
12 month Grant Report

Project supported by the British School Charity.



End of year trip to the Museum of Zoology

Volunteering at ACER Brasil in partnership with Articulate Arts

With huge thanks to the generous support from the British School Charity, I was able to partake in a year's volunteering project at ACER Brasil facilitating workshops for the children in the neighbourhood. The grant rewarded to me allowed me to focus my entire time on planning and leading the creative safe spaces; a project initiated by Brighton based charity Articulate Arts.

At the halfway mark of six months, my experience was only beginning and I was just getting accustomed to the everyday routine and pace of ACER's spirit. As the year progressed the personal difficulties and challenges were relentless, and in hindsight I can see that it was the most enriching experience that has led to a wealth of personal and professional growth. I challenged myself in ways I had not expected, pushed to experience new situations everyday.

As a volunteer I was faced with the obstacles of communicating in a new language, the differences in culture and intensities of living on ACER's site. However, in return I was given the privilege of getting to know the children in the community, learn about their lives and witness their remarkable individual progress within my lessons. From running up to say hello on the street to lovely goodbye cards as I finished my last lessons with them, it was a true pleasure to have been a part of their lives and meeting their fantastic personalities. Over the course of my year the Articulate sessions alone worked with 129 different children; we took them on five educational trips within the city and curated two exhibitions of the children's artwork to promote awareness of the dynamic community and the personal development that using creative arts can bring.

Personal challenges and growth

Despite all my efforts prior to the trip, I discovered there is only so much research can truly prepare you as the reality of culture shock is a truly individual experience. When I arrived, the realisation of my basic language skills being useless was overwhelming, and within both the classroom and social environments it was hard to ignore how difficult it was to communicate. I had been unaware that it would be so tough to live in a different language in comparison to travelling and vacationing; perhaps I never would have made the leap if I had known. While English is a widely used language globally, in São Paulo there is little need for Brazilians to speak English and generally only those of a higher income bracket can afford language lessons. I met perhaps 10 people in the year with a strong level of English in my immediate neighbourhood of Eldorado. With a population of 40,000 people, being a foreigner you are sure to stand out.

Language learning takes time and patience alongside courage and confidence to fearlessly talk to others. I was initially unable to express myself with ease, and felt a loss of identity. Social environments were isolating and workshops were frustrating as I dearly wanted to chat beyond basic phrases. Over the months, I could feel confident speaking one day to not being able to form a coherent sentence or pronounce a word correctly on the next. Thankfully, I shared parts of my experience with other international volunteers and together we faced similar challenges in addition to meeting a variety of other people over the course of a year. Combining this family-like network of support and the kind encouragement from Brazilians, the feeling of loneliness and dissipated and I was able to grow in confidence. I faced many other cultural differences and frustrations over the year but by my eighth month, I finally felt confident to speak entirely in this newly learnt language, spending Christmas and New Years with new friends and having insightful conversations with complete strangers. Feeling comfortable and at ease was one of the biggest successes of my time there and I truly felt settled and self-reliant.

This sense of confidence in my capability to overcome any challenge and learn an entire new skill is going to complement my future greatly; both within my studies and work in mental health and also in my own personal character. The perspective of having achieved so much this past year has given me hope that anything is possible, as well as ready to take on new challenges.



Teens and volunteers at an ACER fundraiser



My leaving gathering with colleagues and friends

Barriers and obstacles

In my previous six-month report, I touched upon some of the difficulties in the community of Eldorado in Diadema. Issues such as over-population, substance abuse and violent behaviours greatly impact the children on a daily basis. After a further six months, it became apparent that the struggles run deeper still. My proficiency in Portuguese and living in the community of Eldorado allowed me to see the vast class and race divide within the city of São Paulo; many areas within the city feel truly worlds apart. 50.7% of the population of Brazil define themselves as black or mixed race, yet statistics show that on average, White Brazilians earn double to that of Black Brazilians and within the centre of the city, less than 20% identify as black or mixed race. In Brazil's history, inequality and racism was a result of Portuguese colonisers enslaving an estimated 4.9 million Indigenous and Africans Brazilians, and the systemic racial inequality in society is still heavily apparent.



