Institute for Central American Development Studies: San Jose, Costa Rica
Proposed Student Research: Northwestern University Community-Based Research, 2017

Project:
Education, Social Work and Violence in Urban Costa Rica

Key terms:
Primary schools, domestic violence, school violence, urban issues

ICADS general description

The Institute for Central American Development Studies (ICADS) has been working for 30 years in Central America to increase understanding of the region within a historical perspective; to develop a theoretical framework for the analysis of root causes, forms and dimensions of underdevelopment and injustice; to stimulate critical evaluation of current development strategies, analyzing their effects on women, children, the poor, and the environment; and to search for alternative methods, policies, and strategies.

The mission of ICADS is two-fold:

- To educate participants about Central America by teaching Spanish and by offering academic programs that utilize a theoretically critical perspective as well as hands-on experience to help students deepen insights into current social, political and economic realities and their effects on the environment and society, especially the poor and marginalized.
- To provide support to organizations and communities throughout the countries where we work; especially to groups that have demonstrated a commitment to learning and/or are dedicated to social justice work in areas such as education, healthcare, human rights, anti-hunger issues, and environmental issues.

ICADS regular programs include internship opportunities with community organizations, and field research to help students explore topics related to social and environmental well-being. A strong staff of people from both Central and North America accompany students as they learn about themselves and the world.

Community-Partner description, Country, City

15 de Setiembre Primary School

The community of 15 de Setiembre belongs to the district of Hatillo, twenty minutes south from San José City. As most other southern neighborhoods of San Jose, 15 de Setiembre faces social inequalities and has been historically stigmatized given its relatively lower level of socioeconomic development, its large presence of immigrants, as well as its higher levels of violence and drug use than in other parts of the city.
The primary school of the town also goes by the name of 15 de Setiembre; it is a public school and serves about 600 students from neighboring communities. The school counts with some resources that are not typical of Costa Rican public schools; these are a dental office and an interdisciplinary group of professionals – a counselor, a psychologist and a social worker - that attends the needs the children have beyond the academic aspect of the school. Nonetheless, being a public school in country with limited economic resources, the institution is underfunded, and this is an important barrier for the work it attempts to do.

Social issue description

Besides the lack of economic stability faced by the community, the children who attend the school must struggle with other social issues such as coming from single parent households, which are, most of the times, single moms with no stable income. At the same time, the young people of this zone struggle with lack of educational support and employment opportunities; therefore, they are prompt to become involved in illegal activities.

Being exposed to high levels of violence complicates the educational goals of the school and makes the children more vulnerable. Often, the students themselves start showing violent behaviors at the school, and this is worrisome for the school’s teachers and staff, and the families of the children. Nonetheless, violence may be becoming more common to the point that it gets normalized and, therefore, the perceptions of it and its causes become harder to determine.

Research project description

The main objective of the research is to create a diagnosis of the causes and manifestations of violence at 15 de Setiembre School through the perceptions of the students, teachers and parents.

Possible topics to explore are: the different forms of violence present in the children's environment and whether the kids, teachers and parents are able to identify them; differences between the ways violence is perceived and expressed among boys and girls; how the socioeconomic context affects the community in terms of access to opportunities and exclusion, and how this has incidence on the violence that all the different parties.

The researcher will work together with the guidance of members of the school and ICADS mentors to develop these and other specific sub-objectives.

Community Partner participation in the project

The staff of the school will be able to provide guidance and support to the research project. The school's social worker, Licenciado Carlos Fernández, will be the primary connection between the school, the community and the researcher. Carlos is a very active member within the institution and the community. He has a deep understanding of many of the obstacles the school has and of the lives of the children that that schools serves.

Depending on the final methodology developed for the project, the researcher will be able to interact with the school's teaching staff, the students and their families. Also, the social worker of the school will provide methodological support to the person carrying out the research.
Impact of this project on the community

Currently, the school is working to gain more knowledge about the ways the surrounding and prevalent violence is perceived and manifested within the school and in the community. Obtaining a holistic diagnosis of such perceptions and manifestations is a tool that the school needs in order to better attend the psychological and social needs of the students, and to work on preventing desertion and the educational success of the students.

Moreover, the school’s services go beyond the students since the social work it does also involves periodical visits to children’s families to discuss relevant issues. Having precise information about the situations behind the violent attitudes of the students is, thus, key to a successful communication and conjunct work with their families.

Research Mentor and mentorship structure

ICADS Research Mentors are Gabriel Vargas, Licenciatura in Sociology, and Kat Peters, M.Ed. with Master’s in Rural Development in Progress. The ICADS mentors will be the primary academic mentors during the project, and will help to develop objectives and provide feedback on the review of the literature. The ICADS mentors are based in San Jose and will be in contact with students via phone, email, and visits during the data collection phase of the project.

The partner organization mentorship will be provided mainly through the school’s social work department, which will facilitate the researcher’s access to information about the socioeconomic background to the population the school serves, as well as access to interaction with teachers, students and families.

Methodology

The research will use qualitative participatory methods that can be complemented with quantitative statistical analysis if the researcher and mentors think necessary. Possible research methods include:

- Workshops with students to learn about violence, how it is manifested and how to prevent it
- Focus groups with parents
- Focus groups with teachers
- Interviews with key informants
- Students life satisfaction surveys applied to the children of the school
- Visits to the community and houses where the students live

Student profile and skills, including language requirements

The student carrying out this type of research must be proactive and open-minded. He/she must have an interest in Latin American studies and culture.

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1 All of these are tentative and can be discussed and modified depending on the final objectives of the project
A background in Social Sciences is highly recommended, as well as knowledge in cultural studies, children/youth psychology, marginalized urban communities, and education.

Intermediate/advanced Spanish needed.

**Dates of Research Commitment**

June 18, 2017 - August 19, 2017