Happen Inc.

Community Outreach Project

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Exploring Community Engagement – Jessica King

Going to WordPlay made me think differently about community programs because I had never been in an area where kids needed a place to go after school so they could stay out of trouble. I was used to thinking of community programs as focusing on issues that an adult would typically encounter and that would normally not have anything to do with kids or education. In fact, the Boys and Girls Club was the only organization I knew of that was meant to give less privileged kids a way to level the playing field by providing a variety of services and activities. Although WordPlay is significantly smaller than a national organization and is still under development, what makes it special is that it is a non-profit created by Northside for the Northside community.

WordPlay’s focus is on educating, nurturing growth, and bettering the community through education, creativity and inspiration in all school-aged children. They strive to give kids a safe, fun place where they can go to after school to get help with homework, relax, read, and use their imaginations to create stories on myths and legends gathered from the community residents. Their entire space is filled with various interactive artifacts for the kids to play with and provide inspiration for their stories. Hearing the WordPlay board members talk about the organization they have created was incredibly inspiring, and I was able to see just how united the Northside community is to be able to identify a problem and seek out a solution. With this in mind I became interested in learning about more non-profit organizations that are meant to keep kids on a good path.

Writing about my educational experiences in my blog left me thinking about how lucky I was to have had such a wholesome childhood. I never had to worry about anything, especially not money, and every day was a great day. I was happy with my home life, I had friends, I was involved in after-school activities for fun and most of all I loved my classes. “Research has determined that the impact of family income is larger for children in low-income families than those in high-income families, and family income matters most in early childhood” (The Achievement Gap) but I was given the opportunity to learn without the distractions less privileged students would have been forced to face as a result of circumstance.

I knew from prior personal research that one of the first parts of a school’s restructuring program is to ensure that the kids’ basic needs for safety, food and clothing need to be met. A child that is constantly hungry, cold, or scared cannot be expected to perform well in any learning environment so matter how well ranked; other aspects that influence education include: “parent participation, student mobility, birth weight, lead poisoning, hunger and nutrition, reading to young children, television watching, parent availability, summer gains or losses in learning, rigor in school curriculum, teacher preparation, teacher experience, teacher turnover, class size, technology-assisted instruction, and school safety” (The Achievement Gap). I had never experienced this kind of lifestyle nor had I ever encountered another student that had to endure so many struggles. Therefore when being introduced to Roberts Academy, I was not expecting to see such a high population of underprivileged students, many of which were on the free or reduced lunch program.

The school is among 32 other schools in the community that is blessed to have a resource coordinator working to better the school. Due to it’s reputation for being capable of catering to a diverse community, the school attracts attention from many international students and students from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. The school proudly serves as a host for many general community events that give back, including the international Welcome Center, homework help programs, free dinners, dance groups, board meetings, food drives and many more.

I learned a lot from Ms. Power, the resource coordinator for Roberts Academy, about the behind-the-scenes work done for the purpose of providing the Cincinnati Public School kids with not only the most basic need, food, but also new clothes, health care, and a safe place for social events. Ms. Power’s job is so indispensable to the kids, the families, the school, and ultimately the entire community. Her efforts to bridge the academic gaps amongst minorities is very important since, “white students outperform Black and Hispanic students on all these measures of academic achievement” (The Achievement Gap). She works to give students the best chance for succeeding in school, helps parents learn how to provide and assist their children, helps the school by instilling better programs to serve their main population of kids, and also unites the community by creating after-school events at the school that are free, educational and open to the public. The school’s motto for community engagements is that it must be applicable to education, recreational fun and community purposes.

Roberts Academy was a very eye-opening experience for me because it allowed me to take the theories on the betterment of school programs from books and see them being applied to real life situations. “It is clear that when it comes to academics, low income and some racial groups of students need more support than their peers” (The Achievement Gap), but with the resources provided at Roberts Academy, I believe they are creating outliers, “those who have been given opportunities- and who have had the strength and presence of mind to seize them” (267). I was very pleased to learn of the great diversity of the students’ backgrounds; the majority were minorities on free or reduced priced lunches. Most importantly, I came away with sense of satisfaction knowing that there are people who’s job it is to ensure underprivileged students will be given the opportunity to succeed academically.

For the outreach project, I partnered up with Morgan Fuller because we were both interested in exploring Happen Inc., an organization we did not have time to look at on our Northside trip with the class. Since we were aware that much like the incredibly enchanting WordPlay, Happen Inc. is also a popular after-school venue for schoolchildren, we decided that it was the place for us to become engaged in. We prepared for our visit by coming up with a list of questions that if answered could be used to compare and contrast Happen Inc. with WordPlay, for which our class was kindly given a tour of and a detailed presentation for.

Our interest in kids programs stemmed from the fact that we believe education is the most important part of raising a prosperous generation in communities, as The Achievement Gap states, “Educational attainment is the one factor that is known to provide a pathway to greater equality in opportunities for jobs, income, economic security, and overall quality of life”. Children that are not given the tools to educate themselves and have healthy childhoods cannot be expected to perform as well as other kids that have their every needs met and are also privileged because of their place in the social system. I believe every child needs to be given the opportunity to make a life for themselves no matter what circumstance they are born or happen to be stuck in. Gladwell notes that, “The wealthiest kids come back in September and their reading scores have jumped more than 15 points. The poorest kids come back from the holidays and their reading scores have dropped almost 4 points” (258). This is the result of after-school activities such as those provided by WordPlay and Happen Inc. There is a huge imbalance in privilege and power in the educational system but through non-profit organizations such as WordPlay and Happen Inc. kids can increase their privilege because by changing the education level they will eventually change their power level. I for one, want to be a facilitator and I wanted to find out how these organizations function in their community so that maybe I will be able to do the same one day.

