

Practicing a Pedagogy of Love

Reflections on Puentes de Salud's Education work

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Reflecting on the aspects of our program that make our work successful, I have been thinking about the role of love in community-oriented practice. Love, consistency, and concerted team-work spanning numerous partners are core elements that support our children's positive development.

In working with communities that are underserved and have experienced or do currently experience trauma, consistency is key. As how we are situated - as a non-profit working within a public school - consistency and trust are paramount; cultivating, growing, and maintaining relationships with school administration, teachers, maintenance staff, other programs, families, community members and local businesses - it all enhances the strength and possibilities of our work. This consistency goes for most importantly for our program staff members, like myself and our coordinator, but also for our interns. The kids speak for themselves - it's easy to get hooked and return for two, three, four, etc. years!

Our organization and communication is another key dynamic that really allows our work to flourish - it is no small task to coordinate communication with 110 interns (and 19 core team leaders) - communicating among them and teachers, parents, outside case managers and psychologists, doctors, administration, etc - especially given how quickly kids grow and change! We make every best effort to do so and are flexible and creative in our approaches, using emails, texts, google docs, in person updates at a variety of levels (with relevant grade team leaders; with all interns in a specific grade on a specific day; with all relevant interns across days who work with one particular student; etc).

That goes hand in hand with our efforts to create as collaborative, fun, and supportive environment as we can. We truly love our interns, and none of this work would happen without them. Many have become very close personal friends of mine over these last three years. We take a genuine interest in their lives and studies; we bond over shared tv shows and events; we write multitudes of letters of recommendation for every job, school and opportunity imaginable; and we try to do fun things, like end of semester parties (with and without kids) and also share relevant events happening in the city (at Puentes, at other orgs; festivals; film screenings, etc.) that may interest them. It's all about building community - that's how our work gets done and gets done well. This proves difficult hard with a) such a large quantity of people involved in our work and b) recognizing that a certain percentage will be here for one semester and no more. Other efforts we take are conducting an initial 15-20 minute 'get to know you' meeting before the program even starts in early September and January - a time for us to put a face with a name and

learn more about each intern in a personal way - where they are from (I recently went to LA for a weekend and was able to draw on suggestions from a few of our interns who are from there, for ex.) and other skills and hobbies they have personally - so that we can also draw those into the program, it opens up opportunities for club days and special guest visits, etc.

I know that when people come to visit they are often surprised by a) the fact that I know every child's name and in depth personality (and address, parents' work schedules and places, other siblings, teacher, etc.) and b) every intern's name, school, sometimes major/a few fun facts. Those kind of comments always catch me off guard - how could I not, what kind of program would that be? For me, I'm entrusting our most precious thing - our kids - to these individuals, to our interns, so I better know who they are and how they show up in the world because I need to know that our children are going to be safe and loved and well-cared for. It's a responsibility that I take seriously, as do our families. I remember a time in my first summer with Puentes, I had just started a few weeks prior after graduating from Haverford, during morning drop off time for our end-of-summer pool party. One of our dads came up to me and looked me straight in the eyes (he couldn't go on the trip, unlike other parents) and said, '*yo te encargo mis hijos*' - i'm entrusting my kids to you. And so I and we do our best to live up to that and to cultivate a culture and community that will promote this shared sentiment as much as possible. I say in all of my orientations that, yes, we are a program focused on literacy and bilingualism and our students' self-esteem and identities - yes, 100% - but that at the end of the day if nothing else happens, if the homework doesn't get done and the book didn't get finished, that this is a place where our kids come and can be showered by love and respect by caring adults who are here to scaffold and acknowledge and celebrate their growth and progress. And I think that translates. Other common comments from visitors are about the tangible feeling of kindness and gentleness that our interns use with the kids, how loving they are.

There are many areas in which our program continues to grow and improve at each step, but I am proud to highlight our consistent practice of love as a hallmark that distinguishes our work and that makes a profoundly tangible impact on all participants - children, families, interns, staff. I, for one, continue to grow in my practice of love as I mark successive events and milestones in my own life alongside our students and families. It is this shared language and enactment of loving respect and dedication that underlies our daily work, that truly represents putting values into action at the intersection of theory, practice, and humanity.