

MORE THAN BOOKS AND SHELVES: FOSTERING A LITERACY-RICH ENVIRONMENT IN BELIZE

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Three goals guided my McMaster project in Belize. First, I wanted to set up a scholarship that would provide each student in San Carlos School with 50% of the money needed to purchase textbooks. Second, I wanted to create an informal school library, which included building bookshelves, providing books, and creating a system for the students to check out books. Finally, I wanted to begin a pen-pal program between the school in San Carlos and a school in northwestern Ohio with the intent to expose the students from both communities to the larger world. The overall goal of this project was to promote literacy development through a variety of means, ultimately giving all persons involved the tools and experiences needed to become active global citizens.

BACKGROUND/LITERATURE REVIEW

In December 2007, I researched the status of education in rural Belize and started a book collection for the school. Approximately 94% of children in Belize attend school, and of those children, 66.3% of them end their academic career with primary school, 20% continue with secondary school, 10.7% receive post-secondary education, and roughly 3% attend some form of higher education (NHDAC, 2002). It is not that these children are unqualified for or uninterested in higher education: opportunities for additional education are not available to the majority of the children in rural Belize.

Rural children are not only limited to primary education due to their isolation but also lack many necessary educational materials, including books. During a McMaster trip to San Carlos Government School in 2006, the teachers and principal expressed their concern that books are expensive and hard to obtain. I chose to focus part of my project on literacy development at the primary school level because I believe that every child deserves to receive the same educational opportunities, starting with access to the resources required for learning. Hopefully, the McMaster School for Advancing Humanity can continue to provide these schools and children with a selection of books.

Definitions of literacy fluctuate greatly depending upon the context and who is defining the term. In its most basic form, literacy is defined as "the ability to read and write" (Schnarr, 2004). The Belize Ministry of Education defines

literacy as “a human right that consists of the ability to express oneself and understand others in oral and written form, in order to cope with everyday situations and to participate meaningfully in society” (Ministry of Education, 2006).

Literacy in today’s global economy is necessary for success and, in some instances, survival. This is true especially for rapidly developing countries such as Belize. Currently, economic development in Belize is attributed to the booming tourist industry. For the people of Belize to take advantage of income opportunities provided by this industry, instead of allowing it to be run solely by outside investors, they must be functionally literate. Belize has a 76% literacy rate which is high for a developing country. However, the number is deceiving because it includes those individuals who read and write only on a very basic level. This number does not necessarily mean that there is a high level of comprehension or the ability to effectively articulate when writing. The functional literacy rate of Belize is approximately 40%, significantly less than the 76% literacy rate (Cornerstone Foundation, 1999). These figures imply that maybe 36% of the population in Belize can read and write at levels beyond that required to function in the society.

For students to acquire the skills of literacy, they must see reading and writing take place and have genuine experiences in their daily lives with literacy (e.g., writing letters). To ensure that students are exposed to and have practice with all the characteristics of literacy development, they must be immersed into a literacy-rich environment. According to the U. S. National Reading Panel, a literacy-rich environment “is a setting that stimulates students to participate in language and literacy activities in their daily lives thereby giving them the beginning understandings of the utility and function of oral and written language” (National Reading Panel, 2001). To support the literacy development of the students at San Carlos Government School in San Carlos, Belize, I proposed creating a literature-rich environment and beginning a pen-pal program. The informal library that was created included bookshelves, posters, carpet squares, a collection of a wide range of books, and a book log to allow students to borrow books. The pen-pal program will facilitate meaningful literacy development for all those involved while also fostering cultural awareness.

HOW AN UNDERSTANDING OF COMMUNITY NEED INFORMED THE RESEARCH DESIGN

When I was previously in Belize (December 2006), I was told by the teachers of San Carlos Government School that books were expensive and difficult to obtain. Textbooks were the responsibility of students’ families each school



year, costing roughly BZ\$100 or US\$50 per student. Most families in this small community had several children that attended the school, costing them a large percentage of their income. Not everyone in this community can afford the necessary textbooks, so their children either did not attend school or came without the resources required for learning.

In specific response to this expressed need, my intention was to develop a scholarship program in which 50% of every student's books would be paid for. The initial step needed was to investigate the specifics at the school. While at the school in San Carlos, I learned that this was no longer a need because the government had provided the necessary textbooks to all students in Belize in the past year. Upcoming Belize elections had prompted the government to act. While this is a positive development in the short term, my concern is that this will only be temporary, based as it is on a political strategy to gain votes. This could put those families in an even worse predicament because in the future they may not expect the expense or have time to save the money. This is something that will need to be monitored by future McMaster trips to Belize.

Last year I brought books to give to the school and discovered that they had only a few bookshelves, all of which were full and being used by the principal, Mr. Lopez, to shelve more than just books. I observed that the few

books and other literature in the classroom were stacked on spare desks in a disorderly fashion. They were in need of some shelves not only to hold books but, also, to help create a literature center, a place where the students can go to read.

