Paige Townsend September 29, 2012

Ethnographic Writing

This past Thursday we visited the Ark Community Charter School. Our group, Lucas, Caroline and I, were assigned the fifth grade. Our group discussed what we would like to talk to the kids about for quite a while before settling on a topic. We decided that it would be best not to bring in tools because we didn’t want to distract from getting to know them. We wanted to talk to them about something we thought we could all relate to, pop culture. The three of us had a discussion about what we thought their favorite music and television shows may be. Caroline and I believed that they all may be interested in Caucasian artists, like Justin Bieber and Miley Cyrus. Lucas disagreed; he believed that they would be fans of rappers like Lil’ Wayne and Jay-Z. Caroline had not considered how their upbringing may have affected their opinion in music, so we were interested to see how these children would answer questions about what is popular with their age bracket now.

We can categorize what we spoke about into a few groups. We asked them about music, television, athletics, the internet, cell phones, how they get to school, what they want to do when they grow up, what they think their flaws are and their best traits, school, politics, and video games. Overall, I was surprised with the variety of the answers. I have a seven year old cousin who I spent the last eight months with, so I feel that I understand some of the up and coming trends with the youngsters. Some of the kids enjoyed things that I expected, like Phineas and Ferb, while other enjoyed shows like Family Guy, which I picture as a very adult television series. In the next few paragraphs I will highlight my experience at the school, including my first impressions and some of the questions I asked.

Upon driving up to the school I realized that the school was located in a very populated area. The streets were seedy and there were people milling around the streets. To enter the school, we had to walk through a small alleyway and ring the buzzer. We were let inside and sat in one of the entry hallways. The students wear a strict dress code, school polos and black pants. We noticed an empty display board in the hallway that said “Hall of Brains”. We went upstairs and were separated into our groups and the children were separated similarly, rotating around the room.

Lucas, Caroline and I had a nice introduction method to make them interested in speaking with us. We all had jobs at interesting places, Disneyland and Hasbro, and the kids ears immediately perked up when we mentioned these things. This would usually be a good segway into a pop culture conversation. We had the opportunity to meet with four different groups and I will now describe these interactions.

The first group we met with was very chatty. We decided to lead in with talking about what they do in their spare time. One of the boys said that they like to go on Facebook and use their phones to text one another. One of the boys and one of the girls in this group, we learned, are neighbors and they talk via technology almost every night. When we asked the kids if they usually get their homework done before playing on the computer, we received mixed reviews. One boy told me that he almost never gets homework; he was corrected by his neighbor, saying that they have homework every night. This confusion surprised me a little bit and made me realize that even though these children are speaking with us, they may not be telling us the truth. Next, we asked about what they all think about playing outside. The boy said that he will play outside and the girl will follow him around, but it sounded like they aren’t really involved in any form of organized activity. They also said that they live about one block away from school, but, both of them are driven to school instead of walking. We noticed an unhealthy trend, so we prompted about eating healthy snacks. Instead of answering the question, the kids decided to tell us about their class jobs. The Chef is in charge of bringing a healthy snack for everyone in every week. We were informed by the kids that the best class job is to be teacher’s helper. This made me think that these kids really are still just kids when I had begun to think that they were growing up too fast. Future jobs were a very popular topic with this group. The boy said that he wanted to be a police man. The young girl said that she was interested in being a lawyer or doing something in the health field. The last thing that we talked about was a touchy subject but we had decided that we had gained their trust. We asked the children what they thought they were good at and what they thought they were bad at. The boy informed us that he was perfect at writing, along with everything else. The girl, however, had lower self-esteem and told us she was not very good at music. She did perk up a tad when she mentioned that she was very skilled at science. These two children were very helpful in particular for our research. They really opened up to us and let us see what their lives are really like.

The next group we spoke with had very large interest in us, especially in how Lucas and Caroline got to build toys. They really liked to talk about the new toys that were coming out which confirmed our hypothesis about their interest in tangible things and pop culture. We asked them what they thought about music and learned that these kids were interesting in a variety of artists of all ethnicities, including Niki Manaj, Beyonce, and Justin Bieber. These kids showed a very large amount of interest in technology as well, saying that they have iPhones and Androids, along with mentioning that they spend hours a day playing video games like Dragonball Z and Call of Duty. These kids had quite a bit of ambition, saying that when they grow up they want to have careers as lawyers, attend college, and train at the police academy. When we asked them about their favorite foods, they told us that they love fried chicken and grapes.

The third group was very quiet. The boy was definitely a trouble maker, and one of the two girls refused to tell me her name, much less talk to me. The only thing she mentioned was her interest in basketball. Luckily, the other girl in the group would not stop talking. She told me all about her love of pears, Poptarts, chips, and granny smith apples. They all seemed very interested in sports. The boy spoke quite a bit about Call of Duty. He also threatened to hurt one of the kids across the table if he did not friend him on Xbox live. Caroline and I told him that wasn’t okay and he said he was only kidding, but it did give us some insight on things that may be happening underneath the teacher’s nose. The boy also too a Newsweek for Kids and showed me that he had drawn mustaches on all of the people including President Obama and Michael Phelps. The last thing that this group of kids talked about was getting married. They all talked about how they were going to marry so-and-so, but they weren’t going to marry other people because they were ugly. This group was a very interesting group and the dynamics were very strange. The kids were interested in the fact that I was a designer. The chatty girl asked me if I would design her an outfit for the next class, and the boy wanted me to make him a football that said RPI on it. The way that they looked up to me was very flattering.

The last group was very kind, but I think the kids were slightly tired at this point. They were similarly very interested in technology. All of them had Twitters and Facebook, also enjoying video games. Their favorite subjects were math, gym, and one boy particularly enjoyed spelling. These kids talked a bit with us about current events like the presidential election and the Olympic Games. One of the boys had a very interesting conversation with Caroline. He was telling her that his parents let him play video games and watch television so that he doesn’t bother them. He also asked if Caroline was from Child Protective Services. This was an interesting final conversation.

Overall, we definitely learned many ways to connect with these children. We also learned quite a bit about their skills, weaknesses, and passions. Hopefully we will be able to use this information when working with them in the future. The last thing that we should consider is the amount of technology these children are exposed to. Even though technology seems to work for them, according to the director of curriculum, I think there may be such a thing as over exposure to all of these technological elements. I would like to make a gadget that is on the lesser half of the technological spectrum. With that said, I feel like these kids have a lot of potential and I would love to help raise their confidence academically and teach them something they don’t think is possible.