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El Salvador: Improvement of Life through Education

Education is most certainly a privilege that many Americans take for granted. Every facet of education contributes to society. Not only does it allow you to expand your knowledge, but school is a major factor in determining who you become as a person. Unfortunately, as is the problem with too many third world countries, the education system in El Salvador is sorely lacking. Many of the country's issues, such as the high rates of violence or poverty, can be attributed to the inadequate schooling. In order to fundamentally improve all parts of life, improving education must be prioritized over any other issue.

El Salvador – bordered by Guatemala, Honduras, and the Pacific Ocean – is known for being the smallest country in Central America. The capital is San Salvador, where many downtown areas are actually quite modernized considering it is classified as a third world country. Outside of the city lie wide expanses of farm land, as well as resorts lining the coast. It has 6.49 million people, as of a 2020 estimate, living on about 8,124 square miles of land (World Population Review). That means that the population density is around 799 people per square mile. According to Land Links, eighty-two percent of El Salvador's land is used for agriculture while only four percent is urban areas. The remaining fourteen percent is classified as “deforested land”.

Their cash crops include coffee beans, corn, cacao, cotton, and sugar cane; a great deal of other crops are also grown in El Salvador, such as tropical fruit. Statistics from the Food and Agriculture Organization show that the average family farm is approximately 4.3 acres and a business farm is about 316 acres in El Salvador. For comparison, the average American farm is around 444 acres (US Farm Data). Agriculture does not come without its risks, especially in El Salvador. The country's regular seasons are quite strong; the winter – which runs from May through October – comes with daily thunderstorms, and their dry season – which starts in November and ends in April – is notorious for extremely hot, dry weather. To make matters worse, just as recently as 2015, the El Niño Phenomena brought major drought into the region. The Food and Agriculture Organization stated, “...hundreds of thousands of subsistence farmers have suffered the partial or total loss of their crops planted for the main grain season that runs from May to September”. Though it is a small country, El Salvador has twenty-three active volcanos. Volcanic activity and earthquakes continually impact the country. To improve even just the quality of agriculture, it is vital that the agriculturalist of El Salvador become educated on ways of dealing with and working through any expected and unexpected challenges.

It is obvious to see that the Salvadoran way of life reflects the adversities they face. According to the Borgen Project, thirty-five percent of the population lives in poverty. For those families, income can be as low as \$320 per month, (Borgen Project). In urbanized areas, the average monthly income is \$2,360. Current Salvadoran citizen Monica Pacheco took time to explain low versus middle income families. “Typical families in El Salvador have usually four kids, sometimes more. Could be that they are living with a single parent or their grandparents take care of them. Sometimes it's all those things in one house. They usually end up working on farm land. As for education, they go to public schools, but in some cases, they stop at ninth grade. Middle income families usually send their kids to private schools. The family itself is usually composed of up to three kids. And just like anywhere, there could be two parents or a

single parent, it just depends. But pretty much everybody finishes high school and goes on to higher education” (Monica Pacheco).

In El Salvador, it is common to have children, parents, and grandparents living in the same home in order to save money and take care of family. Their diet is also reflective of the financial struggles they face. Rice, beans, and tortillas are a staple of many Salvadoran meals. Not only is it cheap, but the combo provides complimenting nutrients that sustain the body. In markets, a lot of fresh fruit and vegetables are sold as well. In the cities, access to plumbing and potable water is not nearly as much of an issue. In the most rural parts of the country is where much of those type of problems arise. A large amount of water that would be available to drink is now contaminated. Factories dumping waste into the water, cutting down rainforests for fields, etc. are all contributing factors to rural El Salvador’s lack of potable water (NPR).

As mentioned, the education system in El Salvador is lacking. “Education in El Salvador is made up of public, private, and religious schools. The education system is made up of one year of kindergarten called Preschool” and “9 years of basic education” (El Salvador Missions). Especially in the rural areas, there are a number of factors that prevent children from getting a decent schooling. National Geographic puts it best when stating, “. . .many families cannot afford the cost of supplies and transportation”. A staggering thirty-five percent of the population lives in poverty; this means many cannot even afford the cost of transporting their children to school. Another factor pertaining to the impoverished is that children will start working at a very young age in order to provide for the family. There are often kids walking in the streets or along the coast trying to sell an assortment of crafts and cheap products. This in itself creates a harmful loop. Struggling parents use their kids to create an extra source of income. These kids grow up uneducated and turn to similar jobs as their parents. In turn, when they have kids, they have to resort to the same decision of whether education or immediate income is more important. Not only does missing out on school cause problems, but being on the streets creates even bigger, more dangerous problems for children.

