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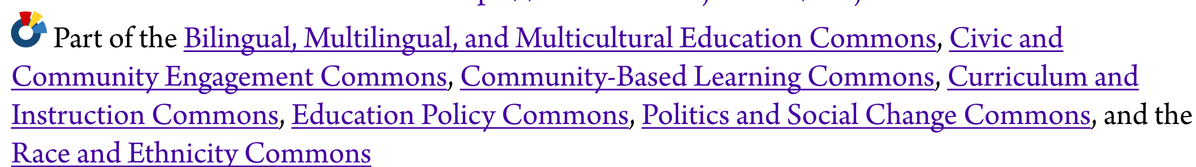
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My Community, Their Community Our Community:

Musings on "Development"

Abstract: This reflection explores the collision of anthropology and civic engagement, a combination that has come to define my senior research. My fieldwork at educational NGOs in Northern Richmond and Northern Ghana caused me to question the local relevancy of NGO management strategies. How can white, middle class teachers appropriately improve educational outcomes for low-income black students in Richmond? Is compulsory education appropriate training for Ghanaian farmers? Academic theories criticize "development" for furthering power against the oppressed, while the qualitative work of NGOs is quantified to fit the needs of grant writers. I find policy can never prescribe perfectly. In order for the management plans of educational NGOs to reflect local community perspective, teachers must self-identify as part of the community. My work as an ethnographer has caused me to reprioritize my identity as a citizen.

<u>Fieldnotes: Northside Richmond, 7/28/2010</u>

"Ms. Grace, you know how to get there, right?"

"I think so, Dwayne…. we turn left here, don't we?"

"Yeah, its down this street at the end."

Halfway into my internship with Kid's House (a pseudonym)[i]*, I am still only somewhat comfortable finding my way around the neighborhood. After a full day of teaching and activities at the summer program for at-risk children, I am driving two program participants, Dwayne and Shamira, to their mom's house. They usually stay with their aunt but mom is off work today. My Corolla slides past New York Chicken; Fifth Street Baptist; Hotchkiss field; hair braiding shops; a corner store; people biking, walking, and standing on street corners, and kids running in yards. The landscape turns from commercial to residential. Rickety skeletons of spacious homes with wide yards hearken to the Victorian era. Now, many structures coldly face the street, their gaping window-eyes patched with plywood.*

"I can't wait to see my mama," Shamira pipes up. She adores her mother, and Shamira clamors for her mother's attention on the rare days her mother is free from work and has sufficient energy for her rambunctious children.

As we pull up to their gray A-frame house, I talk to the kids about their plans for the weekend and we head to the front door. After a minute, Ms. Wright peeks out the screen door in her pajamas. She looks exhausted and is surprised to see us—she expected Dwayne and Shamira to be dropped off at the aunt's house. Shamira and Dwayne look at their mother with big eyes and Shamira grabs her arm. Ms. Wright looks at me tiredly and asks, "Are they staying here?"

I am startled that she is deferring to me, the college student intern, to decide whether she will see her children today. I hesitate and look down at the bubbly kids. "Whatever they want to do…" Shamira immediately begs her mother to stay, and Dwayne wants to stay as well. Ms. Wright quietly concedes.

I consider my relationship with Ms. Wright as I drive home. In Northside, I am a teacher, a mentor, an ethnographer and a friend. In a straightforward discussion of discursive power, it would be easy to simplify Ms. Wright as the local insider and myself as the unfamiliar 'outsider' (DeLind 1998). In reality our identities within the Northside neighborhood are more complex (Crewe and Harrison 1998). I advocate for a development perspective that "places developers and the developed, self and other, within a common framework" (Van Ufford *et al*. 2005). At the Wright's house, my identities are tied to authority. Though I may not be comfortable with Ms. Wright deferring to my decision, I can work to better understand her worldview so that in the future my decisions may be more sensitive to her work schedule. "Natives can be activists and

academics can be natives:" I cannot prescribe perfectly, and Ms. Wright can write her own story (DeLind 1998).

