

COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING ESSAY #3

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? [Note: Here I mostly just stole my answers from Essay #1. You can, too.]

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? [Note: Here I mostly just stole my answers from Essay #1. You can, too.]

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. The time the kids spend in Head Start is focused on things like learning letters and numbers, naming things (expanding vocabulary?), naming colors and shapes, etc. The program also feeds them.

Very Briefly, to Remind Me: What is your role in the organization? Why are you needed? [Note: Here I mostly just stole my answers from Essay #1. You can, too.]

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. My Paly-Doh skills have improved.

What have been your biggest challenges or frustrations so far in your CEL work? How have you dealt with those challenges or frustrations?

Each week the kids come in at 8:00am and that's when I start, too. The kids start by tracing their names using markers on a laminated sheet of paper that has their name written under the lamination. Some of the kids can form letters that match their names; some can't. Anyway, when the kids are done with that they are supposed to play on the floor. I start out on the floor. I play with the kids (blocks, toy bugs, magnetic shapes, etc.) but mainly I keep order. Keep the kids from hitting each other, wrecking one another's creations, stepping on each other. After a while—once the kids are all there—they line up to go to the bathroom to wash their hands (and maybe use the toilet—I don't know since I'm not supposed to go in with them). My job is to wait for them to come out of the bathroom (the teachers stay in with the stragglers) and line

them up along a wall. Then they go into the classroom and sit at tables for breakfast. Along with the two teachers, I sit at the table and help the kids: Opening milk cartons, opening plastic wrap around bagels or muffins or bars, opening straw wrappers, things like that. Once the kids are eating, the teachers lead a rhyming game in which they sing a song about two words that sound the same. I sing along and try to get the kids to do the same. The kids then head back to the floor to grab a book and I do, too. The idea is that each kid gets their own book, and look at it. But in reality there is a fair amount of chaos. I try to read books to one or more kids, but usually the kids lose interest or get distracted. The teacher then leads a lesson on letters and numbers and things like that; my main job is to sit on the floor with the kids and keep order. Stop them from walking away, sitting on each other, etc. They then get free time to play with whatever they want in the classroom. Here, my job is again to help them, play with them, and help maintain a bit of order. Conflict over who had a toy first, over somebody accidentally knocking something over, over doing something they are not supposed to be doing. A lot of keeping order. That usually takes the full 2 hours each week.

By far, the biggest challenge for me has been uncertainty about what I should be doing to be helpful. And, as a fairly introverted person, the nonstop social interaction (which I usually avoid) is pretty exhausting.

I have also found it difficult to handle kids' emotional outbursts. I don't remember what my kids were like when they were 4 well enough to know how often they had emotional meltdowns—screaming, angry, crying, lashing out. I have a hard time anticipating them from the Head Start kids, and so they take me by surprise—and are kind of upsetting to me. I assume each one is a real crisis, a kid having a horrible day.

It has also been a challenge to me to remain patient and kind when kids misbehave. Again, I don't remember what my kids were like. But I am surprised by the kids' behavior sometimes: hitting, shoving, being inconsiderate. I try to redirect and praise good behavior, but the whole issue wears me out.

Have you had any unexpected emotional or intellectual reactions to your CEL work, or have there been any unexpected events?

I like my CEL work more than I thought I would. Despite all the stuff I just said, the kids are incredibly sweet and charming. As they have warmed up to me, they have become affectionate and interactive. The boys, in particular, seem excited to play with me or have me help them do stuff. Maybe this is because the teachers are both women, and because (as far as I have seen) it is the moms and not the dads who deal with education-stuff in this community? Maybe an adult man in the classroom is a curious novelty?

Over the past few weeks, how has your understanding of the problems the organization tries to solve changed? What caused your understanding to change?

I have observed just how hard it is to teach basic skills—letters, numbers, shapes, vocabulary, language—in this setting among kids who seem to be facing lots of out-of-classroom challenges. So much time and energy gets spent—I guess necessarily—on maintaining order and safety in the classroom. So many kids, so few adults. So little time for actual instruction. It all adds up to very little actual learning, as far as I can see. Or maybe it's so incremental that I can't notice it over just a few months. Anyway, I worry that these kids are falling behind their peers in other communities.

I have also observed the tight interconnection between education and social services. Nutrition services, special education services, housing services. I guess it's good that they're so integrated. But it has really struck me.

All of this adds up to: My understanding has become more refined. What I used to see as abstract and theoretical set of processes and sets of issues seem vastly more complicated, intractable, and urgent when I see them play out among real children.

What are your future professional goals (i.e., what line of work do you want to go into)? What are you doing in your CEL work right now that you think will be important or useful for furthering your professional goals?

In the future, I will be a professor of sociology who teaches and does research on inequalities in education, health, and other outcomes. As such, I feel like I need to really/authentically know what I'm talking about. Without getting into the community, without seeing actual kids in an actual educational setting in an actual community that faces all sorts of challenges, I am not sure I can claim to really understand much about inequality or where it comes from or what to do about it.