Three Salvadorans that were interviewed for the purpose of this essay agreed when it came to this issue: gang violence is a direct correlation of a lack of education. Marcela Rickels – one of the interviewees – was born in El Salvador and attended a private, Catholic girls-only school. At the age of twenty-five, she moved to the United States. Mrs. Rickels is now a para educator for the Midland School District in Wyoming, Iowa. She had this to say on the topic: “Some of the kids, because of being in the streets, get exposed to so many things without supervision. Anybody can try to influence them to take the wrong path and make the wrong choices. It’s exactly in the streets that gangs try to start recruiting new members at young ages. Then when one kid is in a gang at school, they could try to get the other kids at school to join”. Mrs. Rickels did point out that because she attended a private school, she never had this problem.

It is very clear that the issues with education are with the public and rural schools. Salvador Romero, a father of four, currently resides in San Salvador. When asked why he sent his kids to private schools, he answered with, “Two reasons, first being that education in public schools lower than private. The second consideration is that people with higher economic standings prefer private school. Public schools primarily end up being for the poor”. Miguel Pacheco is a lifelong resident of San Salvador and works in logistics. He was asked how if being educated in a private school gave him more opportunities in life. Mr. Pacheco’s answer was, “Yes, I know if you go to a private school it’s because you have the money to pay for it. You’ll get better education and better opportunities. . . it gives you better chances when getting a

job”. It seems that not only does the type of school you attend affect your quality of education, but it represents your social status as well.

On top of gang violence and the quality of public schooling in comparison to private schools, corruption is often a term associated with El Salvador. One of those notable examples of corruption in El Salvador is the case of Antonia Saca. His term lasted from 2004 to 2009 and he represented the National Coalition Party. In that time, he managed to steal \$300 million from the government of El Salvador. In 2018 he finally pleaded guilty, but he only has to serve ten years in prison. Unfortunately, Antonia Saca was the only president actually convicted of stealing from the country. Former president Francisco Flores died while in house arrest and Mauricio Funes fled to Nicaragua where he was granted asylum (ABC News). One such way to try to end the long line of corruption in El Salvador is obviously to educate. The general public will in turn be able to create the “right” decisions when it comes to politicians. On the other hand, politicians will be better able to lead the country.

Not all schools in El Salvador are substandard, though. The Escuela Americana, EA for short, is an example of what every school in El Salvador should strive to become. EA is a private school located in San Salvador. They have almost every sport and club an average American school would have, a botanical science facility, and a very large campus. The teachers, faculty, and administration are highly educated and teach with their vision statement in mind. That statement is as follows: “For all EA students to achieve their full potential and become responsible global citizens”. Some of their perks may seem trivial, but the effort that EA puts into providing the best learning environment is clear, and that makes all the difference.

However, the point is not to become EA, but rather to learn from them, and from other examples of a good education we can observe. Concerning excellent education, Finland is an obvious illustration. “Finland is the answer – a country rich in intellectual and educational reform has initiated over the years a number of novel and simple changes that have completely revolutionized their educational system. They outrank the United States and are gaining on Eastern Asian countries”, says the World Economic Forum. This website lists many points that El Salvador would benefit from implementing, such as, “Consistent instruction from the same teachers ...Providing professional options past a traditional college degree ...and Cooperation not competition”. By keeping one teacher with the same grade, the teacher is better able to gauge specific student’s needs. The World Economic Forum goes as far to say that, “During this time, the teacher can take on the role of a mentor or even a family member”. Perhaps a familial relationship with students is what Salvadoran educators need. They may be able to convince poor parents that keeping their kids in school is what is best in the long run. One of the other points was “Providing professional options past a traditional college degree”; that just means that Finland offers and advertises trade schools and other post-secondary schools that are equally as advantageous as college. This option also leaves less possibility for the extreme debt notorious to achieving a college education. One of Finland’s biggest points is their refusal to buy into the idea of education being a competition. This can be seen in a few different ways. For one, there are no standardized tests, rather students are passed based on individual progress. On top of that, “Finland’s educational system doesn’t worry about artificial or arbitrary merit-based systems. There are no lists of top performing schools or teachers. It’s not an environment of competition – instead, cooperation is the norm” (Weforum.org).

