



## WELCOME TO THE SCHOOLS

### INTRODUCTION

The principal objective of La Esperanza Granada is to support the education of the children in the schools we work with. Volunteers have been working in some of these schools since the organization began in 2002. Working in the schools is fun but hard work. No matter what your level of previous teaching experience is, with a bit of patience and enthusiasm, you will certainly be able to make a positive contribution to the lives of these lively and affectionate children. Enjoy it!

Because consistency is important for the children and it takes time to build-up teacher-student relationships, we ask you to respect the minimum volunteer time commitment that you have made.

We have put together this information so that you can make a flying start in the schools.

### NICARAGUAN EDUCATION SYSTEM – THE APPROACH TO TEACHING

Firstly it is important to say that this is a different culture, and a poor country. These things may sound obvious; however it is easy to walk into the schools and expect things to be as they were when we attended school. Because of the lack of funding from the Government, lack of educational resources, and multi-grade classes, things are very different. This poses big problems for both the teacher and the students, as it isn't possible to give individual students the attention they need. Consequently many children fall behind. Some may get by copying from their classmates and others fail their exams and have to repeat the year. Either way they are not learning.

The Nicaraguan education system is very different to what most of us are used to in our home countries, and this is often one of the most frustrating things for volunteers to accept. Especially if you have previous teaching experience, it can be quite shocking. The tasks set normally involve copying from the board or from a text book. Questions and answers are there to copy and in some cases to memorize for a test. Math puzzles are put on the board, but it only takes one bright child to know the answer and the rest copy it and pass it around without learning how to do the exercise. There is no level of competitiveness between the children. A child who knows the answers will happily share with others to try and help them. The objective is seen as getting the exercise done, as opposed to learning how to do the exercise.



## WHERE DOES THE SCHOOL VOLUNTEER FIT INTO?

As Volunteers, we support the Nicaraguan education system in ways that are not available in regular classes. Our role in the schools is to **assist** the main teachers, not to try to take over their jobs. Volunteers are not expected to work in the schools as a teacher. Volunteers will be assisting locally qualified teachers and **helping the children get the extra individual attention they need**, more specifically basic math, reading and writing. Giving the children lots of individual attention helps raise their esteem and gives them the will and interest to learn. **One of the basic facts of extreme poverty is lack of self esteem.**

### Class assistants / Tutoring

Taking into account the educational system and payment we cannot expect the best teachers in the world to be at these schools, but it is not for us to criticize them; instead we need to support them. We do need to work with them, not against them. Good communication between the volunteers and the teachers is essential, and the 'ayudantes' play a vital role in this. All group or individual work we do with the children should be to support what they are learning in class. Sometimes this means bringing it back to basics as what they learn in class is often too advanced for their actual level and so they fall even further behind. We ask you to fill in a form with educational information about each child you worked with before you leave. This helps the next volunteer to continue the work.

### English Team

Our volunteers who teach English in the schools play an important role especially for those children who complete primary school and go on to attend high school. In high school English classes are compulsory and the children are expected to have a basic level when they start.. In all the private schools the children do have English classes, but in the poverty stricken schools where we work, the only opportunity they have of English lessons is when we are able to supply the volunteers to teach them.

### P.E. and art lessons:

In addition there is the role of **taking children for sports** in order to aid their physical coordination, as well as learning group behavior. **Arts and crafts** play another important role and this is to help stimulate the children's imagination as well as develop manual dexterity by using scissors, paintbrushes, crayons, etc.

The time a volunteer has with the children, whether it be in groups, one-on-one, or with a whole class, is a valuable way of introducing different learning techniques. This can be in the form of games, puzzles, songs, drawing/ art or anything to get them thinking for themselves and using their brains. It's not easy, but with persistence, patience, repetition and creativity you will get the results.

