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SUPPORTING PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS' EDUCATION AND ADAPTATION TO U.S. SCHOOLS WHILE CELEBRATING BILINGUALISM

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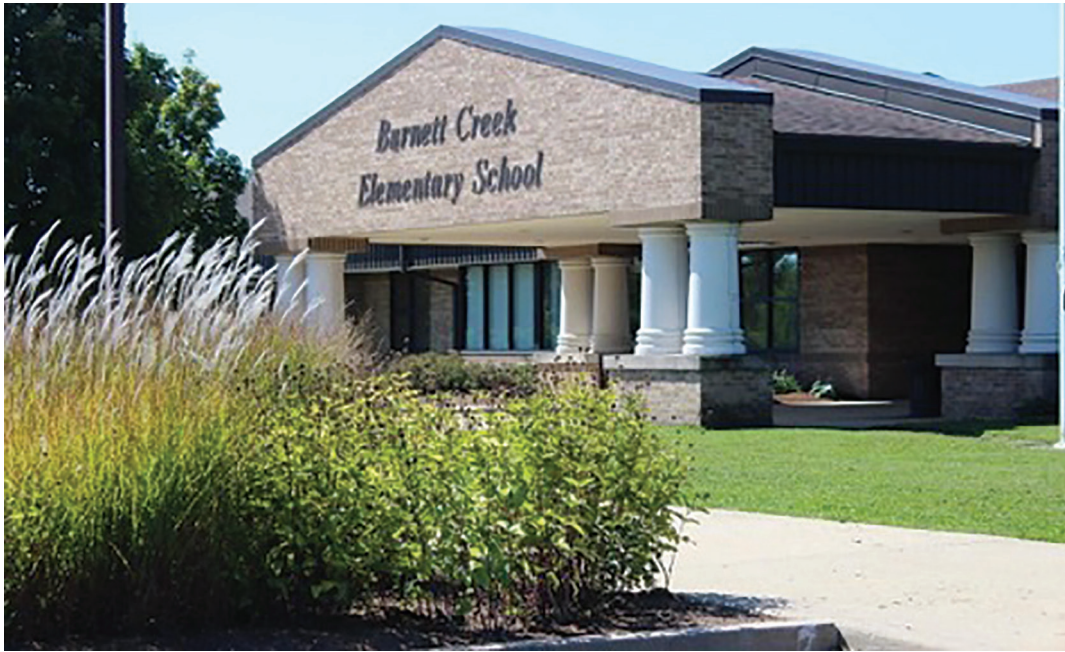
Allison Crosbie is a junior in Pre-Veterinary Animal Sciences and Spanish at Purdue University. She has gained copious experience with animals through a veterinary internship and volunteering opportunities during her time at Purdue. She plans to pursue a career in either small animal veterinary medicine, into which she will incorporate her knowledge of Spanish and her love of animal care and helping others, or she will pursue a doctorate degree in Spanish Linguistics to become a translator for a medical organization. She was involved in the service-learning program *Ayuda y Aprende* during her sophomore year, and in this article discusses how this program incorporated her passion for people and Spanish into working with local Spanish-speaking children.

INTRODUCTION

In the Lafayette, Indiana area, 4.3% of the 48,308 citizens are Hispanic or Latino, totaling approximately 2,077 people (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Many children in the school system are either bilingual or are exposed to Spanish within their household, and some children are transitioning to an English-speaking school for the first time. Due to these facts and considering the benefits of bilingualism (*The Benefits of Being Bilingual*, n.d.), it is important that the local schools work with these students in ways that support their learning and, in some cases, their bilingualism. Using resources available in the community, local public schools work with *Ayuda y Aprende* (“Help and Learn”), which is a service-learning program in which Purdue students who study Spanish support local Spanish-speaking and bilingual children with their education. In

the case of recent immigrants, Purdue students also help with their adjustment to the U.S. school system. While serving local students, *Ayuda y Aprende* also allows Purdue students to learn more about the Spanish language, Spanish-speaking culture, and the diverse backgrounds of public-school students in the United States.