Community development is fraught with contentions and risks. But, if we remain frozen in a theoretical critique of power, the oppressed will not have their consciousness raised (Van Ufford *et al.* 2003). The divide between the oppressed and the oppressor will limit each to their own reality. Education is commonly a part of the agenda to reduce poverty (Apple 1982). I seek to closely examine how Non-Governmental Organizations (I will use the abbreviation NGO to describe all non-profit organizations) work to support low-income Americans in Richmond and subsistence farmers in Ghana towards succeeding in formal school systems. As a representative of Kid's House, I began to wonder if I had supported Ms. Wright as a parent, or if, in supporting the program goals, I was training her children away from her world.

My fieldwork occurred in Richmond, Virginia during the summer of 2010, and in Tamale, Ghana in November 2010. In both settings I worked with NGO supplemental education programs in low-income communities: Kid's House, in Richmond, and Literacy Support, in Tamale. I explored what organizations mean by "education" and how staff imagine positive change in the disadvantaged communities where they work. In Ghana and the United States, oppressed communities face similar injustices. Education in Ghana has been influenced by the bias and exclusion of colonialism, and in Richmond, schools have been influenced by the legacy of slavery and the civil rights movement.

Historically, education worked to prepare individuals for life in their home communities. For wealthy classes, this meant cultivating a student's abilities through a tutor. Rural families relied on community support networks to educate their children. As education became nationalized it began to embrace conformity within government boundaries. Rather than

establishing the individual's role in a local community, public school systems establish the individual's role within the nation as a citizen and a worker (Burbules and Torres 2000). Students whose culture or livelihood contradicts with the public school's agenda frequently face diminished educational outcomes (Bourdieu 1973). National standards in both Ghana and Richmond trace back to an Anglo-Saxon tradition of formal schooling, and this heritage communicates a problematic message about the culture of a successful citizen (Apple 1995). Increasingly, NGOs in Tamale and Richmond are realizing the tie between cultural backgrounds and educational outcomes. Moving forward, NGOs are poised to re-localize the process of education.

The populations served by these educational NGOs would commonly be designated as "poor" by development organizations, academics, and the citizens' own governments (Moeser 2012). I find the term "poverty" in the English language simplifies the many ways an individual can be described and highlights their deficiency of economic and material resources. An economic definition discounts intrinsic cultural values associated with communities that lack wealth in the economic sense. Students and families who participate in educational NGO programs will often be termed "the oppressed" throughout the paper. Naming economically poor populations as oppressed speaks to the power exerted in the process of creating poverty (Freire 1970). The NGOs studied in this project are working against many types of oppressors: biased policies, racism, capitalistic goals, stereotypes, and an individualistic civic culture (Moeser 2012, Dreier 2000). Poverty does not exist passively: it is the byproduct of the active decisions of oppressors. Legitimized national school agendas have the power to encourage social conformity through discourse. NGOs must work to reconcile the conflicting norms of the oppressed and the oppressors.

I do not seek to critique management choices, but to analyze structures and rhetoric to better understand the flow of discourse from the boardroom to the classroom. My fieldwork shows that prescriptive policy will be imperfectly planned or imperfectly implemented. Academic research cannot expect to form ideal plans for social action (Van Ufford *et al.* 2003). As an ethnographer interested in empowerment, I must constantly evaluate the relationship of my work to the voices of oppressed people so "my thoughtful prescription for empowerment does not become an imposition of power itself" (Van Ufford *et al.* 2003). Ethnographers cannot expect to inform the conversation on social injustice and NGOs without becoming agents in processes of change (Mosse 2005). Research must resituate NGO management goals within the moments of implementation where goals must be justified.

