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Case Study: NGO Staff Implement Educational Goals in Northside Richmond

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"Stability in the world of action does not come from coherent action, but from effective relationships." –David Mosse

Abstract: The Richmond non-profit organization, Kid's House[i], complements imperfect educational models with creative and flexible community-based programs. In Northern Richmond, children living in oppressed communities have diminished educational opportunities and outcomes. I use the term ―oppressed‖ to describe these communities because it highlights various political, social, and economic power that has historically been exerted in the process of creating poverty. An NGO's staff is effective in reaching poor students and parents when they are attuned to local social processes. Kid's House teachers negotiate an uneasy existence as mediators between the spheres of structural bureaucracy and local poverty. This ethnographic study culminated in a senior thesis project. The author spent one summer completing participant observation, and three years mentoring and teaching weekly at Kid's House. While Kid's House continually works to develop legitimacy in Northside, its daily implementation of program goals shows an interest in fostering sustainable solutions to urban poverty.

Field notes, Northside Richmond, 6/5/2010

The Kid's House Center Director, Jimmy[ii] and I were looking for books to fit each of our students' particular needs, and he was thinking about Rose, a spunky and smart girl who was a long time participant of Kid's House. "One time," he said, looking up from the book he picked for her, "she asked me if I could be her dad. Because she doesn't have one." It was evident he had processed and struggled with Rose's question, and admitted he didn't know how to answer her at the time. It is impossible for him to be a father for all of his students, but it is evident from his interest in his students he understands the importance of a long-term investment in their lives. When several of our students performed at a school recital weeks later, he pulled out a camera and exclaimed, "Dad's gonna go. . ." as he began to take pictures of the kids. The kids tried to hide broad smiles when they made eye contact with him.

In the Kid's House neighborhood, 3,644 of 27,180 households are single parent households—more than twice as many as are married couples (City-Data 10/15/2010). Fifteen to twenty percent of residents live in poverty (as defined by the 2007 census) compared to five to ten percent in the University of Richmond's census tract (Social Explorer 10/15/2010). Staff understood the circumstances of home life for each of their students, and understood educating their students would mean parenting and disciplining in addition to teaching. Teachers introduce lifestyles and educational outcomes but these habits are legitimized and reinforced by parents

(Lareau 2002). After school programs can provide relevant cultural context to standardized curricula learned at school (Wong 2008).

The educational agenda of Kid's House in the Northside of Richmond is constantly revised and improved by the daily action of staff. Kid's House does not make educational goals in a vacuum (Goldman 2005); the organization is part of larger cultural processes in Northside. In this essay, I will highlight the relationships between Kid's House staff and the community where they work, and how staff's actions are influenced by the neighborhood's particular culture. Staff take the time to invest in relationships with program participants beyond what their job description requires (Mosse, 2005). Development critics may see staff as outsiders to the community, but the staff's knowledge of Northside's people, values, and history illustrates their relational approach to community change. A moral imperative has spurred them to action and ensures programs will constantly be questioned and re-evaluated based on the needs and perspective of the community (Van Ufford *et al.,* 2003).

An NFL football player founded Kid's House in Washington D.C. He saw a need for resources in the inner city to help youth from low-income families succeed. There are two Kid's House educational centers in Richmond. Belleview, the older center was founded in 2003 and is surrounded by a housing project. Belleview is a larger center than Northside, and has more students in its programs. The Northside center is in a central part of the neighborhood, near a corner store, gas stations, hair braiding businesses, and another NGO. Kid's House provides academic support, character development, computer skills, and health and wellness for its students. There are four white teachers on staff and all children served by the program are black. The Kid's House Northside center was established in 2008 and is still in the process of establishing legitimacy in the neighborhood. All NGOs must work to align their program's

mission with a community's resources and needs for effective service delivery (Allard, 2008). Organizations seek to extend social services in areas of great need (Allard, 2008) but must operate in a space that is stable and affordable enough for the organization to survive. An NGO's location can be used to the organization's benefit for networking (Harsh *et al*, 2010, p. 260). The Northside center's location is the result of organizational partnerships. It is run out of an outreach center operated by a church located in the suburbs of Richmond. The bottom of the building is a thrift store, and Kid's House utilizes the upstairs classroom and the playground outside. Kid's House is next door to a NGO that provides job training for ex-convicts; staff of both organizations attends community gatherings and hearings regarding local government policy. The historic six point intersection where the Northside center is located was the economic heart of the neighborhood until the mid-1970's, and is now a mix of boarded up storefronts, corner stores, and a couple of thrift shops (Field notes 6/16/2010). The physical location of Kid's House and its use of space in Northside illustrates the program's desire to collaborate with other organizations and exist as a visible part of the neighborhood's historical economic center.

