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September 28, 2011

Studio Field Trip Assignment

First Ethnographic Investigation

\*\* Due to illness I missed the original trip to Ark Community Charter School. I made up the field trip on Wednesday September 28th.

My first observation was of the location of the school; the Ark Community Charter School is located on next to St. Patrick’s Church, between Ingalls and Douw Street. The school is hidden within a neighborhood and one of my immediately thoughts related to the safety of the neighborhood. As I walked down the alley way in which one would enter the school I pictured groups of students walking down this alley. It felt spooky, desolate, and dark and I wondered about the safety of the students traveling down the alley. Did the teachers walk them out of the school? Did the students walk to and from school alone?

This was my first experience to a charter school and I did not know what to expect when entering the school. I have been tutoring on my own at Griswold Heights, in Troy, for the last two years and have worked with very underprivileged families. I mentally prepared myself for a similar experience when entering the Ark Community Charter School. I was reassured about the safety of the school when I had to buzz the front desk to let me in and when I had to sign in and out in the main office. The school itself was an interesting set up. I noticed that the children stayed in one room all day long, except for breakfast, lunch, and recess. When I went to elementary school, we changed classrooms throughout the day so I was unfamiliar with this set up.

When we entered the first classroom, I noticed the blackboard that had the daily schedule written out. The first item on the agenda was breakfast. When I was in school, I did not eat breakfast at school; I ate at home before school. This immediately led to think about the home life of the children attending the school. My next observation was the loose dress code. The majority of the students were in collared shirts with the school’s name written on them and others were in plain collared shirts. It seemed that most students were in black or khaki pants and no jeans were worn. Since we arrived a little early, we got to observe the classroom and students at work. There was a strong sense of discipline in the classroom. If a student were to act up, the teacher would simply say, “you need to go take a break.” This meant that the student needed to get up and sit in the chair labeled the “chill chair.” It amazed me that the children acting up would not complain or even fight the system.

We paired the students up and had them interview each other. This allowed them to talk about topics they were comfortable with and allowed us to observe and get to know them. There were an odd number of students in the classroom so I was paired up with the remaining student. The teacher explained to me that he was a more challenging student. He demanded a lot more attention than the rest of the students, but once he got the attention needed, he was very bright and enjoyable. In the classroom he has his “own space.” This is a large laundry basket with a bean bag in it. He is the only student allowed in this space and anytime he feels overwhelmed and can return to his space. I found it interesting how the simple set up of the bean bag gave him the needed sense of comfort.

As we got to interviewing each other the topic of family came up. He asked how many siblings I had and I returned the question. He told me that he did not know how many siblings he had. He then explained that he has half and whole siblings and that some of them live in New Jersey and some in Puerto Rico. I was amazed by the amount of different places this 4th grade boy had lived. As the interview continued, I asked him what he was going to be for Halloween. To my amazement, he told me that his mother does not let him go Trick – or Treating; she believes that it is not safe in the neighborhood that he lives in. It was somewhat upsetting to hear this, especially when he explained to me that he really wanted to have that experience.

The class was mostly students that were black or Latino. There was one white boy in the classroom and I noticed he acted up the most in class. The teacher sent him to the “chill chair” three times while we were there. I noticed him acting up to impress the other students and I wondered if he had to do with feeling out of place. I also noticed two students that spoke Spanish to each other as well as students that were either siblings or cousins. One teacher in the classroom spoke to a specific student only in Spanish. He seemed to only listen to her if she were speaking to him in Spanish. I was listening to two boys argue over video games and heard on boy say to another, “I will slap the Puerto Rican out of you.” Cultural differences were noticed and talked about among students. Students used cultural differences as a way of insulting each other and a there was little respect in the classroom.

Overall, I really enjoyed the experience. After working at the school, we travelled with the students to the Troy Boys and Girls Club. There I got to see the students interacting with each other in a free, comfortable environment. I watched as they assumed themselves with simply toys, such as bouncy balls. It led me to thinking of toys I could create for them and their interest in interactive toys. When their hands were busy doing something, such as playing a game or drawing a picture, I was most able to connect to them and talk to them.