Street view looking out from ACER

Unequal representation in media, government, private businesses and higher education highlight the stark contrasts in opportunity as well as societal perceptions of racial equality. Governmental bodies argue that quality education, healthcare and work opportunities are available, and it is a matter of personal motivation and individual hard work. However, the ability to achieve these goals are dependent on postcode, and the geography of São Paulo shows the lower the income, the further from the city you live; residents within Diadema are a two hour journey away. Free public universities are available in São Paulo, offering prestigious qualifications. However, the entrance exams require the highest academic ability and mostly only privately school educated students have the necessary requirements, as the general state education is not sufficient in preparing candidates. Other private universities charge tuition fees equal to a person's salary, and so those who wish to study towards a future career are subject to working days beginning at 5am to earn their tuition, and returning home close to midnight after class.

Without basic facilities for the whole population, this fundamentally maintains a divide as not all can tirelessly fight for their future and challenge the status quo. This physical segregation also cultivates an 'us and them' mentality. Racism and prejudice surrounds everyday conversation, fuelling issues such as police violence and racial stereotyping. The lack of representative role models for young people impacts their aspirations and feelings of being welcome within society. While they are affected by the socio-economic struggles within Eldorado, the difficulties are based on a foundation of inequality and injustice; a problem on a much bigger scale.



Eldorado's dense, hilly streets.

Creative and fun educational activities

As a result of these challenges, I found myself looking closely at the intended learning outcomes within my sessions and hoped to incorporate ways to work on these issues. I continued to lead engaging sessions to encourage creativity and equality within an educative environment. Over the year, Articulate was relocated to a new classroom, a space solely for our projects which allowed us to freely decorate and structure the space.



Regular 'Inglês e Artes' students

Within 'Inglês e Artes' (English and Arts) my Portuguese ability allowed more flexibility in my teaching, and I was able to converse comfortably with the students. This allowed students to give me feedback and suggestions, self-directing and taking control of their own learning. I hoped to encourage their autonomy and pride in their education, to carry into

their independent learning as well as empower the students with behavioural challenges. Both louder, dominant students as well as quieter students were both listened to and given equal space in lessons. They loved to see ideas implemented in the lessons which encouraged consistent attendance and focus. Similarly, the children loved to ask questions about England and British life, learning about cultural differences and different backgrounds.



We also took the children on museum trips in the city to show the variety of available resources, and methods to learn independently. We provided students with clipboards and worksheets to build their confidence exploring the museums and interacting with the exhibits. The worksheets were encouraging of individual interests by prompting to choose their favourite pieces and allowing ample time to draw and explore. I found this challenged negative stereotypes of children from

Diadema as our students showed genuine curiosity and respect, visibly surprising staff and others. It also expanded their knowledge of São Paulo by demonstrating how to access public resources and to feel welcome within those spaces. This hopefully encourages them to seek out and enrich their personal interests in the future, and break the social barriers of accessing them.

In addition, we held exhibition showcases of the artwork made in 'Clube de Artes' both within ACER and within St Pauls, an exclusive independent school and supporter of ACER, based in the city. By doing so, the children proudly saw their favourite pieces enjoyed by others and I hoped to raise awareness of both the impact and benefits of art making. Exhibiting the work in St Pauls was also to encourage a dialogue between the two groups and to celebrate the skills and creativity of our young people. By increasing communication, I hoped to challenge social bias.



