

PROJECT BOOKS FOR BELIZE: A LOOK INTO BELIZEAN EDUCATION

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As a future teacher, I am always looking for opportunities to further my knowledge and understanding of the world. The McMaster School for Advancing Humanity offered me a chance to expand my knowledge through real life experiences and service initiatives. My project goals were to (a) create an educational assessment designed to provide baseline data that would help shape future research and service initiatives, and (b) provide books to the school in San Carlos and other schools on the periphery of the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area, both during and after the trip.

Belize, a British colony from 1862 to 1981, continues to display remnants of its colonial past in its education system (Leslie, 2006). As during the colonial period, a unique partnership of church and state manages the school system, resulting in the state government's primary control over curriculum (Merrill, 1992). While "church organizations are responsible for the management and the maintenance of their schools and personnel matters," the state "establishes education objectives, provides funds to pay teachers' salaries, contributes half the costs of facilities and their maintenance, develops curricula and administrative standards, trains teachers and administers examinations" (Wright, 2006).

The compulsory primary education of Belize is equivalent to an eighth grade education in the United States (Wright, 2006). According to the National Human Development Advisory Committee of Belize, approximately 94% of children attend school and 66.3% of those end their academic careers with primary school. Only 20% of children in Belize attend secondary school (NHDAC). About 10.7% of young adults in Belize receive post-secondary education at two-year programs at various institutions, including Belize Teachers' College, Belize School of Nursing, and the Belize College of Agriculture, and roughly 3% attend some form of higher education (NHDAC). Primary education is not only compulsory but also free. Even so, the dropout rates are still high, especially in rural areas.

In their mission statement, the Belize Ministry of Education and Sports states, "School services will provide access to quality education through equitable distribution of resources and effective management of education services to ensure that the Belizean child fits into the society as a productive and actively participating citizen" (Ministry, 1999). The Ministry is continually working

toward fulfilling this goal and currently has the Ministry of Education Action Plan 2005-2010 in place in order to improve education for all. Teacher training and access to training appears to need the most improvement.

To be considered a fully trained teacher, an individual must graduate from high school, attain two years of training at Belize Teacher Training College (BTTC), and intern at a school for one year, after which a trained teachers' is granted. Teacher-in-training status is granted and after two years the individual is admitted to the final one-year course at BTTC. If this final year is completed, the teacher is then considered fully trained (Bennett, 2000).

Before traveling to Belize, I collected age- and content-appropriate books from book sales at the Paulding County Carnegie Library and the branch libraries of Antwerp and Payne. Additional donations were provided by Ann Bible, librarian from the Pilgrim Library at Defiance College, and St. John the Baptist Catholic Elementary School in Payne, Ohio. Due to the success of the collection efforts, not all the books could be taken to Belize, and upon review, I selected those that would best entertain as well as educate the students.

GROUND WORK

Our first stop was in San Carlos, where I met with Mr. Lopez, the principal at San Carlos Government School, Mr. Ruben Arrival, one of the three teachers, and the students. The students were extremely excited when we unpacked nearly sixty books, thirty boxes of crayons, and numerous coloring books, pencils, and erasers. In addition to our visit at San Carlos, Ivan Gillett was able to contact Armando Peralta, the principal at Saint Michael Roman Catholic Government School in San Felipe. Mr. Peralta agreed to meet and gave us a short tour of the school, including the computer lab, teachers' lounge, a classroom, and his office. I was able to interview both Mr. Lopez and Mr. Peralta about their curriculum, students, and needs.

The astounding difference in resources between the two schools highlighted the need for our continued connection to San Carlos. Though only a two-and-a-half hour drive apart, this short geographical distance meant the difference between having a computer lab (San Felipe) and having no electricity at all (San Carlos). The lack of equitable distribution of resources makes our continued connection to San Carlos even more necessary.

The majority of Belizean students do not pursue education beyond primary school because the opportunities are simply not available. The remote location of San Carlos and other small villages is the main reason for the low percentage of children attending school beyond primary education. The nearest high school to San Carlos is located in Orange Walk, 41 miles away.



These 41 miles consist of a series of dirt roads, often muddy and littered with potholes that take several hours to travel. It is nearly impossible for any child to travel this distance daily. Bussing is not an option because it is cost prohibitive (about \$7.00 U.S.) and the bus doesn't travel between these locations daily. The children who attend school are those that have relatives in Orange Walk with whom they can stay. Only four individuals from San Carlos have graduated from high school, two of whom currently attend college.

Another obstacle to education is the associated costs. Students' families have to purchase textbooks each year, but the quality of the books is low and the cost is high by Belizean standards--\$25 to \$50 U.S. per student per year--which also contributes to the high drop-out rate. The science textbooks shown to me while visiting San Carlos consisted of bound black and white copies, illustrated with drawn pictures rather than photographs.

Understanding the state of education and viewing the condition of standard educational resources helped to confirm the importance of my project. By providing an initial collection of books and conducting an initial needs assessment of our partners, I can see how our continued partnership with the schools in San Carlos will benefit the local children.

REFLECTION

The most important outcome from this project is the friendships that have been made with the teachers, students, and entire community of San Carlos. The contacts we made will be maintained and have a positive effect on the relations between Programme for Belize and the people on the periphery, ultimately strengthening conservation efforts there.

As I learned through real life experiences about the world around me, I gained much more from my experience in Belize than could ever be taken from a classroom. I am forever connected to the people I met and fell in love with in Belize. Not a day goes by without thinking of the children. They will forever be my inspiration in life, especially as an educator.

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