One of the biggest factors is funding. There seems to be a lack of financial backing for public schools in El Salvador. This means that supplies are limited, the teachers are not paid adequately, and the facilities are not quality. Mr. Pacheco had this to say about funding: “The government has to invest money in the schools and infrastructure and invest money in good teachers. Also scholarships would help a lot”. Mr.

Romero also mentioned that it is important to motivate teachers with better pay. Teachers who are properly compensated for their work may be more willing to work harder, or a better pay may attract better teachers. Research done by Dave Reid of Michigan State University actually points out that teachers in the US that are payed more end up staying in the profession longer. An article by Tim Walker of neaToday states, "...higher pay promotes competition and therefore more and better teaching applicants". Therefore, by increasing the funding of the education system, El Salvador should see an improvement in the quality of the teachers and their work. All in all, funding is vital to this cause.

Mrs. Rickels had some very thoughtful ideas when it came to ways to improve the education system. She said, "...one thing I would change is to bring more involvement in extracurriculars like sports and clubs. The idea is that if children have ways to stay active and have fun in school, they will be more likely to want to go to school and learn. A great idea for a club could be where students make crafts. Then instead of going to the streets and selling them, they hold a small market sale every other week possibly." This would not only give families another reason to send their kids to school, but these same kids will stay away from bad influences and danger in the streets.

The issue remains, in a country where schooling is not viewed as important in society, how is this issue brought to the attention of the public? Protesting for funding and a revision of the Salvadoran education system may very well be the way to show the urgency of the situation. The Black Lives Matter movement in the US is a great example of how a collective of people with a mission can bring awareness to a major issue. El Salvador has very recently shown that they are fully capable of protesting as well. "Thousands of people participated in protests in El Salvador on May 13 by banging pots and pans and blowing the horns of their vehicles to express their dissatisfaction with President Nayib Bukele's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic" (Peoplesdispatch.org). When the event was brought up to Mrs. Rickels, she had this to say: "Nayib Bukele ended up not getting what he wanted because parliament decided to listen to the people protesting". The goal would be to have a small group of protesters bring awareness to the issues of the education system. With the attention of the public, more and more will join the cause. Eventually, with enough traction, the people could once again bring an urgent issue to the government and be heard.

Protesting could also get the attention of more than just the government. If the world began to take notice, it is very possible that multiple organizations would step in to help in the form of volunteer groups. These groups along with donors have been known to assist with other pressing issues, such as water quality and building homes – why not education? The goal would be to have the volunteers and donors help any given school get off their feet. With proper assistance, all Salvadoran schools would be able to sustain good practices.

Such organizations could include buildON, the International Volunteer HQ, and GVI. The website for buildOn displays this on their front page: "We build schools with villages that lack adequate classrooms – where students learn in huts, are taught under trees, or walk miles to a neighboring villages. Or don't go to school at all". Mr. Romero even previously mentioned that the poor infrastructure of the schools is a factor that is holding the whole system back. Working in El Salvador would not be that large of an adjustment for the program as well. The front page of buildOn.org displays a map that shows the locations they have worked in, including Guatemala. The International Volunteer HQ, also known as IVHQ, would be another group that could greatly aid El Salvador. IVHQ's goal is to, "...provide assistance to the achievement of long term community goals in countries all over the world" (volunteerhq.org). El Salvador's "long term community goal" would be to assist in building the education system, whether it be through teaching, supplying, or construction. It is important to note that IVHQ – much like buildOn – already operates in Guatemala. GVI seems to be one of the most advantageous programs for El Salvador.

They “Volunteer to teach children in...remote locations where schools are often overcrowded and teachers are a limited, stretched out resource” (gviusa.com). This statement seems to define most of the problem El Salvador has with their education system. Though reliance on volunteer groups is not a sustainable practice, it would most definitely be a step in the right direction.

El Salvador has many issues stemming from a lack of education, such as poverty, violence, and political corruption. That does not mean that they cannot be fixed. With the improvement of education being more prioritized, all aspects of life will improve immensely – everything from food scarcity to politics will continually change for the better. Quality education provides hope for the future of El Salvador.

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