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Sophia De Quattro
Dominican University of California

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Building Up a Community by Empowering Disadvantaged Youth

Sophia De Quattro
Dominican University of California

“The first impression is that Marin is a wealthy community, but if you dig in, you find a significant population of poor families here. And there is a very big need to address them.”
– Michael Watenpaugh, Superintendent of San Rafael City Schools

When you enter the grounds of Marin County Community School (MCCS), you see security patrolling the premises. The students may be on probation, house arrest, or have general behavior issues deemed unfit for regular public school. High-risk youth in Marin County generally are referred to MCCS, an alternative education facility, in hopes of providing the student a second chance to earn a high school diploma and a better future. MCCS, located in San Rafael, California provides an educational program geared towards intensive instruction in English/Language Arts and Mathematics with a focus on developing pro-social skills through the integration of services that address an array of issues such as mental health, aggression, substance abuse, and occupational programs. MCCS partners with many social behavior programs in order to establish a better learning environment.

Education for all is a pressing issue in Marin County. When my English professor, Caroline Hanssen, notified me she would be teaching a service-learning course in the upcoming spring 2013 semester pertaining to this ideal, I eagerly signed up. This incredible opportunity that Dominican University of California presented me incorporated relevant classroom curricula about education inequity, college access, and disadvantaged youth with the chance to mentor at an alternative education school in order to learn first-hand about all these problems in today’s education system. By establishing the criteria and expectations in the classroom, students can enter adulthood better educated and socially versed to uphold community well being.

As a Marin resident, I am fully aware of the lavish society associated with this affluent region. Children often enjoy a sheltered lifestyle with minimal financial issues due to the success of their parents. What is often ignored, however, are the inhabitants who fall below average income, who cannot afford to engage in what is considered the “norm” of Marin County. As Superintendent Michael Watenpaugh put it, poverty *does* exist in this area. It is an ugly truth for such a seemingly perfect part of the world, and even uglier side effects occur — racial profiling and economic discrimination. And, unfortunately, all these factors have crept into the schooling system, causing rifts in the pursuance to educate all students equally and adequately.

These real world issues are applicable to a distinct area of Marin—the Canal District. Marin’s cities are abruptly divided due to financial success and failure. One area is affluent and predominantly Caucasian, while other areas are populated by people with low-income, minimal education, and basic English-speaking skills. 12,000 people live in the Canal District, an expanse of just 2 ½ square miles; over half of them have not earned a high school diploma. The average annual earning is \$21,000. In Ross, separated by a mere five miles, an individual earns \$78,500 annually, and four out of five adults have earned a B.A. or higher (Brown 2012). Many of the students from MCCS, mostly black or Latino males, are victims of racial profiling and economic discrimination. Poverty within Marin County is heavily ignored because it is unexpected in a wealthy area. This complicates the lives of students who attend MCCS because they are in the minority not only in their ethnicity but also in their economic status. Understanding the drastic

high-lows and financial make-up of the county is important to fully grasp what conditions the adolescents of this area, especially the minorities, live with.

I tutored at MCCA, a facility mainly for teenagers who have been suspended from their previous schools for misconduct and poor behavior. When I chose MCCA as my location for service learning, I never imagined the extent of chaos I would be dealing with. All students who attend have behavioral issues and many live under less than ideal circumstances, such as single parents, physically abusive parents, and/or parents who abuse alcohol and a range of narcotics. I remember my first day vividly. Students dressed in all green shirts and ranging in age from 12 to 18 gave uninviting looks and had apathetic attitudes. To make matters worse, the security staff was absent, and the extreme intimidation I felt dampened my outlook. Throughout the training, my enthusiasm to mentor the students faded into fear for my safety. The school was ridden with loud, expressive individuals who had limited respect for the teachers and authoritative figures. My head raced with overwhelming thoughts, ranging from “How is a middle class, sheltered, Caucasian female going to benefit the lives of these students?” to “Why didn’t I choose another location?”

The first few weeks, I completely avoided tutoring and even tried to switch locations, to no avail. Eventually, I started accepting that I would have to complete my hours at MCCA. It took approximately one month to force myself back to the school and officially begin my position as a tutor. The disappointment I held toward myself ate away at my morale. How could I have let a bad first impression allow me to waste such precious time with these individuals? Students at MCCA, out of everyone in Marin County, need the most intervention with their at-risk lifestyles and behaviors.

