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A key focus of my research agenda area the educational experiences of children and youth in out-of-home care. Some of my recent work has involved comparing policies at the intersection the child welfare and education systems in Costa Rica, Panama, and Wisconsin. A key difference between the two Central American contexts and Wisconsin's is that the first two rely much more heavily in shelter or congregate care for children and youth in out-of-home care, while Wisconsin (and the US more broadly) has been stepping away from this type of care. In the case of Panama specifically, a high majority (about 96%) of children and youth formally in the out-of-home care system are living in shelters/congregate care settings.

Most of my previous research (documented in my Curriculum and Instruction master's thesis) was based on analyses of policy documents and communication with local expert informants. To potentially expand on this work, an IRIS award from UW-Madison allowed me to travel to Panama for ten days. I am thankful for this award which made this trip possible covering travel, lodging, food, and transportation expenses.

The goals of this trip included:

- (a) Visiting shelters for children and youth in out-of-home care.
- (b) Meeting with shelter leaders and/or staff to get to know, informally, in more depth about their experiences working with children and youth at the shelters and their access to educational services.
- (c) Discussing potential research collaborations.
- (d) Meeting with government actors involved in broader policy and other decision-making processes regarding this population of children and youth.

I visited two shelters, one located in the metropolitan area of Panama City, province of Panama, and another one located in the province of Chiriquí, near the border between Panama and Costa Rica. During these visits I was able to get to know the shelters, have conversations with some of the people in different service roles (e.g., caregiving, management, food services) and listen to their perspectives in relation to the educational experiences of children and youth in care. I also met with one governmental actor who shared with me some of their insights on the national policy framework for supporting children and youth who have experienced abuse and/or neglect. It was a wonderful experience to visit shelters located in two very different geographical and sociocultural regions of the country.

Overall, I was able to confirm some of the observations I found through my documental research and get more nuance and richness on many others. I was also able to discuss about research needs and interests from the perspectives of actors in the shelters and the system more broadly. For example, on the current national interest / effort underway to transition from a shelter care-based to a foster care-based system in the country, and all the policy and practice efforts that might come with that transition. I also learned about perceived barriers to these efforts. Through these meetings I also learned about challenges in relation to inter-

institutional collaboration, conflicts between public interests and private management models, the role of religion-based institutions in the management of and education of children and youth in shelters/congregate care and consequential tensions. I also had the opportunity to hear from the caregiver professionals themselves and how much care, their passion, and the effort they put into their work. Importantly, many more questions emerged and remain for me as I continue with this research.

I am very grateful with the Institute for Regional and International Studies for their support of this exploratory trip. It is my hope that it will be the beginning of future research projects in partnership with staff members, children, and youth in the context of out-of-home care settings in Panama.