The need for a supplemental education program in a primarily low-income black American neighborhood hints at racially biased policies that have created "reservations for the poor" across American cities including Richmond (Dreier *et al.,* 2000). Poverty in Richmond is place based and driven by a history of racially biased policies (Moeser 2012). The neighborhood in the Northside of Richmond was constructed and planned in the 1890's as a suburb planted at the end of a street car line, designed and marketed to attract working middle class families. The central business area is built around a six point intersection and several established parks. The orderly neighborhood streets boast examples of Queen Anne architecture and broad yards. Many of these artistic facades are now boarded up. Government subsidies and government housing

initiatives funded a handful of recently renovated homes. Today, this historical infrastructure contains a vastly different social structure and culture than it was designed to hold.

Structural and cultural forces have isolated this Northside neighborhood from separate cultural values that initially formed its streets. Twenty to twenty-five percent of neighborhood residents live in poverty (as defined by the 2007 census) and seventy-five to ninety percent of residents are black (Social Explorer 10/15/2011). The culture of Northside has been described by academics as "deviant," and by the local media as a place were there are "broken families and [residents] have a sense of hopelessness" (Massey *et al.,* 2003; Wilayto 9/2003). These negative connotations influence the way residents experience their own neighborhood. Rather than being able to leave their low-income area and talk about their hometown with pride in a middle-income community, they focus on sharpening skills that will help their day-to-day survival in Northside. Black communities have historically been marginalized by policy decisions in Richmond. The combination of low-income instability and historical racism exacerbates cultural values in Northside that are distinct from the affluent West End.

In Northside, where the formal economy is often weak or stagnant, street smarts and kinship ties are valuable social assets (Wilson, 2009). An individual has little need to cultivate job skills, professional strengths, and networking capabilities when they do not have a social network outside of Northside (Young, 2000). Today, only twenty to thirty percent of Northside residents have graduated from high school (Social Explorer 10/15/2011). This statistic reaffirms the disadvantage students face in the public school system. From the time they are children, the legitimate cultural values that identify them at home may alienate them at school. For example, boys value "hanging out on the street after school…and listening to hip-hop music" (Wilson 43), and girls value motherhood as an attainable and desirable social role (Wilson 126).

Children growing up in the Northside neighborhood gain a set of valuable social skills. These children often form closer relationships with extended family and these ties lead to positive traits like resilience, empathy, and community reliance (Hicks-Bartlett, 2000). This social skill set does not emphasize professional skills like the ability to analyze and solve problems, read critically, and network with other professionals. Throughout my time teaching at Kid's House, I found the program was structured to both support and maintain children's skills obtained from the neighborhood, while also teaching students how to be accountable for themselves and their futures. At the end of each day, I gave all the students from my reading group based on their behavior points. Each student must be evaluated daily for their ability to complete their work, work cooperatively and respect others. Though this may be a different standard than their family imposes, Kid's House seeks to work as a team with parents by sending the behavior slips home to parents on a daily basis.

Parents of Kid's House students are at the mercy of an economic system that becomes the priority, often leaving community involvement and academic support to the wayside. A lack of civic activity creates an environment void of the educational and economic resources a community requires to facilitate empowerment and build social capital. Kid's House staff hails communities that are culturally different from Northside; the staff is constantly learning how to teach children with cultural norms different from their home communities in mind. My first summer at the Kid's House, students participated in an elective where they were instructed to identify their favorite spots in their neighborhood and then allowed take photographs of those places. Students were at first frustrated and challenged by this task (Field notes 6/28/2010), but after a month produced thoughtful projects about their home. Other educational development projects in low-income neighborhoods have found student participation models to be beneficial

and productive (Sloan, 2007). I hoped students would be challenged to articulate their community as a beautiful space and a space with value, because they often communicate their community as an undesirable or dirty place.

In order to keep order at the Northside center, teachers Jimmy and Veronica established boundaries for conduct from opening of the Center in 2008. New kids at the Northside center often go through an initiation phase of sorts and as they learn to comply with behavior guidelines that often do not exist at home or at school (Field notes 6/9/2010). These carefully cultivated student-teacher relationships became evident one afternoon when I was working on multiplication tables with D'Asia, a student who struggled with math at school. Staff were spending extra time tutoring two students who were struggling with multiplication though the summer program at Kid's House did not begin for another two weeks. (Field notes 6/9/2010). Though Jimmy had worked with her and had some success earlier in the week, D'Asia's face was set with hard anger and disinterest as soon as we sat down to work. I cheered her on, asked her questions, and held flashcards up, but to no avail. Jimmy told her if she was not going to work, she would be sent home, and after sitting for several minutes of silence, Jimmy told her she must go home. She stood up, threw a pen across the room, and marched down the stairs.

D'Asia knew her multiplication facts when Jimmy quizzed her on the way home, but blamed me for asking the facts too quickly. I noted, "her grandmother makes attempts at disciplining her, but Jimmy characterizes her grandmother's tactics as fear based. D'Asia hasn't learned much about consequences because he can't think of a time when the grandmother has followed through with these threats. Jimmy says he usually gives the students choices in such situations . . . straighten up . . . or you will go home . I think D'Asia is surprised when she is shown the compassion that offers her the opportunity to improve‖ (Field notes 6/9/2010). Some

critics may argue the concept of ―character development‖ automatically imposes a powerful

rhetoric on a community of low-income children (Apple 1982). It could be argued the moral and

character standards of Kid‘s House staff are working to reinforce specific and oppressive

economic roles (Apple 1982). Others argue minority students may be at a disadvantage in the

classroom when the cultural and social differences between the teachers and the students are so

great that it negatively impacts student learning (Ogbu 1981). This analysis would simplify the

unique vantage point of Kid‘s House as an organization working in favor of the oppressed.