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## **BACKGROUND ON THE SCHOOLS**

La Esperanza Granada supports seven schools in poor communities on the outskirts of Granada: Elba Zamora, Nueva Esperanza, Los Angeles de Morales, Juan Diego, Salomon de la Selva, Jose de la Cruz Mena and La Epifania. The schools are part of the state school system in Nicaragua, under the Ministry of Education

## **WHAT TO TAKE WITH YOU TO THE SCHOOLS**

Take plenty of drinking water, insect repellent, sun-protection for the walk to school, and your tutoring kit which is available in the office. It is recommended that volunteers limit the personal objects they take to the schools. You should take only enough money for your day's needs, and a copy of your passport. Don't carry your credit/debit cards except when you are going to the bank to use them. It is suggested not to take cameras on a daily basis as they can be very distracting.

## **VOLUNTEER CONDUCT IN SCHOOL**

Whilst being at school please speak only Spanish. This also includes conversations with other volunteers. It is also important to dress appropriately in order for the children to respect your role. To avoid any possible accusations please make sure you are never alone with a child out of sight of others.

## **SCHOOL MATERIAL**

If you or the teachers you are working with need any resources or equipment for any of your work in the schools please let the ayudantes know. They will come to the office to get the material. We have material in the office for arts and crafts etc. and you should also try using recycled items, natural resources, such as seed pods, leaves etc. in your projects.

## **ACADEMIC YEAR – HOLIDAYS AND EXAMS**

The academic year runs from the start of February to the end of November. The two terms are separated by a week long break in July. The end of term is preceded by a week of exams.

## **MEALS IN THE SCHOOLS**

The Nicaraguan Government provides a supply of rice and beans to each school, to be delivered every few months. The food is prepared by some of the mothers, so every child gets a meal at school in the recess period. Sometimes either the food isn't portioned correctly or the delivery comes late, so weeks can go by without food.



## HINTS AND TIPS

- Tell children the basic behavior you expect when they work with you out of main class.
- Be consistent and fair.
- Plan ahead (with lesson focus for the week and range of possible activities) but be ready to be flexible, depending on circumstances and attendance.
- Ignore children who 'play up' for attention as far as possible, but praise good and cooperative learning behavior. You could try a smiley face, sad face system for young children (names can be written up under one or the other to reflect behavior but they have a chance to redeem themselves).
- Be clear that the choice is to participate in group work properly, or else to go back to main class.
- Use silence to get silence (and you can make a game of it by touching your nose when you want silence and last one to notice, stop talking and touch their nose comes out to the front of group to do a forfeit).
- Wait for please and thank you, ban 'no puedo' (or reply with "creo que puedes") and "dame" / "regálame".
- In a class where you hand out resources (arts, PE) appoint two kids as monitors who are responsible to give out and collect the resources. Give the monitors badges to underline their special position and praise them for their work. Like this the kids learn to take responsibility and it facilitates your work as well.

## OFFICE RESOURCES

The ayudantes will bring things from the office for you to the schools such as markers, crayons, paper etc. and they record everything that they bring to the schools. However all volunteers should spend time in the office reviewing all the resources that are there to help you work with the children. There are teaching manuals, worksheets, flashcards, games, binders with suggestions and tutoring tips from previous volunteers and professionals, ideas for arts, games, sports etc. Over the past few years a wealth of resources and information has been gathered, and we encourage you to use this, and if you are a creative type of person, add to it.

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## COMMON CHALLENGES....

Challenge

- **There are too many students and I don't think they understand what is going on!**

The schools we work with suffer from a lack of funding from the government, educational resources, and most importantly, teachers. This lack of resources leads to a couple of frustrating scenarios:

1. High student to teacher ratio: Many of the schools have multi-grade classrooms, sometimes with as many as 3 grades and 45 students per classroom and teacher. Needless to say, the students simply cannot receive the level of attention they need.

The high student to teacher ratio ultimately results in one of two major problems: either the students unable to do the work fall more and more behind with little hope of catching up, or those who are more advanced go unchallenged and thus become bored (often leading to disruptive behavior).

2. Lack of creativity in teaching: In addition to the shortage of teachers, schools are also in need of even basic materials such as books, paper, pencils and water. The lack of resources, especially teaching aids such as flashcards, models, etc. means that there is little opportunity to introduce creativity into the lessons.