During my sophomore year at Purdue University, through an individual extra credit assignment within my Spanish 301 and 302 classes, I worked with students at both Burnett Creek and Mintonye elementary schools (Figures 1 and 2). At these schools, I aided multiple students with varying English and Spanish bilingual language backgrounds and helped with many different elementary school subjects such as reading, writing, and math. I visited these schools multiple times throughout the semester, and I learned from my time spent with the students, alluding to the “help and learn” title of the



Figures 1 and 2. Burnett Creek Elementary (above) and Mintoine Elementary (below), two local elementary schools that the author worked with during her semesters in *Ayuda y Aprende*.

program. The Purdue student volunteers and the Spanish-speaking students worked together to enhance their understanding of each other's languages, as well as learning more about each other, their respective backgrounds and languages. Each semester was also different in the interactions I had with the students and the teachers, some more involved than others, proving there to be both positive and negative experiences during community involvements such as this. However, service-learning is an experience that cannot be repeated through a typical classroom setting, and *Ayuda y Aprende* has allowed

Purdue students to gain experience and knowledge, while showing Purdue students the positive impact they can have on the surrounding community, proving overall to be a highly beneficial learning and teaching experience.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Ayuda y Aprende is a semester-long program in which students in Spanish 301 and 302 classes have the opportunity to earn additional credit toward their grade through their participation. This article will go into depth

about the aspects of the program, such as where students can volunteer, how many children are paired with each Purdue student, and the duration of this program.

Spanish 301 and 302 are advanced Spanish courses designed to help students reach an advanced level of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, while also studying cultural practices and significances prevalent in Spanish-speaking communities. *Ayuda y Aprende* is designed to help these 300-level Spanish students gain more communication and cultural experience that is not typically obtainable within a classroom and that provides real-life interactions for Purdue students aiming to communicate using Spanish in candid instances.

The program lasts the duration of a semester and totals 20 hours of service-learning. Each Purdue student is assigned to a varying number of children with whom they work, depending on the school at which they volunteer. Purdue students are also given the liberty to choose which education level they desire, ranging from elementary to high school. At each visit, Purdue students and the children's teachers decide the best plan of action for the day, depending on what the child has been practicing or learning in class. After each visit, the Purdue students record words or phrases they learned during their visit from their student through working together on the child's schoolwork, as well as any other cultural practices that were discussed between the Purdue student and the bilingual child during free time if the child completed their schoolwork early.

Each semester, approximately 20 students from Spanish 301 and 302 become engaged in this service-learning opportunity and meet once a month over the four-month period to discuss their experience, what they learned, and their overall feelings about their time spent with the children during their visits. These meetings allow the Purdue students to feel a greater community impact, as well as give advice to other volunteers based on their personal experiences and what they have learned from the service learning. After recording new vocabulary words or phrases from the weekly visits, the Purdue students discuss these vocabulary words and their potential to be incorporated into their use of colloquial Spanish. Such sharing helps other Purdue students enhance their Spanish vocabulary and knowledge of common Spanish used in casual conversations, as well as allowing Purdue student volunteers to learn from one another, once again relating to the "help and learn" title of the program. This shows that *Ayuda y Aprende* enhances each student interaction within the program, whether involving the Purdue students, the public-school children, or between the two.

Discussing vocabulary words or phrases learned between the Purdue students also demonstrates the knowledge developed after each of the visits from the Purdue students and shows progress and development of the ability to understand colloquial Spanish over time. These meetings are also important in allowing students to express positive and negative feedback about the program, which is helpful in further developing and improving the program to be accommodating and supportive of the bilingual children in the area.

STUDENT-STUDENT INTERACTION

During my semester at Burnett Creek Elementary, I worked with two sisters, ages 6 and 11. The youngest sister had no knowledge of English, while the older minimally communicated in English, but was working hard to become more conversational. These sisters had moved from Mexico six months prior and had been attending Burnett Creek since their arrival in Lafayette. Working with these children was challenging at times, specifically with the youngest, who, like any 6-year-old, was at times not focused on the tasks assigned by the teacher. However, as the semester went on, I began to understand her background more and the reason behind her behaviors. Her teacher knew little to no Spanish and was not able to proficiently communicate with her throughout the school day; this communication barrier existed with her classmates as well. This caused her to feel isolated at times, which she would express to me. However, her classmates still treated her with respect and kindness, and many still interacted with her both inside and out of the classroom. In order to help consistently improve her Spanish, an aide provided by the school came to help during the same times I did on the days I was not present, providing a consistent Spanish education environment for her throughout the week.

The older child, an 11-year-old, was mostly fluent in Spanish and had worked hard in her months spent at Burnett Creek to learn and succeed in her English courses. Throughout our visits, we were able to discuss not only her school material, but how she had adjusted to living in Lafayette, and how she and her family were handling the tremendous adjustment. During this time, I learned a great deal about the life of Spanish-speaking immigrants, and how difficult their transition to life in a primarily English-speaking city can prove to be, a topic that will be discussed in the student impact section of the paper.

