

Report of experience of the “Volunteer School for Water”

Expectation of the voluntary

I just finished my studies in environmental engineering in August of this year in Switzerland. In order to take some time to do something different, learn a new language, discover a new country and its culture, I decided to travel in Latin America. Besides these aspects, getting more professional experiences related to the field of the environment was one of the main targets of my travel too. In that perspective, this voluntary was for me like the perfect combination to start my travel time. Even though I did not have any experience in teaching classes and was only used to help children with their homework, I saw that as a good opportunity to actually try to sensitize children to that subject and at the same time improve my Spanish skills, which was really poor at that time.

Situation by entry and objectives

As I came at the school three weeks before Christmas holidays I had only few days to get familiar with the school and the program. After a little talk with Felipe about his expectations for the School of Water, related possibilities of activities and a short visit at the college of Cuitiva time came to actually start the school. My tasks were teaching English and environmental culture to the children of the 6, 7 and 8 grades (11 to 14 years old). As the subject is really broad, it gives a wide range of possibilities and a lot of freedom to the volunteers to actually do whatever they want.

Experience

For me, even though it was a very short time experience, it has been a very rewarding one. Of course, I would lie if I would say that everything was perfectly coordinated all the time but no major issues showed up during this month. The major uncertainties were mainly related to the schedule of the classes, mainly coming from a lack of communication with the other teachers (mainly due to the language barrier) and also the organization of a cleaning excursion to end up the class. However, teaching and exchanging with children about the environment and the culture differences between Colombia and Europa, as well as organizing an event with many different entities in a foreign language and country was a very enriching task.

Recommendations

In order to allow a better start of the school and not have the feeling to just be put into the cold water, it might be important to launch communications with the ex-volunteers and the new ones, or at least between the volunteers that are working at the same time. Also sharing some of the teaching contents or ideas of activities could be a good option.

Report of activity

I went every day at the college from 7.30 to 12.00 approximately and was teaching two different classes the same subject during two hours more or less. One of the teachers gave me a time schedule when I arrived with the classes I was supposed to teach but it turned out that I have the total freedom of going in any classes I wanted during the time that I wanted.

In order to raise the awareness of the children on environmental issues, three main topics were covered. These three leading topics were the following:

- 1) to identify the sources of water worldwide and related scarcity by getting familiar with the notion of “water = blue gold”
- 2) to identify the water consumption at a large (country) and small scale (home)
- 3) to be aware of the sources of contamination and possibilities to avoid and/or mitigate them.

All these subjects have been presented in English and translated in Spanish, either through prepared presentations or open discussions. Through different games (mimes, Pictionary,...) they learnt and practiced basic vocabulary and expressions in English related to the 3 topics previously mentioned.

In addition to that and in order to end up the school with an activity that the children will remember a recreational and educational excursion has been made. The aim was to sensitize them to the impacts of throwing waste away by organizing a beach cleaning at the Tota’s Lake. Thanks to the support of many different entities, such as the college of Santo Domingo for their support in the organization, the municipality of Cuitiva for the transport, Coservicios for supplying the materials needed to collect the waste, the Finca San Pedro for supplying the support to make prevention posters and volunteers to supervise children, as well as the militaries of the battalion and the police of Cuitiva for ensuring the safety of the children, three cleaning excursions have successfully been conducted. All the organization aspects have been covered by Felipe in a first time and then Katharina (another volunteer from Germany) and I have had all the responsibilities. It was quite challenging to have everything under control but at the end everything went really well and we all have a lot of fun.