COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING ESSAY #2
Rob Warren ~ SOC 3452

Very Briefly, to Remind Me: What is your organization, what problems does your organization seek to solve, or what issues does it address?

> My organization is a Head Start pre-school program. Children who are ages 3 to 5 go to class for a half day each weekday to learn the basics of letters, numbers, colors, etc. They also get family services—help with nutrition, parenting skills, and other social services. The children at my specific site are almost all children of recent East African immigrants; they are mostly very poor. They all live in the high-rise public housing complex in which the classroom is located.

Very Briefly, to Remind Me: How does your organization try to solve those problems or address those issues?

> The main goal of the Head Start organization is to prepare disadvantaged young people to be ready to do well in kindergarten and beyond. Children get basic skills (i.e., learning colors, letters, numbers, and so forth) so they can do as well as more advantaged children in school — at least, that's the idea.

Very Briefly, to Remind Me: What is your role in the organization? Why are you needed?

> I am a classroom volunteer. Mostly I will be helping the teachers with whatever they need—I have been playing with kids, helping them line up, helping them with breakfast, reading some books. Mostly playing, though.

Before you started: What were some of your preconceptions or beliefs about the people or clients the organization serves? What did you think the people were going to be like?

> I didn't have many *conscious* preconceptions—specific ideas about what the kids would be like. My imagination of what 3 to 5-year-old preschool kids look and act like was shaped by parenting my own young kids. They and their (racially diverse, but not socioeconomically diverse) classmates were happy, playful, excited kids who were generally engaged in school, precocious, and inquisitive. That doesn't mean I thought the Head Start kids were going to be the *opposite* of that—it's just that I didn't know what to expect.

> I imagined that the kids would mostly not speak English very well. I suspected they wouldn't be as good at "school skills" (e.g., letters, counting) as the kids I knew from when my kids were in school.

Now: Have those preconceptions or beliefs turned out to be true so far? Explain.

The kids have surprised me by how warm, welcoming, and funny they are. I am a new person in the classroom, and different from the other teachers—the teachers and their assistants are African American women, and I am a white man. And I'm a stranger. But as soon as I sat on the floor to play on the first day, the kids have engaged me warmly. They play with me, climb on me, ask me questions, want me to read to them. I didn't expect to be so quickly accepted.

I was wrong about the kids' English language skills. Some were quiet (so it's hard to tell) but the ones who speak use quite fluent English.

I was, as far as I can tell, right about the kids "school skills." Just from my observations, I didn't come upon any kids (there are about 14 in all) who recognized or could name letters; a few could name colors. I don't really know whether most American 3 to 5-year old kids can name numbers or colors.

I was also struck by how emotional the kids are. Some seem to have regular crying spells or are withdrawn. I don't know the kids well enough to know if they were just having a bad day (as opposed to being emotional or withdrawn in general). It's been a while since my kids were that age, but I don't remember them or their classmates being so upset so frequently.

How do you personally differ from the people that your CEL organization serves (in terms of your background, prior life experiences, advantages and disadvantages you may have, race or gender, political views, etc.)?

I am very different from these kids. I'm a white man from relatively advantaged socioeconomic origins; I now have a good professional job. These very disadvantaged children of East African parents have mostly lived in the high-rise public housing in which the Head Start classroom is located. My life hasn't been perfect, and there are people more advantaged than me. But really, these kids and I are extremely different.

Before you started: What fears or anxieties, if any, did you have about your work at your CEL organization? Have you overcome those fears or anxieties? If so, how?

My biggest fears were sort of unrelated to the CEL organization: I'm kind of an introvert, and am uncomfortable in new and unfamiliar situations. I also don't like being the center of attention. So, being a new person in an unfamiliar classroom that requires lots of one-on-one interpersonal interaction is tough for me.

I also feared being useless. Not being able to contribute anything, to be helpful. I can read books to kids and play with them, but I worry that maybe that's not really what the organization needs—such that I'd be useless.

Finally, I have (like many people in SOC 3452) fears about time. Including driving time, etc., I spend all of half a day on my CEL assignment. And then I get up to 25 hours for the semester *only* if I go every single week (right up to the holidays) and don't miss any weeks. So, I worry that even after everything I'll be short on hours.

Now: What fears or anxieties, if any, do you have about your work there the rest of the semester?

Most of my fears still remain. I hope I can be helpful, but I'm not sure I will be. Reading to kids, playing with them, taking some of the load off the teachers, etc., are all good things—but I worry I won't really be that useful. I'm still not so familiar with my CEL organization that I have gotten over the introvert issues. And I still worry about time.