

# Starting at Zero

Sixth graders research historical places in their neighborhood

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*On a cool autumn day in a crowded plaza in downtown Madrid, eight sixth graders circle up to learn from each other's research. Amidst the hustling crowd of pedestrians, Alejandra nervously looks at her notes and explains the architecture and history around them.*

*"Puerta del Sol is one of the original gates that protected Madrid in the 15<sup>th</sup> century," she explains to her classmates. "And today all roads in Spain start right here at a plaque called kilometer zero." Some students are surprised and some skeptical at this news.*

*"Really? Where?" asks a boy and a brief energetic hunt ensues to find the plaque amidst the bustling crowds.*

*"It's over here!" exclaims a boy. The students converge on a star-like emblem in front of one of the many old plaza buildings. They crouch to examine it more closely.*

*"One of the myths of it," Alejandra adds, "is that if you stand on it you are destined to return to Madrid."*

*"Cool!" exclaims another boy. To their delight, and to the pleasure of many passersby, they take turns standing on it.*

These sixth graders attend the International School SEK Santa Isabel, a private pre-k to 6<sup>th</sup> grade school of 350 students in the historic downtown center of Madrid. The students and teachers view Madrid as their campus and regularly explore and engage with people and places in their community through what they call learning paths. "The students designed this learning path," their History & Culture teacher, William, explains. His students researched places they were interested in and, during a two hour walk of the city, they taught one another about their significance. "It's important to make history visible and real so students can see the past in our surrounding buildings, plazas and statues they encounter," he adds.



## On the Learning Path

With hands full of pamphlets they made to explain each site, the students step out of the school and onto the old cobblestone streets outside their school. The mother of one student, Alejandra, joins the group to help William with the students on the brisk trip and learn from their research. Along the maze of old sidewalks, the students laugh, play skipping games, and chat as they pass familiar places. Some students take the time to review their notes in preparation for teaching their peers.



After a short walk, the students enter an enormous, sun-filled plaza humming with activity. Three students stand in front of the group to explain Spain's Golden Age and why this place symbolizes it. "It was built in 1620 during the Golden Age and there's a statue of Philip III on a horse over there," Ismael explains, pointing to a monument at its center. William and other students ask questions about who built it, how it was used then and how it is used today.



"It held many historical events, including it was the site of many executions during the inquisitions," Lydia adds and points around the sun-filled plaza. After some discussion, another group takes the stage to share their research on a different topic that is reflected in this same plaza.

"This is also an important place during the Peninsular War," Anna explains and shares details about the French occupation. "This was where Ferdinand VII abdicated the throne to Joseph Bonaparte in 1808," she adds and makes a connection, "and there were lots of executions here then, too." The students discuss the grizzly past but note how today workers are setting the plaza for happier times: the Christmas fair in a few weeks.

Reflecting on the plaza, one student shares, "Living the experience, you remember it better than seeing the photo. In the Plaza Mayor, I imagined that it was burning. It's more real to be in the place. It stuck more in my memory. It impacts us more, and we remember it more being in the place. We remember it better."





Their trek continues through the warren of cobblestone streets and shops in the old center of Madrid. Soon they emerge at another expansive plaza, Puerta del Sol. Here Alejandra and her partner Sofia, share their research about the Bourbons, Palacio Real, and, of course, Kilometer Zero. William gently quizzes the students about when and who built the palace, the significance of a statue, and where the sun rises in the plaza. A few students recognize this place as the site of the country's New Year Eve celebration that is annually televised. Their tight circle is broken once students learn about kilometer zero: where is it? Once it is found and fun is had, the students continue while one of the students reflects on how nervous she was but how it helped her a lot to know that she was with her teammates. "I had a pretty good time, really, and especially handing out pamphlets to the people in the Plaza. This is how people learn!"



The commotion of the city quickly dissipates when the students enter the natural beauty of Parque Retiro, just a few minutes walk from Puerto del Sol. Here the last pair, Julia and Raquel, share the history of the park and the Statue of the Fallen Angel which stands behind them. "And today, the park has the oldest tenant in Madrid," Julia adds. "It's an olive tree that's 627 years old, which we call the grandfather of Madrid." Students share parts of the park they enjoy the most, the pond, the street market and the artists walk that hosts many performers.

On the return trip back to school, the students are proud that all their research and hard work has paid off. Most students hand out extra pamphlets to people passing by, who, to the joy of the students, gladly accept them.

"I'm very impressed with what they showed they learned," William reflects. "Their clear presentations and pamphlets showed the historical knowledge they built through their research. Many were able to answer my questions, which they didn't expect." He has done several learning paths that anchor historical concepts in the everyday neighborhood of his students.

"I really liked working on this project in the classroom with my classmates because we had time to talk and share," Julia shares afterwards.

"We liked that they told us that we could create, design, and shape the learning path however we wanted." Anna adds, "I found it wonderful because on an individual level I have been able to learn the difference between the Peninsular War and the Civil War, which people think are the same, but they aren't. And on a group level I have been able to learn about the Bourbons and El Retiro through the presentations of my classmates."