My resistance to this new experience reminded me of Mark Salzman’s memoir, recounting his personal conflict when he was offered the chance to volunteer and teach a creative writing class at a juvenile hall in South Central Los Angeles. *True Notebooks: A Writer’s Year in Jail* (2003) details his experience at Central Juvenile Hall. The choice to teach the incarcerated youth was not made immediately. When a situation conflicted Salzman, he wrote in a notebook to weigh out the positives and negatives. In August 1997, he wrote two lists titled “Reasons Not to Visit Duane’s Writing Class at Juvenile Hall” and “Reasons to Visit Duane’s Class at Juvenile Hall” (2003, 6). Salzman initially found more negatives than positives to working with delinquent, disadvantaged youth. Before getting to truly know delinquent youth, I, like Salzman, had already decided I could not benefit them. It is easy to decide one simply cannot connect with the students or that it is not one’s responsibility to associate with criminal, reckless, and hopeless youth. Society’s influence and the public opinion only focus on the flawed nature in these individuals, not the potential or the opportunity for the incarcerated, disengaged, or disadvantaged youth to learn from their mistakes. Media and other social influences, such as my grandparents, had taught me to ignore this demographic. Often, juvenile delinquents are placed in juvenile hall because society does not know how else to deal with them. Nevertheless, the experiences at MCCA, for me, and L.A.’s Central Juvenile Hall, for Salzman, helped us overcome our doubt in these students.

During my semester with MCCA students, I fought a constant internal battle over my perception towards the students. Some weeks were harder than others to walk through the doors of the classroom and offer my help. I had to put my own discomfort out of my mind in order to serve the needs of the students. This did not come effortlessly, but it was essential to place myself in a vulnerable state in order for growth. One Friday morning, I arrived at MCCA with a more hopeful attitude than usual. I signed in, noticed the absence of security in the hallway, and

then entered Mrs. R's English class. Like most Fridays at MCCS, there was a small turnout of students, ten at most. They were watching *A Thousand Words* (2012). This movie captured themes that many of the MCCS students could identify with: divorce, single parenting, and an absent father figure. The end of the movie is especially emotional because the father Jack McCall, played by Eddie Murphy, imagines himself absent from his son's life. McCall's father had abandoned him when he was a kid, and it remains at the root of many of his character flaws, such as his workaholic mentality and his passive love for his wife. In a daydream of McCall's, his son refuses to acknowledge their relationship because he had missed out on such an important portion of his childhood. This emotional ending to the movie had a profound impact on the students. Many of the kids in class that day took the movie's message to heart.

The relatability of the movie struck the students' vulnerability and I sensed many of the kids shifting to an uneasy but engaged mentality. I grew up in a broken home, and I felt like I could use the content of the movie to relate to the students. I can identify with the feeling of abandonment and mistrust, like many of the students of MCCS. During this tutoring session, I began to think of the students more as members of my community than as "others." One of the underlying reasons there are social barriers is because we naturally categorize and group people that seem to fit a certain stereotype. By breaking down the boundaries, there is opportunity to amend the learned stereotypes that have developed throughout the years. That day, I disregarded my prejudices for failing youth; beforehand, I had strongly believed that they were lazy, socially inept, and freeloaders. But now, I saw them in a different light. Perhaps students who attend MCCS are failing in school because they are distracted by or conflicted with emotional issues, like bad parents or guardians. I know that when I am not on good terms with a family member, I have an extremely difficult time focusing on my schoolwork. I'm thankful that I tutored that day, because although I had little interaction with the students, I left that day feeling more attached than ever before.

Over the weeks, the degradation of the academic agenda in the school became more apparent. The same day I watched *A Thousand Words* – my fifth time visiting the school – Mrs. R. informed me that she had been the only adult that came to school that day. She said she decided to skip the regularly scheduled lesson plan in order to contain the students and make them as compliant as possible. This stood out to me because all at once I gained clarity over the hardships of running an alternative education school. Before this day, I never really recognized the complexities of the process. That morning, Mrs. R had to keep about forty kids, thirty of whom were students of the teachers that did not arrive, from breaking out into utter chaos until more staff and faculty arrived at the school. She was distraught and exhausted after handling that number of kids without any help. So, her decision was to put on a movie for the duration of the class. This exemplifies the conditions under which MCCS operates and it caused me to question the role of the teacher, and how one can be qualified as good or bad. Good education constitutes good teaching, and every good teacher can provide pathways and opportunities to develop their students' thought processes and personal opinions. While family figures do play an influential role in shaping personal opinions, a teacher who can genuinely earn respect from a classroom can have just as influential an impact. What upset me most about my time at MCCS was the lack of relationship between the students and teachers. Students of MCCS need all the genuine support and care from the staff because they may not have proper supporters at home. If parents are unable or unwilling to support their children, then the teachers should modify the behaviors of the restless, disrespectful adolescents.