After speaking with the Tommy Rueff on several occasions, we were able to get some answers to our questions and we now know all about Happen Inc., an important all-volunteer organization that benefits the community in an immense way. From him we were able to see just how much support and growth the community services for children still need. Happen Inc. is an award winning arts organization dedicated to letting kids express themselves and to creating life-changing experiences for kids and adults alike. I think that the values they stand for are all very positive and ambitious and I want to help somehow. The best way I can think of is to promote the magnificent efforts of each and every volunteer that dedicates their time to helping kids get involved in healthy and fun art projects.

Happen may focus on closing the privilege, poverty and educational gaps between children, but they also look at the community as a whole and find ways, no matter how small, to help. They are active participants in the Northside community and can be found working behind the scenes in things such as programing connections between community groups to providing fundraising events to beautifying the streets for the holiday season with wreaths and ribbons. Happen works closely with the community Presbyterian Church and the Boys and Girls club to give kids a chance to be paired up with a mentor at Happen Inc. when it is known that their parents are unable to accompany the child.

We concluded that WordPlay and Happen Inc. are similar in many aspects but that they are much more different because of their unique approach to engaging in the community. Happen Inc. is much more involved in the community as a whole as well as carrying for the 7,000 children it sees every year at the diverse art programs provided. Happen can also cater to a larger range of kids because of the versatility that is provided when making art as opposed to reading and writing which is better suited to older kids. Happen Inc. has also been recognized as an outstanding organization by the city of Cincinnati various times and has been nominated for many other prestigious awards.

Our visual presentation was created in the form of a scrapbook because we had felt inspired by WordPlay’s focus on books and Happen Inc.’s focus on creative expression through crafts. Because we took our field experience at WordPlay and tied it to the readings of privilege and power, we wanted to find a way to represent each aspect of the organizations. One thing I learned about community, is that it cannot be based on one individual group’s perception but on a collaboration of all the members. Unity of diversity in a community is important because it prevents discrimination and instead encourages communication between other communities. Conformity is not good because with predominance of sameness, goes all aspects of motivation for growth and change and betterment. If everyone stayed in their positions because of their lack of privilege and no one extended a caring hand, the community would go nowhere. Therefore, it was incredibly important that our visual incorporate both the influences from WordPlay as well as Happen Inc.

My time at UC is relatively short for me to take advantage of all the wonderful community engagement opportunities, however, I feel inspired in new ways to change the way I view my relationship with the community. Social awareness is not something you can just get from reading a newspaper or hearing someone’s story, but something that should be experienced as well; this class instilled some new personal goals that I will do my best to carry out to fulfillment.

From this class I plan on using the knowledge I acquired to embark on a variety of activities that I feel would further my involvement with my community than simply looking for meaningless and quick volunteer opportunities. I feel that now that I am more informed about the social issues surrounding the Cincinnati community, and that it makes me accountable for trying to defend the needs of individuals and groups. I will take into account all the areas of the community that need help the most when deciding where to invest my volunteer hours in because helping set up tables for a club would not give me the same satisfaction as say devoting a few hours to the Drop Inn Center where the volunteers are truly needed to keep the shelter running.

One example of a meaningful community service activity I can be involved in is Bearcat Buddies. I was a part of this tutoring organization for the fall semester because I thought it would be a good experience, and after learning about the effects of privilege and power, I think I will make it a point to participate in Bearcat Buddies every semester. I knew that the kids we would be tutoring were from a population of low-income families that are not able to give their kids all of the things they need to do well in school but I didn’t think too much about what that meant. I now realize that by putting myself in a position of power over these kids that I can greatly influence their motivation to do well in school and go on to get a college degree. I not only want my student to learn language arts, I feel responsible for making sure my tutee feels comfortable enough with her home life to be able to focus on school and I feel the need to provide my tutee with information about college. I know my presence in one kids life may not seem like it would make much of a difference for the community as a whole, but by helping those with less privilege I am part of the underlying change to better the school’s low educational ranking. My efforts to help a community in need will make it easier for others to do the same and in the end I know I am doing something that matters.

My other goal to incorporate my newfound knowledge of community engagement in a meaningful way is to travel abroad with the UC College of Nursing in my junior year through an international clinical experience. The trip could be to Ecuador, Honduras or Tanzania and its purpose is educational as well as a way to make a difference in another part of the world; “students have the opportunity to expand their cross-cultural nursing skills… [and] to gain a new perspective of international health care” (http://nursing.uc.edu/future\_students/undergraduate /international\_clinicals.html). I know I can continue not only to make a difference in myself with regards to community engagement by being exposed to the way less privileged people have to live as a result of their circumstance, but in others as well by helping them push through the circumstances they are bound by and giving them the opportunity at a better life by promoting better health care.

Taking this community engagement seminar taught me much about the community I once took for granted. I found myself stepping out of my comfort zone, experiencing unfamiliar groups, serving in my community in a meaningful way, and engaging in a different social activity on a weekly basis. I grew as a person and I have come away with a much greater sense of the meaning of community that I can now use to see the value in my future experiences.

References

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