In my second semester with *Ayuda y Aprende* at Mintonye Elementary School, my experience with my assigned children was not as personal as in the first

semester due to the large number of children with whom I worked. During each visit, I helped approximately 10 children from various linguistic backgrounds, some with Spanish, but mostly with English. During this semester, all of my children were educated in Spanish, but equally or more capable of speaking English than the two children in the previous semester, therefore showing that there are various levels to bilingualism and Spanish- and English-speaking abilities within the bilingual community of Lafayette. There were some classes in which I was able to assist multiple children from the same class, leading to a more cohesive learning environment, but this proved at times to be more difficult for the children to concentrate due to their ability to distract one another. The time spent with each child or group of children was also much shorter, and therefore I was not able to connect with these students as much as I did in the first semester. However, my experience in this semester was still highly valuable in learning to work with children of various Spanish- and English-speaking backgrounds, as well as learning to work with groups of children.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Overall, this program was deemed very successful by the Purdue students, the Spanish-speaking children, and the administration at the schools of the Spanish-speaking children. The success of the program was noted through the improvement in the performance of the Spanish-speaking children, the feedback from the teachers of these children, as well as the feedback from the Purdue students. From the administration at the schools where I worked, the teachers were extremely appreciative and thankful for the help I was able to give and noted the improvement in their Spanish-speaking students' comprehension of English and increase in their overall classroom participation. Throughout the monthly Purdue student discussions, each student was ecstatic at the improvement seen in the children they worked with, as well as their improvement in the Purdue students' Spanish vocabulary. The program coordinator and a professor within the department of Spanish and Portuguese at Purdue, Kely Paez-Urbano, is organized and passionate about this program, and encourages Purdue students to remain patient and optimistic throughout the program. Her encouragement also leads to the Purdue students' success throughout their time working with their Spanish-speaking students and personally allowed me to follow through with the process of both helping and learning with the Spanish-speaking children I worked with. Therefore, through my time with *Ayuda y Aprende*, I believe the program is highly successful and will continue to thrive in the future with caring Purdue students and a

coordinated program director, as well as participation from the local school system, as it has since 2003.

The Purdue students involved in *Ayuda y Aprende* were made aware of the rigor of the program by the program coordinator and the qualifications regarding a position in the program, such as the necessity for a decent proficiency in Spanish as well as an ability to properly work and communicate with children. Therefore, I believe that the Purdue students were as prepared as possible for working with their assigned Spanish-speaking students. However, some of the teachers at the schools were not always prepared for the Purdue students' arrival and were sometimes unorganized regarding what activities or assignment the Purdue students should do with their Spanish-speaking student or students that day.

STUDENT IMPACT

This program has also allowed me to encourage the children I worked with to continue practicing and celebrating Spanish, the first language for many of the students, and bilingualism, as well as to achieve higher education after primary and secondary schools, which is another main purpose of the program. By placing Purdue students in primary and secondary education environments, the Purdue student is able to discuss the children's passions and potential career opportunities, either at Purdue or another higher education institution. There were several instances in which I personally was able to do this with my students and inform them about the many possibilities available in college and afterward. Several of my students would also ask me questions about how I enjoyed college and how difficult it was. It was very important for me to answer these questions honestly, while encouraging the students to work hard throughout their elementary, middle, and high school years to achieve success later in life, and to also spend time discussing their extracurricular passions. Overall, these students seemed highly interested in continuing their education by pursuing a college degree in the future.

It was very important to me that, as a member of *Ayuda y Aprende*, I encouraged the children to embrace and take pride in their potential or current ability to practice bilingualism. Benefits of bilingualism include improvement in cognitive development, allowing their brains to be "active and flexible" (*The Benefits of Being Bilingual*, n.d.), and social-emotional development, which "benefits children in maintaining strong ties with their family, culture, and community" (*The Benefits of Being Bilingual*, n.d.). Other benefits include developing "flexible approaches to thinking through problems" and having

access to “more job opportunities than monolingual adults” (*The Benefits of Being Bilingual*, n.d.). Therefore, these children should embrace their abilities and continue to practice both languages throughout their life. However, it may seem daunting to continue to practice Spanish in an area where English is almost always consistently used. Therefore, I made it one of my main goals to show the children I worked with how much passion and love I have for Spanish and how I aspire to achieve bilingualism. Showing these children Purdue students of various backgrounds who speak Spanish allows them to understand that someone from any background, race, or culture can embrace and love their language and culture as well, which hopefully allows them to feel more comfortable in their usage and feelings of acceptance toward their ability to speak Spanish. As the semester progressed, many of the students I worked with became more comfortable and confident with their Spanish usage, showing positive growth in their feelings toward speaking Spanish.