Instead, a task such as copying from the board is usually set. Sometimes the students have no idea what they are writing, or how to do the problems they are assigned. For example, first graders may be copying words when they still do not know some of the letters of the alphabet. Or they may be copying numbers with no comprehension of the symbolism of what a number *means*.

The students who finish faster (or who just give up) are left to sit at their desks in boredom or distract other students. This lack of planned activity for many students also occurs towards the end of the day as often teachers stop giving lessons before it is time for students to be dismissed! Often this aspect is one of the hardest for volunteers to accept, as it is unclear how much importance, if any, the school system places on developing interactive and engaging lesson plans.

Response

- It is normal to feel frustrated with the system, especially during your first few weeks. However, we must remember, that **the time a volunteer has with the children, whether it be in groups or one-on-one with the whole class, is a valuable way of introducing different learning techniques into their educational environment.** This can be achieved through games, puzzles,

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songs, art - anything that will get them *thinking for themselves* and *using their brains*. Persistence, patience, repetition, and creativity will get you results.

Also remember that **one-on-one successes can be huge**. We will not be able to change every student's life, or help every child pass his or her grade. However, we can have an impact on the learning potential of some. There is wonderfully documented research available about the potency of a consistent and ongoing relationship with an adult and how it directly benefits a child's life.

Finally, we must realize that **our job here is not to change the system**; it is to work within it to the best of our ability. **We are guests** within the system, and it would serve us better to understand *why* things are done the way they are done rather than attempt to impose our views and values. Often lessons are taught as they should be—it makes sense linguistically, for example, to learn the vowels in Spanish first. This may not be the case in English, but if we don't take the time to sit back, listen, and learn, we might miss this key fact!

We are volunteers at the most basic, interpersonal, grass roots level. **We are here to assist individuals and individual communities.**

- **My students are not coming to school!**

Challenge

Absenteeism is high, and some children may go weeks without coming to school. There are various reasons for poor attendance - illness, parents needing their kids to work/look after siblings/help at home, etc. It is difficult to know whether the parents legitimately need their children's help or whether they think that the money earned by them is simply more valuable than an education. Although most of the parents we encounter are sincerely dedicated to their children's education and our work in the schools, some parents may believe that earning money now is better than becoming educated or a brighter future that may never materialize. Indeed, unemployment and underemployment, even among those with some education, are extremely high.

Response

- We have the ability to **show the children how important we believe their schoolwork is, and how glad we are to see them at school every day**. As they leave school, we can tell each one that we look forward to seeing them tomorrow. In your team, you can work to provide incentives for attendance and effort in order to provide positive reinforcement.

Try to bring absentee students up to class level during your one-on-one work, but don't feel defeated if you can't. If you are particularly worried about an individual child, discuss your concerns with your *ayudante* at the school who will talk to the appropriate teachers. The teachers know most of the families in the community, and may have some insight into the attendance problem.

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Challenge

- **My students seem awfully disruptive—I don't know what to do!**

It seems in some of the schools that walking in and out of the classrooms, shouting, and fighting are the accepted norms.

This can be frustrating or downright disturbing, especially if you happen to witness a fight. Often the teacher seems to take no action, or is inconsistent in his or her discipline strategies.

Response

- **It is not our job to take disciplinary actions with the students.** It is our role to support the teacher and be sensitive to the conditions the students are used to. Culturally there is a different attitude with class room discipline and we cannot expect the students to behave according to our norms when we are not the main presence in the classroom.

Please also realize that **students with special needs are in the regular classes** as there are no separate classes or schools for them to attend. Disciplinary actions that you might expect for a regular student might not be appropriate for a child with physical, psychological, or emotional problems. Always find out as much information as possible before reacting to a perceived situation.

All of this being said, **we can take preventative measures**, in an attempt to ward off future disciplinary problems. For example, if teaching PE or Art, we can tell the students "our rules" for the class *every time* before we begin. These may include listening to instructions, staying in their seats, respecting others, etc. Tell them that if they do not follow these rules, the lesson will end and normal class will resume, and *mean it!* It usually only has to happen once before they get the idea!