Jimmy set a standard for D'Asia that are different from her grandmother, but he had also

invested time in understanding D'Asia‘s upbringing.

The public education system does not have the dexterity to put state educational goals in

the context of local cultural norms. By reinforcing cultural experiences that are often limited to

the middle and upper socio-economic classes, public schools ―whose effect is unequal among

children from different social classes…tends to reinforce and to consecrate by its sanctions the

initial inequalities‖ (Bourdieu 1973). Northside‘s cultural differences are not limited to

socioeconomic factors, but extend to race. Kid‘s House students live in a largely segregated

world, and research shows black students face cultural challenges in order to achieve

academically. One study in central North Carolina finds high-achieving black students were

accused by their peers of acting white (Tyson *et al.*, 2005). When Kid‘s House staff arrive at the

local elementary school to pick out the participants, non participants will comment curiously

about the ―Kid‘s House‖ kids (Field notes 7/1/2011). It is uncertain to what extent Kid‘s House

participants are distinguished socially from their peers.

Some are critical of the agenda of community development organizations in poor

American communities. Bourgois (1995) focused ethnographic research on Puerto Rican

immigrants in New York. His fieldwork leads to a critical analysis of the local education

programs for children:

> Essentially, Head Start seeks to take inner-city preschoolers who live in lead-painted, rat-infested tenements without steady heat or hot water, and metamorphose them into bright-eyed, upper-middle class overachievers. It illustrates well the long-term inadequacy of policy initiatives that focus on individual symptoms of social misery, such as low self-esteem…instead of addressing the material and political forces that generate   the neglect, battery, or hunger of children in economically fragile families. (Bourgois, 2003, p. 325).

This simplification generalizes the after school environment Kid's House provides. Kissane, *et*

al. (2011) completed a study with both residents and NGO directors in three low-income

Philadelphia neighborhoods to determine how these groups perceived the community. A

―legitimate‖ organization is one that applies the perspectives of community residents to its goals

and cultural norms (Kissane *et al.* 2011). Kid's House is housed in the same building as a

community outreach center. The center operates a thrift store and a drug rehabilitation program.

Spatially, the center is in close contact with residents. Additionally, Kid's House intentionally

chooses families who have some ―buy in‖ to the program, and whose will be able to support

their student's participation. Kissane *et al.'s* study found directors more often highlighted

unemployment and the education system as the biggest community problems, while residents

were more likely to mention crime and safety (Kissane *et al.,* 2011). Staff had a more overall

positive view of residents, while residents were more often negative about each other (Kissane *et*

al., 2011). Though Kid's House staff would like to see more businesses come to the

neighborhood and more residents visiting parks, staff are still working to build partnerships with

NGOs and local churches in order to achieve these goals. Kid's House is interested in community

relationships, which I argue is key to sustainable educational programs in lowincome

neighborhoods. However, the dedication to relationships does not correlate to achievement of community goals in a straightforward way. Currently, Kid's House staff in Northside are challenged to overcome Richmond's history of racist policies.

Ospina, *et al.* (2002) find NGOs that have established a reputation of accountability with local communities are most effectively able to implement their programs. Jimmny and Veronica give their cell phone numbers to all the parents in the program. This familiarity between staff and families is practical and also builds trust between parents and the program. Kid's House has established a working relationship with the local elementary school. When the program has openings for new students, the staff works with school administrators to identify children who could benefit from mentoring and after-school tutoring. Staff communicates respect for school staff and administration by asking for assistance in identifying children for the program. Establishing this initial relationship makes it easier for staff to work with teachers throughout the year in order to implement student goals.

Jimmy and Veronica's work in Northside with students extends beyond the classroom. When staff infer a student's poor school performance may be related to his exposure to lead paint as an infant, and his father's jail sentence, staff begin to think about education as a process that is related to many social variables: parenting, employment, public health regulations, and public housing. The work of NGO teachers becomes community outreach work: it requires reconciling multiple moral and ethical standards on a daily basis. Today, there is no certain proof that the sustainable engagement of Kid's House will strengthen the civic fabric and reduce the poverty of Northside. The program has effectively improves the test scores and of many of its students, and it provides a stable, reliable environment for participants, but the program also does not have the capacity to address the many social and cultural factors shaping its students' lives.

I find 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. In summer 2011, Veronica moved her family to Northside. She writes a neighborhood newsletter, and is active in forming a neighborhood civic group. She knows Kid's House can provide effective tutoring and mentoring, but it cannot address all aspects of oppression shaping residents lives.

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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.

ii   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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