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A Public School in São Paulo

My group of twenty-five American students walk off our private bus onto an unfamiliar street 40 minutes outside the center of São Paulo, the most populous urban habitat in the southern hemisphere. Our driver has taken us west across a polluted river towards the poorer periphery of the metropolitan giant. He navigated the shifting, tangled web of traffic and infrastructure as if possessing a sixth sense as we chatted expectantly in the back of the vehicle. Though we are all accomplished college students, field trips still excite us.

As we cross the street and pass through a gated entryway, I can't help but notice the disheveled look of the place. The building is ugly. All concrete and chipped paint, it hardly seems an optimum environment for learning. I am about to tour a public school in Brazil.

The principal comes to greet us outside the main door. She smiles as she addresses us gringos, sharing with us information about the school – the number of students enrolled, the shoestring operating budget, the night classes offered to those who work during the day. She is proud of her school's role in the neighboring community.

We enter through a small common room and into a courtyard. Two young boys, seemingly on their own, stand by a pile of rocks and rumble. They stop what they are doing to watch curiously as our group observes the area. The expressions on their faces grow especially animated when they see me.

I see a covered gym area where kids are playing with balls of various shapes and sizes. We move on. I sit in a stuffy one-room library with the world map that needs updated. We hear about the children's book program being implemented by the government. There's more to see. I smile awkwardly in front of a class of dark-haired adolescents that smile awkwardly back from their desks. It's difficult to determine who is studying who more intensely. We view the new computer lab with the government-funded machines and drab walls. Some of us are impressed – considering the circumstances.

We see it all in less than an hour. As my group readies itself to leave, I stand patiently in the common room we entered from the main door. It appears to be a cafeteria right now. Bright-eyed children carrying bowls of rice and beans eat around me. Some sit and eat. Others stand. I can feel their stares lingering on me, crawling up my long frame. It's as if I am the only foreigner in the room. They have never seen anything like me before.

The small one addresses me - asks me a question. I stoop down and tilt my head towards his voice, carefully weighing every word. "How tall are you?" he asks.

"One-hundred and ninety-five centimeters," I reply. It's a question I've been asked before. The boy continues to gawk openly. A few of his classmates join him.

"Do you play basketball?" one asks.

"Of course," I say, not voluntarily elaborating beyond a basic confirmation.

Now the dam has been breached. I'm surrounded on all sides as more children press closer.

They want to get a good look at me – take in my staggering height, my light-colored hair, my clown-size feet. *Where are you from? What is your name? What size are your shoes?*

The imperative questions travel through the air towards the ceiling, towards my face. I look intently at each questioner, making sure to pronounce my words clearly. One boy tells me he plays basketball too. Another tells me he has heard of the United States, but has never visited. One courageous girl races up to me and places her foot next to mine before quickly sprinting away in laughter like she had just touched a hot burner and escaped the consequences.

Someone tells me it is time to leave. I wade through a sea of rambunctious midgets to get to the door, saying my goodbyes. Taking one last glance through the slotted metal doors, I can still see the curious faces looking back. A final thought passes between my ears as I walk away: Maybe this building isn't so ugly after all.