

## ***Seeing Social Problems through the Eyes of Community Members: Reflections on Community-Based Service Learning at Moses House***

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College students and researchers sometimes assume when they start a community partnership or service-learning project that they have many things to offer to the community but that perhaps not much will be received in return besides an out-of-classroom learning experience and course credit. However, what I learned throughout my service-learning experience and continued work with Moses House is that community members—in this case, children living in Sulphur Springs, a high-poverty neighborhood in Tampa, Florida—have much more to teach college students than what we might at first suppose.

I am an undergraduate student majoring in Anthropology at the University of South Florida (USF). Anthropology attempts to understand everyday sociocultural realities from the multiple perspectives of real people as they go about making meaning in their day-to-day lives. What anthropology students, as well as students from other social science disciplines, can learn from community-based service-learning in low-income neighborhoods is that the views and experiences of children can—and should—inform public policy directed at such populations. Anthropologists can become more involved in the policy decisions that affect these communities in cities across the United States by bringing what they learn from the everyday lives of community residents to the policy making process.

Moses House is a grassroots nonprofit organization founded in 1984 by two brothers, Taft and Harold Richardson, who were African American folk artists passionate about using art and educational outreach to improve the well-being of children living in public housing projects in East Tampa. When the housing was demolished during 1999-2000 and residents relocated to Sulphur Springs, Moses House followed them there. Faculty and students from the Anthropology Department at USF came across Moses House and the Richardsons in the early 2000s. A few years later, they began cultivating a university–community partnership that allowed for mutually beneficial learning and resource sharing. This has proven successful in that, in recent years, Moses House has been awarded a number of grants and awards, while USF students and faculty have developed long-term research projects and semester-long service-learning courses.

My work with Moses House started in the 2011 spring semester as part of the requirements for my *Anthropology of Childhood* course, which had service-learning as a required component. The purpose of this course is to provide students with the main theoretical frameworks and research methods used by anthropologists when conducting ethnographic research. The class covered theories of agency, ethnographic research ethics and methods with children, food insecurity and food deserts, and relationships between children and their environments. We studied how to do participant observation and conduct structured and unstructured observations and interviews, and then we applied what we learned in a real-life context. By conducting our own research, we could better understand which research methods might be more appropriate or relevant for investigating different research questions. For my service-learning research project, I focused on perceptions of healthful foods held by children in Sulphur Springs, and the course taught me how to choose the most appropriate ethnographic research methods as well as how to implement them in order to gather data that could answer my research questions.

In December of 2010, Moses House had been awarded a technical assistance grant to start a community garden as a way to learn about and address issues of food insecurity and food deserts in low-income areas of Tampa. Food deserts have been defined as “poor urban areas where residents cannot buy affordable, healthy food” (Cummins and Macintyre 2002, 436). Because the neighborhood of Sulphur Springs has been identified as a food desert, the members of Moses House aimed at providing the community with closer access to fresh fruits and vegetables, something that is not found in the nearby convenience stores that surround the area. My study initially intended to focus on the opinions and perceptions of what the kids at Moses House thought were healthful foods and why they thought healthful foods might be important. After my research started, I became more aware of larger societal issues and questions, such as whether or not as researchers we are focused on the most important issues, pursuing the most meaningful goals, and even asking the right questions.

Throughout the semester, I went to Moses House for one afternoon per week. This gave me the opportunity to build rapport and trust with the kids. This trustful relationship allowed me to delve deeper into their lives, and learn not only the basic perceptions they had about healthful foods but also how much they are actually aware of their environment and social circumstances. I became knowledgeable of their level of awareness when I had an assignment that asked for the children to draw a picture of what they thought represented “healthful foods.” For example, I asked two of the boys to draw a picture of healthful food, and as they made their drawing, they discussed what they were representing and explained why they drew certain foods and not others. One of the kids drew some of the vegetables that were currently growing in the garden, and when I asked why he thought they were healthful foods, he said, “Fruits and vegetables are very good for you, but at school you have to pay for them so you can’t eat them a lot.”

If children in this community are already living in a ‘food desert’ and lack access to more healthful foods, one would hope that they would at least be able to have more access to them at school. As college students and members of the Tampa Bay community, I believe we have to start questioning why our public school system is not already providing better food options—or, indeed, whether the political will exists to change school policy so that schools are required to provide more healthful food options. Parents often express frustration at the long process they have to go through in order to have their school provide their child with more healthful food options. From personal experience working in a doctor’s office, I know that this is indeed an arduous process. If parents want their child to be provided with more healthful foods, they are asked to go to the child’s school and obtain the appropriate paperwork. The parents then need to go to the child’s pediatrician and ask them to provide a physical exam, followed by a physician’s note stating the need for the child to obtain more healthful and fresh foods, along with the accurate completion of the paperwork obtained from the school. Many doctors’ offices ask the parents to leave the paperwork and allow for a couple of days for the documents to be filled out, requiring the parents to once again have to travel back to the physician’s office to pick them up.