This program is also significant in allowing members of the Purdue Spanish-speaking community to feel connected to the local Spanish-speaking community in their surrounding area. Many students at Purdue are very passionate about this program after initially becoming involved due to the opportunity to practice Spanish in a realistic setting. Additionally, they feel as though they have made an impact on the surrounding community. Students who still desire to be involved with *Ayuda y Aprende* after Spanish 301 and 302 are eligible to take Spanish 419, which is a 1-credit version of what they experienced in previous semesters. This gives an opportunity for students to continue to enhance their Spanish-speaking abilities and continue having a positive impact on local schools and families in Lafayette.

As previously stated, this program has allowed me to further understand the lives of Spanish-speaking community members. For example, the 11-year-old student from Burnett Creek Elementary exclaimed to me that prior to coming to Lafayette, she had no idea she would be moving from Mexico. Therefore, she was not able to properly say goodbye to some of her family before she left, a topic that she expressed to me with deep sadness. She also explained that her town in Mexico was fairly dangerous, and therefore her parents wanted to raise her and her sister in a much safer area, where she would also have access to a higher quality education system, unlike the one she had experienced prior, which was lacking in sufficient funds. This type of information has tremendously increased my knowledge and awareness of the lives of some immigrant children, who have no control over their situations, but have parents who truly want

the best for them. Many of my peers and fellow Spanish students at Purdue also learned of similar situations and were astonished as to how challenging the transition from a primarily Spanish-speaking country or household to a mainly English-speaking city was, which is the reality for many of the children in the local schools involved in this program.

Another significant advantage to being a part of *Ayuda y Aprende* is the opportunity for me to practice Spanish with native speakers, which has helped enhance my fluency and pronunciation, as well as expand my vocabulary. This also prepared me for future significant events such as studying abroad in Spain, as well as using Spanish further on in my career preparation. The ability and opportunity to converse with children whose first language is Spanish is particularly beneficial due to the honesty most of the children possessed when correcting my grammar or assisting with my vocabulary. I am now able to go into Spanish conversations with much more confidence than prior to this experience. When working with solely Spanish-speaking children who have very little knowledge of English, communication in Spanish is highly important, even if one forgets a significant vocabulary word. This leads to circumlocution, in which one has to describe the word in detail for the other person to understand what word one is trying to say. This is vital for language practice because it encourages speakers to think more about the word in the second language, rather than succumbing to the lethologica, or tip of the tongue, phenomenon and asking for the word in English, because that would not be possible in a situation such as this.

Although there were many benefits to participating in this program, there were some challenges throughout my experience. At times, the children would not be completely willing to work on their assignments, or to discuss questions they had about the material. Therefore, it is primarily the responsibility of the Purdue student volunteers to understand when their students need assistance or encouragement to complete their work. However, this has allowed me to understand behaviors of young children, which will be useful when working with them in the future, because children tend to have moments of stubbornness. Another challenge included the obvious language barrier between the children and me. There were instances when I was not able to understand exactly what the child or children were referring to, or vice versa. Therefore, circumlocution was extremely vital in this situation; it allowed the children and me to work around the word or phrase they were attempting to say, which helps improve language skills for both parties involved.

Size was also a challenge at times. When I worked with a larger group of students in my second semester of the program, the experience was much less effective both for the students and for me, due to the fact that the students could distract each other at times and asked fewer questions as opposed to the visits I had with the individual children in my first semester with the program.

This experience with *Ayuda y Aprende* is the most substantial and impactful experience I have participated in during my undergraduate career. Helping children, enhancing my fluency and knowledge of colloquial Spanish, and learning about the reality of immigrant children in local communities has influenced my passion for utilizing Spanish for the remainder of my life, and also persuaded me to apply to graduate school for Spanish linguistics to become a translator. Because of this experience, Spanish has become more personal and important to my future and personal goals and allowed me to understand the world and another culture in a transformed perspective that I would not have been able to obtain in a standard classroom setting. I hope to continue working with *Ayuda y Aprende* by enrolling in SPAN 419 in my final semester of my undergraduate career.

CONCLUSION

Ayuda y Aprende is a program that is beneficial to Purdue students who speak Spanish, as well as the community and students of Lafayette. This program allows the most superior form of practicing and enhancing Purdue students' speaking capabilities by helping both Spanish-speaking and bilingual children, while also giving a deep insight into the real lives of Spanish-speaking and bilingual community members and showing Purdue students how much of a positive influence they can have on their surrounding community. This service-learning project is praised and appreciated by all parties involved, due to the mutual benefits for Purdue and Lafayette, and therefore I hope that future students in advanced Spanish

classes will also seek to partake in this program. I highly recommend this program to any student who enjoys working with younger children in primary or secondary school, and those who hope to obtain real-life speaking experience with native speakers of Spanish in a relaxed and fun educational environment. Service-learning is an experience that cannot be repeated through any other volunteer or learning initiative, and therefore I hope Purdue continues to encourage this program within the Spanish and Portuguese department.

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