In response to this need, I proposed to build bookshelves, create a library book log for allowing students to borrow books, and provide posters and carpet squares. The purpose of providing these materials was to create a literature-rich environment that supports and encourages student learning. These materials were collected and/or created in the United States and brought with the McMaster Scholars to Belize.

With each passing year, Belize McMaster Scholars, Fellows, and Associate Fellows have created more connections and partnerships with people on the ground. One partnership or connection that I felt needed to be made after my first trip was one between the school at San Carlos and the schools in the Defiance, Ohio, region. I proposed creating a pen-pal program. The purpose was to foster literacy development, as well as cultural awareness and sensitivity, opening the eyes of all involved by expanding their scope of the world.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Instructional settings greatly influence teaching and learning in either a positive or negative manner, especially when it comes to literacy development. Settings or environments that support literacy development are positive, full of print-rich materials, have purpose, and incorporate partnerships (Moore & Hinchman, 2006). In response to the scarcity of bookshelves at the school, I proposed to build bookshelves for the book collection started last year and those brought with us on this trip. These shelves would establish a place for reading, making it known that books are important and have a place within the school.

In addition to the shelves, I wanted to provide posters that promote reading and carpet squares for students to sit on while reading. The combination of all of these elements created an inviting literature-rich environment. Research shows that collections of printed materials encourage students to read (Atwell, 1998). According to a study done by Scholastic, "by providing access to a rich classroom library, teachers promote greater amounts of reading, increased reading frequency, and more diverse reading experiences among their students, thus helping them to attain greater levels of reading achievement" (Flawson & Reutzler, 2007). The posters and carpet squares helped to create a positive environment for reading that is comfortable and appealing.

Creating an informal library will allow the students of San Carlos Government School the chance to attain greater levels of reading achievement by providing them with a place to support their independent reading and comprehension strategies. Children need a place that will ignite their passion for reading: a stimulating place that will invite them to sit, explore, and return. Engaging students in meaningful reading of various types of texts in a literature-rich environment improves writing, language, reading, and other cross-curricular skills (Atwell, 1998).

To develop literacy, students need to be involved in meaningful reading and writing, with tasks that have real purposes. Classrooms that have purpose or promote activities that have a purpose are more likely to have higher rates of achievement because the students are engaged (Moore & Hinchman, 2006). Students are genuinely interested in what they are doing within the classroom and do not realize that they are developing literacy skills. To involve the students of San Carlos actively in literacy, I have partnered 43 students of San Carlos with 11 students from the Groverhill Elementary School 21st Century after-school program in the U. S. They will write letters to the students of San Carlos, and in turn, the students of San Carlos will write back to the students of Groverhill Elementary.

RESULTS/ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

As a result of this project, the students of San Carlos will have more opportunities for literacy development. More books were given to the school to add to the collection started last year. Bookshelves were built to house these books, and posters and carpet squares were given to Mr. Lopez to incorporate into his informal library. This creates a positive environment, inviting students to comfortably read and interact with literature. In Microsoft Excel, I created a simple library log spreadsheet so that students could borrow books from the library to take home. I made copies of this spreadsheet, three-hole punched them, and placed them in a three-ring binder. This is a simple method of keeping track of books, but it may make the difference between students only interacting with books at school and sharing them with their families at home.

Since returning to the United States, I have had my students at Groverhill Elementary write letters to most of the students of San Carlos Government School. In addition, my students have drawn pictures to their pen pals and I have taken pictures of them to send. We are currently anticipating receiving letters from San Carlos.

CONCLUSION

Many doors have been opened because of the contacts made with schools in the last two years. Having now helped to develop a literacy-rich environment, the teachers at San Carlos have brought to our attention another pressing need: art supplies and manipulatives. Perhaps this is a need the McMasters Scholars program can fill in future trips.

REFLECTION

As a future teacher, I see the value in education and am always looking for opportunities to further my knowledge and understanding of the world around me. The McMaster School for Advancing Humanity offered me just that, a chance to expand my knowledge through real-life experiences and service initiatives. Since this was my second trip to Belize, I had the advantage of knowing what to expect ahead of time, instead of trying to imagine the people we were partnering with and the places we were going to be.

From my experiences with the McMaster Scholars program, my view of the world is no longer limited to northwestern Ohio, and this has changed how I live. These experiences have also made me a better educator, researching within my discipline and putting that research into action. I expect to share my firsthand experiences, stories, and pictures with students in the future and will strive to connect them to this “bigger picture” mindset that I now hold. Working now for two years within a diverse and multidisciplinary learning community has given me the experience and skills to see how different disciplinary projects can connect in a real and powerful way. I now see these connections in my daily life and am better able to problem solve from a multiple-perspective standpoint. I would like to thank the McMaster family who gave me this life-changing opportunity.

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