Also, we can request that the teacher stay in the classroom or participate in the activity. Sometimes this prevents bad behavior. If not, we at least have someone to ask for help.

Ultimately, however, you are only obligated to stay in a situation with which you feel comfortable

Challenge

- **As a volunteer, am I actually making a difference? How effective am I?**

Sometimes the problems we face as volunteers seem so great that nothing about our small, short term involvement seems to be helping. We don't see the progress we expected, we perceive the actions around us as failures, and we become frustrated. We recognize that we are dealing with the symptoms of underdevelopment, not the root causes. Being at the schools on a daily basis can be emotionally draining. The highs are great, and are what make the whole experience worthwhile, but the lows can really get you down.



Response

- First of all, this feeling is completely normal, and exists in all volunteer programs, especially those abroad. Whether we are volunteering 2 weeks, 2 months, or 2 years, we will all feel disillusioned and frustrated with our involvement at some point. The reality is that it can take a long time to see the results of the work we are doing. Although it may not be obvious, the time you spend in the schools or communities adds a whole new dimension to their education or lives, and may be one of the keys to their future successes. And again, we are in the business of affecting individuals, not systems. One important thing to remember is that what you are doing is so much more than nothing at all. All the help you give the children is a bonus in their lives. Without you personally they would not receive it.

**Manage Your Expectations and Set Reasonable Goals:** Don't fool yourself into believing that you have come into this situation with no expectations and that you are open to anything. It is better to dig out your expectations, articulate them, and realize they might not be met. You should work hard to let go of the expectation that you'll be able to fix all of the problems that you encounter. Many volunteers begin to look for volunteer experiences with one set of expectations, arrive with another set, and depart for home with a completely different set of experiences and lessons learned. We can all help each other with this by positive discussion amongst ourselves.

## *Other Common Challenges...*

### *... Within the School System*

#### **Lack of Concentration / Lack of active learning skills**

This is best tackled by using a variety of different and inter-active teaching methods. Focus on a theme and practice/reinforce it in as many ways as you can think of. e.g., chanting, using rhythm or music, games etc.

#### **Children repeatedly asking for things, especially pencils/exercise books**

We do have a supply to use at our discretion, though lending is better than giving. Make it clear that you want it back at the end of the class. This applies especially with scissors, glue etc. You should count them out to the children at the start of the class making in quite clear how many you have given out, and then count them back in at the end of the class..

#### **Variable timetable / teacher absences**

There are rarely 2 days the same at school, and the best way to deal with this is to be flexible and adaptable. School may finish early without prior warning due to meetings/the weather/exams/just because they fancy it. It can be frustrating, but the best way to minimize the misunderstandings is to maintain good communication with the teachers. Let them know when you arrive and when you leave. Make a point of speaking to them every day even if it is just to check that there are classes 'as normal' tomorrow.



## SUPPORT FOR VOLUNTEERS

It is important to remember that teachers study for several years at University and do practical training in order to become teachers. It is not expected that you will suddenly become a fully qualified teacher. There are lots of materials in the office that will give you tips on how to cope, and how best to tutor children effectively. **By giving them your full individual attention you are giving them something very special** and fulfilling an important role.

We all go through the same ups and downs, and talking about it with the other volunteers really does help. If things ran smoothly and all the kids were perfect students, they wouldn't need our help.

It can take a long time to see direct results from the work we do, and although it may not be immediately obvious, the time you spend with these children adds a whole new dimension to their education that they otherwise wouldn't have access to. It really is benefiting them on a daily basis. Accept the low points and difficulties as part of how life is here in Nicaragua, and embrace the highs - they are well worth it!

All volunteers are encouraged to come and talk to Pauline (Director), Karen (Administrator) or Donald (Volunteer coordinator) at any time. You do not have to wait for a meeting.

**La Esperanza Granada wishes your volunteering experience to be very rewarding. We appreciate your time and dedication to this organization and hope that the new professional and personal skills you will develop in this role will help you in your future.**

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