This ideal is identified and argued in the movie *Waiting For "Superman,"* directed by Davis Guggenheim. The film identifies the imperfection in America's school system and attempts to find the reason why students are not succeeding. Guggenheim portrays public education in America as a failed enterprise due to bad teachers and that they are the biggest influence in determining the success of a student. To solve this, America should invest in charter schools rather than public education (Ravitch 2010). Diane Ravitch's critical analysis of *Waiting for "Superman,"* "The Myth of Charter Schools" provides insightful background to this issue and viewpoint. Ravitch's review encapsulates the counterargument to Guggenheim's standpoint, dispelling the belief that charter schools are a savior to the failed American public school system. She checks the facts, such as Guggenheim's statement that "teachers alone can overcome the effects of student poverty" (Ravitch 2010, 126). Rather, she notes that Eric Hanushek, a researcher at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University, found that teachers simply cannot undo the emotional tear from an unsupportive home or the pressure and prejudices against students from different ethnic and economic backgrounds. Guggenheim, however, strongly believes this is the case. Although society wishes that quick fixes truly existed, the social, economic, and political hierarchy takes a toll on youth born into poverty ridden families.

The circumstances of MCCS do not allow much opportunity for teachers to fulfill their duties as not only educators but also as role models. MCCS is a perfect example of a school full of imperfections, and many of its students are from poor backgrounds. And, ultimately, a teacher cannot be blamed for a child not learning. While teachers do play a role in student success, they do not determine whether or not a student will succeed. Because this is a complex concept, one definitive factor cannot be blamed. Simply, too many factors that affect the mental and biological growth in a person exist. Ravitch argues, however, "If we are serious about improving our schools, we will take steps to improve our teacher force...that would mean better screening to select the best candidates, higher salaries, better support and mentoring systems, and better working conditions" (Ravitch 2010, 130). Grave consequences may occur if we continue without innovation in America's current educational system. Nevertheless, Ravitch offers hopeful points.

In the public education system, instilling changes can be arduous, but not impossible. An improved focus on the teachers and the conditions they work under could have extraordinary results. Mrs. R is just one example of many teachers that are not given proper tools and time to conduct class. In effect, teachers are not able to provide proper support to their students. Teachers are relied on the most to instill hope and learning among students who feel abandoned by the school system. Increasing the amount of teacher aides and tutors in the classroom helps ensure each student's needs are addressed. The Canal's status is a grim one. Improving the quality of education and reinforcing standards in public schools in Marin could improve such areas, which suffer from low literacy, low job retention rate, high crime, and unstable families. Some programs, such as the one that I was a part of, are constantly trying to improve their methods and implement new systems to help students remain on track and earn their high school diploma. Over the years, students from Dominican University of California have been tutoring more and more at MCCS. During the 2007-2008 school year, nineteen DU students tutored 68 MCCS students for a total of 343 hours. In three years, the number of tutors has doubled and their help has reached out to 105 students for a total of 870 hours (Dominican University of California 2013). This escalation of help in the classroom is something to be proud of. The bottom line is, without Dominican students, there is very limited staff at hand to offer extensive time with the students because the environment and time restrictions cause such disarray.

Spending a semester learning about education inequity and seeing the effects of it has strengthened my support of volunteering with disadvantaged youth. Marin has identified the disparity of education quality among its districts and has been actively working as a community to make sure that all schools are upholding the same standards of education. San Rafael City Schools has a strategic plan, “Roadmap to the Future,” which Superintendent Watenpaugh is overseeing (Perez 2013). He has gained support from The National Equity Project, Parent Services Project, the Marin Community Foundation, the San Francisco Foundation, and the Coalition for Community Schools to reshape, improve, and carry out the objectives of this plan (Perez 2013). My service-learning project coincided with the goals of “Roadmap to the Future.” By working toward a common goal, change is possible. Each and every year, conditions are improving, giving youth better opportunities than the generations before them. However, students are held accountable to work with educators and programs that want to better their futures. Both parties must respect each other and their tendencies must align for progress to occur.

My program made me cognizant that many students are unaware that they must take their education seriously, but by insisting, urging, and supporting students at MCCS as much as possible, it increased the chances for a more cooperative group. Unanimous cooperation was not common in the classrooms at MCCS, but I know that beyond the initial apathetic attitudes, my volunteering was important. My colleagues and I who tutored at MCCS played a vital role in helping both the teachers and students. I was a valued volunteer, even if all I did one day was help a student understand multiplication tables. For decades, areas such as the Canal District in San Rafael have gone unnoticed. It is crucial, however, to address the failing status of these districts. Only then can we have a heightened sense of what measures need to be taken to improve our future generations.

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