In the case of the children in Sulphur Springs, many of these parents live in poverty and often have limited means of transportation. Thus, they lack the ability to be able to go through the process of completing the paperwork demanded by the school system. Therefore it is easy to see how the children of Sulphur Springs, and children who attend public school as a whole, have less access to healthful foods than children and parents who do not live in poverty. From a health perspective, one must also question why the school system does not already provide all children with more healthful food options, given that there is an accumulated body of scientific

knowledge and data showing the many health benefits that eating fresh and healthful foods provides for children and their development.

After spending time with the children, I started to listen more closely to the ideas they had regarding many of the issues that they face at a very young age. Although researchers and the scientific community often overstate the lack of agency people might have, and, likewise, anthropologists often desire to “give people a voice,” my community-based service-learning experience demonstrated that children from Sulphur Springs in fact have a strong sense of personal and group agency. They know what is good for them and what is harmful to them, and how the socioeconomic and political systems leave them behind. They also realize how these systems fail to provide them and their older siblings with the opportunities that would allow them to have a healthier and more successful future.

The children often discussed their lives from a different perspective than the one we university students had. The children explained how many of them had started school late, and after doing so, how their teachers did not seem to want to provide the best education they could. They would often express feelings of frustration because they would not understand something that “other kids their age knew.” They felt that their teachers did not care about their behavior or how well they were learning a certain topic, but they did not understand why their teachers did not care. From an anthropological perspective, one must question why, if there are so many strong voices of people who live in these situations, policy makers and human service professionals do not seem to listen or even be aware of them. These perspectives should be used in developing programs and social assistance in order to bridge the gap in the level of education obtained by these children when compared to students who attend charter or magnet schools in Hillsborough County. As researchers and community members, are we truly allowing them to have their voices heard in the decision-making process? Are we questioning the people who make the decisions that affect their everyday lives? Are we concerned about the low levels of education the children are achieving? Or is it easier for us to look the other way and simply blame the individual and endorse the idea that “if someone wants to and works hard enough” they will be able to overcome all these issues? I argue that we often become so involved in “the system” that we fail to see how it constrains our own agency and affects the lives of people around us.

After the semester was over, I continued my work at Moses House. It was during this time that I learned how much more this “system” continues to affect the children in the community. After speaking to one of the older children, he explained exactly how he felt about the system:

Our schools do not work like the rest of the schools. Our teachers put us through these stages, and once we get passed them all, we can move on to a better school. But they don't make this easy, they treat us bad, curse at us, and get in our faces just to make us upset. It gets to the point where you just explode, and you're back at the first level. That's why I dropped out of school, not because I am not smart, I want to go to college, but I didn't like the way I was treated.

Social science academic disciplines have produced a wealth of knowledge about systems of oppression. High levels of food insecurity affecting urban and rural areas have been mapped and documented. Much research has been published explaining how poverty affects all aspects of people's lives, including their health, education, potential for employment and professional advancement, and access to the opportunities for pursuing what our society calls “a better life.”

However, as college students, and future professionals, what we often fail to see and understand is that we often times have the power to act as advocates for the disadvantaged or simply as liaisons between disadvantaged communities and people in charge of policy-making.

What the service-learning course and the opportunity to work with Moses House showed me is that it is no longer merely an issue of food insecurity and unequal access to healthful and fresh fruits and vegetables for the Sulphur Springs community. This is only part of a larger mix of societal problems, such as inequality of educational opportunity, wrongful accusations that push children into the juvenile justice system, the repercussions of having a juvenile or criminal record, and lack of access to real opportunities for improving their lives and wellbeing. As an outsider to the community, and as a person who is receiving a college education, it is easy to be judgmental and negatively biased against certain peoples or communities. However, what a community-based service-learning experience can offer is not only the chance to explore theoretical frameworks and methodology but also to learn from the people one works with and to at least attempt to see things from their perspective. Lastly, it is important to remember that many college students, myself included, are able to obtain a college education thanks to Pell Grants and tax-payer money invested in education. I argue that we have to somehow give back to the community, and become advocates for those we learn from while conducting research and studies in these communities. After all, we have access to higher education in part thanks to them, and our service-learning in their communities enhances our educational experience in many positive ways. Giving back is the least we can do.

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### **References**

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