Fieldwork experiences caused me to question the authority academics have to evaluate these social processes. Near the end of my stay in Tamale, I wrote in my blog, "Whose idea was this? Social science is so weird and I don't want to analyze this anymore." Upon the completion of my two very different fieldwork experiences, I felt privileged and confused. I had seen community support that fostered youth empowerment; however, these situations are challenged by theories regarding the impact of social class on academic success. For example, a student has "two and a half times as good a chance for admission to Harvard if his father went there than if he did not" (Hodges *et al.* 1985). According to Lareau (2002), child-rearing norms within the home reinforce class and race identities. How could I profess the significance of providing mentoring and educational support to oppressed communities when my own educational outcomes seemed so tied to social class?

Both of my parents and I graduated from the University of Richmond. I struggled to justify the opportunity for empowerment from a place of privilege throughout college. In the fall

of 2011, following completion of the course “Poverty and Political Voice,” I revisited civic engagement, newly convinced social theories will never be perfect in practice (Mosse 2004). “Teaching children, laughing with children, soothing children, scolding children, cleaning children, leading children, and following children has taught me about windows of opportunity. We must take advantage of teachable moments, and after teaching in Northside, I must teach my grandma in the West End about Northside. The teaching should flow in all directions. The black and white of race, of space, and of ideology, must melt together” (Personal Reflection 12/1/2011).

Future ethnographic work can inform community development in important ways. Qualitative research on American inner cities is limited compared to qualitative work in Africa (Bourgois 1996). It is important for our country to own up to our own political injustices and understand the nuances of development within our own borders. Bourgois (1996) makes the key observation that “Anthropology’s obsession with the ‘exotic other’ has discouraged anthropologists from studying their own societies and puts them at risk of exoticizing what they find when they study close to home....” Dreier *et al.* notes American cities are becoming increasingly segregated by income. It is alarming that “In 1970, the average affluent household lived in a neighborhood were 30.8 percent of their neighbors were also affluent, but that figure rose to 33.8 percent in 2000” (Dreier *et al.* 2000). Increasing isolation of the oppressed in America makes it easier to construct stereotypes regarding urban America that are reinforced through the media’s sensational interest in crime reporting (Dreier *et al.* 2000). Citizens can too easily generalize the causes and effects of oppression and poverty. My ethnographic work challenged me to question my assumptions about others.

In Richmond and Ghana I learned about empowerment--about raising individuals up and

giving them means to shape their own world towards community. And what if the NGO's goal of improving literacy rates or government testing scores simultaneously degrades students' reliance on valuable neighborhood kinship networks? Who am I to say whether a formal education can take a child, whether in the city or on a farm, and penetrate her soul and engage her mind? I find NGOs' understandings of social justice are subjective to the locality they are in. Justice for the oppressed is not directly correlated to a strategic plan, but involves the NGO and the government, the NGO and the volunteer, the NGO and the family, the NGO and the community, the NGO and the school. I am interested in NGOs as institutions because they are incubators for creative ideas about social change. Fair collaboration with the oppressed is sometimes problematic, but it is possible.

Education can be a tool or a cage. It has been perceived as both an imposition of power and a source of empowerment (Freire 1970). Local teachers at Literacy Support and Kid's House are situated to re-localize education to foster the functionality of marginalized communities on their own terms. Through this contested process of development NGOs' educational agendas must hand communities back to students and allow them to develop their own identity with pride while gaining skills that allow accessibility to social contexts beyond their own. I admit the limits of academic development theory and advocate for research projects that place the researcher and the community in a common framework.

Last spring, the Northside center received a letter from three program participants who moved to the other Kid's House learning center, and missed Northside. The family has since moved again, and is still in the Kid's House program. My housemate and I mentored the siblings in college and I recently found out that my home in Northside Richmond is within walking distance of their home. We look forward to visiting them soon.

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[i] All names of NGO or non-profit organizations and persons interviewed are pseudonyms to protect the organizations and the people involved. Such a practice also follows the American Anthropological Association's ethical standards.

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