Mural made from the children's art

Outcomes

By the end of my year, the outcomes of the sessions and my presence within ACER resonated the aims of both Articulate and ACER Brasil. Through the use of creative, expressive activities and interactive educational games, the young people within my sessions showed fantastic developments both individually and collectively. Many showed a growth in confidence, chatting freely and comfortably after initially being quiet and disengaged and began to make more art with bold, imaginative use of materials. Additionally, being provided a sense of creative freedom to express their ideas in a safe, non-judgemental environment allowed students who misbehaved in other classes and struggled within rigid structures to excel in my sessions. The ability to decorate and structure our own art space also gave students the autonomy to self-direct their sessions and take responsibility over the care of art materials. This led to being adventurous with new ideas and respecting others as they navigated the communal space. Children in my class all loved to make artwork either independently or as a group and would even want to remain after sessions to help me clean materials. This showed great progress for the children, responding well to the session's boundaries and the expectations in behaviour and tidying up; something I had struggled to establish previously and have spent time to build.

In the social environment of disruption and difficulties, the respect shown for my teaching and the activities I ran was transformative and exemplified the encouragement of positive behaviour and unique ideas. We were able to have freely messy activities, play students' favourite music and have conversations which created a vibrant, fun environment. These positives were evident in their consistent attendance and if I was absent, the children were sure to find me the next day to check on me!

Within other ACER projects, I was able to make strong connections with fellow colleagues and found it very constructive to share ideas for new activities. During programs such as the holiday project (projeto férias), the education team worked together to run an action packed fortnight of activities. Working closely with the staff during these events was great in sharing different methods of working and exchanging ideas. The aim of welcoming international volunteers is to also facilitate cultural exchange, and being a long-term presence in ACER allowed me to understand the environment before going forward to contribute. I provided ideas on the volunteer programs, how to better incorporate Articulate's projects within the everyday running of ACER and how art activities can be implemented in more areas; aspects that will hopefully have a lasting outcome on ACER's everyday running and add value to their projects.



Evaluation

Conclusively, the year was full of a variety of experiences with the constant arrival of new volunteers, new children and new challenges. As a result, looking back on the experience brings so many stories to tell and broader observations of my time. The work carried out was catered directly for the needs and showed positive individual developments, and I feel grateful to have been given the time and space to run my classes autonomously using my skills and experiences from previous work. I also feel ACER's staff appreciated the volunteers choosing to spend their time working alongside with them, and were open to collaborations and sharing of stories to meet people from such diverse backgrounds. The role of international development and cross-cultural charitable work brings about many ethical and sustainability questions, and I feel the role of ACER within the community, while strong and positive, could have a longer-lasting impact. With the constant arrival of international volunteers and funding income from international sponsors, there is a delicate balance between support and dependence; I hope that a focus on collaboration and shared learning is maintained rather than 'foreign aid' arriving to deliver ideas without incorporating or considering the values of the local community. Currently, there are sometimes miscommunications of the role of the international volunteer from other projects; Articulate has a strong 6-year partnership whereas others are new partners starting new initiatives. Confusions in communication leads to blurred role responsibilities and sometimes unrealistic expectations for both the volunteer and ACER on the volunteer's input to the charity during their time. While this does not impact the children's experiences and enjoyment of the sessions, ACER is perhaps not making the most out of their resources, which may be a detriment to the sustainable growth of the charity and benefits for the community.

The Future

In terms of Articulate projects within ACER, the current future of the project hangs in the balance of available volunteer facilitators able to travel and spend their time working within Eldorado. With the currently economic climate in the UK, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find individuals with the experience and availability, and perhaps the future for the creative art workshops will be for ACER to take the initiative on and train locally based staff with the ideas and aims that Articulate has shared with them for the past 6 years. This has been suggested and initiated in our collaborations with present staff, and would also increase the sustainability of the project and longevity of the direct impact of the sessions on the children.



Similarly, the future of ACER as an NGO hangs in the balance of funding income, as of any charitable organisation reliant on donations, grants and sponsorships. As funding channels and economic climates change year on year, ACER seems to have undergone substantial changes to cater for funding bids and in my time there was a need to decrease staff numbers due to funding budgets. The future of charities overall in this current climate is precarious, and I sincerely hope ACER is able to innovate ideas to perhaps self-fund and find new, sustainable funding opportunities to continue its valued and vital work within the community.