arrival before I was finally introduced to Cuqui Leal, the director of the school. She quickly greeted and introduced me to the last two groups of students who were still in lines. It was explained to me that I would be working with the group of children who have Down syndrome (the Grupo Integrado), in the mornings and would be teaching small groups of children from the English classes after recess. I was then sent to the Special Education Classroom to meet the Grupo Integrado. Although I was disappointed by the lack of introduction and explanation and a little confused as to why nobody knew that I was going to be working there, I chalked it up to cultural differences and was eager to get started.

After recess the first day, I visited the English classes to test and time their reading skills. The children that were not reading at the appropriate age level were the students that I would be working with. These students were often new to the school or had underlying language disorders. In my group we played games, read stories, and discussed the basic rules and vocabulary of English, depending on the level of the group. However, this was more challenging than I had expected.

The English coordinator wanted me to do an intensive review of English basics in the first few weeks then attempt to catch them up to their grade. I have had little training and experience in teaching a foreign language. I found it difficult to speak only English with the children when I knew they didn't understand and I often spoke Spanish without realizing it. To complicate matters, I did not have my own classroom and my classes were held outside where there were many distractions and I was often unable hold class. Since the English coordinator also used me as a Substitute English teacher and as an office assistant there were several times when classes would be days or even weeks apart and the children would forget the material that we had covered. Another obstacle that we faced was the fact that the main English classes continued to advance while the children were out of the room with me for 30 min. I felt that they were missing the information that they were being tested and graded on. I attempted to work with the teachers so that I could cover the same information as in the classrooms, but received little assistance. Although I found useful information and made a lot of useful material for the school, I do not feel that my work with the English pullout groups was as successful as with the Grupo Integrado.

Although the English groups gave me a good challenge, once I was in the classroom with the Grupo Integrado, it became obvious to me that my biggest challenge in this internship was

going to be working with the Special Education Teacher. Her teaching and disciplinary methods were very different from mine and I felt uncomfortable in the classroom. As I worked in a corner of the small room with each one of the 12 students, attempting to collect data on the characteristics of their speech and Language, I struggled to get them to speak to me. In order to be of assistance, the teacher yelled and threatened them with no recess, which just made them cry or talk less. Her yelling and aggressive disciplinary techniques deflated the children and created an uncomfortable learning environment so I began to work with them outside. In doing so, I discovered that half of the children that I had thought to be non-verbal could actually speak quite well.

In order to help the children communicate more efficiently with the teacher and cut down on frustration in the classroom, I began investigating therapy and teaching techniques for children with Down Syndrome. I decided to make communication boards for each student as well as hang pictures of items that the students used daily in the classroom for the teacher to use. In order for my plan to work, I needed the cooperation of the parents and the teacher, which I did not receive. Therefore, my project was not as successful as I had hoped and the situation was worsening. I went to the coordinators and the directors to discuss my problem in the classroom armed with the information that I had found about teaching children with Down syndrome. I kept getting the same response, "In order to teach the behaviors the we want them to have, it is necessary to treat them that way." I continued to present my argument and suggest alternatives, but towards the end of the first semester, I could hardly stand to be in the classroom and spent more time working with the English groups. Fortunately, the teacher began taking a course, witnessed other teaching and disciplinary techniques that work, and took advantage of my

knowledge of Down syndrome to learn more about the disorder. She has changed her methods and the children have shown great improvement.

After Christmas break, we worked out a new plan and schedule for language therapy. Since the initial plan didn't work out as hoped, we decided that I would give language classes to the entire group every morning for about an hour and a half while the teacher planned activities for the rest of the day. This gave me the freedom to run the class, using my own techniques, without interference from the teacher. In these classes, in order to improve the intelligibility of their speech and language, I played games that used their reading and writing skills to help them associate words with objects, improve pronunciation, practice turn taking, and lengthen utterances. Their improvement has been extraordinary. I thoroughly enjoyed the extra responsibility, the experience, and the relationships that I was able to form with the students and their families.

One of my major goals of my internship was to experience the Mexican culture so it was important to me that I formed relationships with the families and teachers at the school. In doing so, I had the opportunity to participate in various plays, in sports activities, and in traditional celebrations. My most memorable experience was dancing in the celebration of the Mexican Revolution. My host mother was teaching a group of parents to dance traditional Mexican dances and invited me to join. My willingness to participate allowed me to get to know other families and opened the doors to many other memorable experiences. For example, I accompanied the Grupo Integrado to Guadalajara, played on a flag football team, volunteered at an orphanage, gave private English lessons, took a Neurolinguistic Programming course, and I went on many exciting outings in Vallarta. By getting involved and staying busy, I was quickly able to adjust to the culture and experienced very little culture shock.

Initially I was hesitant to choose Puerto Vallarta because of the tourism, but after my experience, I have no regrets and would do it again in an instant. It was beneficial to have the ability to go to the beach and meet other English speakers when I started to feel homesick. Between my internship and my travels through the country, I have come to love all of Mexico, the people, the language, and the culture and I will be sad to leave.

At the end of March 2006, although I'll continue to work at the school until mid May, my internship ended. My biggest challenge was adjusting to the different teaching and disciplinary methods used at the school. However, by adjusting to that culture and demonstrating to the Coordinators of the school that I was knowledgeable in my field and willing to learn and work in other areas, I quickly became an asset to the school; a major factor in the success of my internship. In time that I was there I faced several challenges, had many laughs, met new people, greatly improved my Spanish, experienced a different culture, and most importantly, I discovered more about my own cultural identity.

My advice to all interns is to remember that the success of your internship depends a lot on your attitude. In order to make it the best it can be, it is necessary to be positive, flexible, understanding, and patient. Do your best work and respect the culture of the organization, even if you don't agree. If you feel something needs changed evaluate why and then research your plan to make sure it is something that it is beneficial to and is congruent with the cultural beliefs of that organization. Even if you are fluent in the language or have lived in the country of your internship, expect cultural misunderstandings and miscommunications. In dealing with these, remember that most people don't intend to hurt or offend one another. It is ok to react and feel offended, but try to evaluate the situation. Don't let a misunderstanding ruin an incredible experience. The most important thing to understand is that we all come from different

backgrounds and different lifestyles and it can be difficult to completely understand where the other is coming from. The only way to arrive at that understanding is to immerse yourself in the culture, ask questions, get involved, and try new things. Communication and understanding is the key to a successful and enjoyable internship.