Project: Effects of transitioning from elementary to secondary school in Buenos Aires, Puntarenas
Key terms: Rural youth, youth-psychology, education

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

Colegio Técnico Profesional de Buenos Aires (Technical-Professional High School of Buenos Aires, CTPBA).

The Technical-Professional High School of Buenos Aires is located in the county of Buenos Aires in the southern region of the Puntarenas province of Costa Rica. This rather large public institution serves a population of about 800 students from seventh to twelfth grade. The goal of technical high schools in Costa Rica is to provide students with the necessary skills to increase their likelihood of finding employment once they finish their secondary education. To do so, students are required to go through six years of high school as opposed to five, which is the norm in Costa Rican academic schools. From tenth to twelfth grade, students take classes and do an internship in their field of specialization as a requirement to obtain their diploma.

Buenos Aires is a small city in southern Costa Rica; its main economic activity is pineapple production, and the main employer of the community is PINDECO, a subsidiary of Del Monte. Other sources of employment are scarce in the region; therefore, students often see technical education as a means of finding employment in other areas of the country.

Social Issue Description

It has been observed that the highest drop-out rates in the Costa Rican educational system occur in transitional stages; one of the most important ones being from sixth to seventh grade. Sixth grade is the last year of elementary school, and to get their diploma students must take standardized national exams to start high school in seventh grade. This is a significant change in students’ lives since they often have to change schools when they move from primary to secondary education, which implies a whole new social dynamic (new classmates, new teachers, more subjects, etc.). Additionally, they go from being the oldest students in their elementary schools to the youngest ones in the new institutions. Moreover, students are still transitioning from childhood into adolescence.

Although the CTPBA has a high retention rate, students who drop-out from school do so mostly from seventh to ninth grade; therefore, working to ensure a positive and healthy transition is a priority for the institution in order to prevent younger students from leaving the educational system.
Research Project Description

The objective of this research is to study the effects that the transition between elementary and high school has in the students of the Technical High School of Buenos Aires. Sub-objectives that can be explored are (but not limited to):

- Students’ perceived changes (teachers, settings, commuting)
- Students’ strategies to adapt to the transition
- The involvement of the families and the school’s personnel in accompanying students in the transition process
- The similarities/differences of the experience of female and male students
- Factors that are specific to this school/region as opposed to more urbanized/“developed” areas of the country
- The effects of bullying at the institutional level

Please note that each of these sub-objectives carries in itself a significant amount of work that may not be possible to complete in eight weeks; a CBR student may want to choose what he/she considers more feasible according to his/interests and the interest of the school.

Because a lot of the primary data for this project would be obtained through interactions with a vulnerable population such as underage high school students, Northwestern IRB approval may be needed for this project.

Costa Rican ethical research guidelines require parental consent for minors under the age 12†. For underage teenagers, consent from their parents may be needed as well depending on the sensitivity of the subjects discussed on interviews, surveys, or focus groups.

Community Partner Participation

The staff of the school will be able to provide guidance and support to the research project. The high school’s internship coordinator, MSc. Melissa Polonio, will be the primary connection between the students, the community, and the

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† This particular sub-objective is of great interest to the school as it impacts no only students’ education but many other facets of their lives. Given its complexity, a student may consider developing a full research project on this subject.

† The referenced guidelines are those of the University of Costa Rica, which is the most important academic and research institution of the country; for more information see: http://www.cu.ucr.ac.cr/normativ/etico_cientifico.pdf
researcher. Melissa herself is a graduate of the school and native of the community who has also worked with ICADS students before in different projects. If included in the objectives of the research, the researcher can also interact with other staff from the school and the families of the students.

**Impact of the Project on the Community**

By having a clearer understanding of how students navigate their first years in high school, this project aims to improve the institution’s retention rate as well as the experience of the students. The research has the potential to provide the institution with empirical material that can guide future counseling, tutoring or stimulation programs that encourage students to continue and finish their secondary education. By doing so, students will perform successfully during their first years, increasing their chances of obtaining their technical degree and better employment options or higher education. Eventually this could contribute to the overall objectives of the Buenos Aires community.

**Research Mentor and Mentorship Structure**

ICADS Research Mentors are Gabriel Vargas (Lic. in Sociology) and Matthew Dearstyne (ICADS Assistant Director). 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 community mentors, in this case Melissa Polonio and other members of the high school, will provide on-the-ground support during the data collection phase by facilitating, logistical and cultural orientation during the time in the field. The school staff will also help in obtaining students’ informed consent and parental consent when needed.

**Methodology**

The researcher will define the most appropriate methods with help from both ICADS mentors and the CTPBA’s collaborators. We suggest qualitative interviews as the main method of data recollection. Different interview schedules can be elaborated for different demographic groups (students, parents, teachers) which can then be coded into themes, analyzed, compared, and contrasted.
Given the school’s large student enrollment (more than 800 students), a complementary survey might be considered. This would give the researcher the opportunity to reach out to a larger portion of the student body (potentially a census) and perform statistical description and analysis in certain areas.

ICADS’ own Field Program students have made short field research exercises in the past about CTPBA students’ life satisfaction. The raw data and objectives from these studies can be provided to the Northwestern researcher if needed and pertinent to this particular research.

The elaboration of research methods should take into account that underage people are a vulnerable population; therefore, CBR students without the proper training may refrain from discussing overly sensitive issues in their interaction with the high school students.

**Student Profile and Skills**

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, and a sensitivity toward youth, education, rural environments, and intercultural issues. A background in Social Sciences is highly recommended, as well as knowledge in cultural studies, education, children/youth psychology, and rural communities. Intermediate/advanced Spanish is needed.