The Ecology of Education in the Fifth Ward of Evanston
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Abstract:

After collaborating with many community leaders to bring a Freedom Schools program to Evanston, and after reading about the history of the Fifth ward, and after reading about all the factors that affect literacy, and after attending school board meetings that addressed the achievement gaps among children, I recognized the complexity of some of the questions facing public education in this city. I began to ask: what are these factors and how do they affect our children’s education?

This research seeks to name the ecology of the Fifth Ward that affects the education of children and to discover how the community that is created in a Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools program engages this ecology.

1 What is your topic?

Education (especially literacy), Evanston and Freedom Schools programs

2 What is your research question and methodology?

My research question is:
- What is the ecology that affects the education of children?
- How does the community created in a Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools program engage this ecology?

I plan to present a case study of the ecology of the Fifth ward of Evanston.

In anticipation of collaboration between my seminary and Evanston in the establishment of a Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools program, I began to read about the city and to talk with residents. It became apparent that the Fifth ward was the location for such a program.

The fifth ward is the only ward in Evanston that does not have a school within its boundaries. Its neighborhood elementary school, Foster School, was closed in the 1970’s when Evanston City Schools were integrated. Children who attended Foster School were bused to other schools in the city, and currently children in the Fifth ward are divided among five schools in neighboring wards.

At a school board meeting in December 2015, statistics were presented that showed a huge achievement gap between children of color and white children in Evanston City schools. A follow-up report was presented in April 2016, and the achievement gap is enormous. There are many concerned voices and many
proposed causes and reasons. The report included information about early childhood childcare and preschool, readiness for kindergarten, reading and math competencies at several key milestones, new programs that seek to address the achievement gap, and more.

I plan to research the history of the city, and the Fifth ward, through public records, biographies, and oral histories. I will also “map” the Fifth ward according to a variety of factors (economic, education, real estate, businesses, etc.)

3 What theories inform your research? What are your core references?

One of the primary works that informs my research is that of Urie Bronfenbrenner and his ecological systems theory. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

Second, I am reading widely in the field of literacy, especially as it relates to the “thirty million word gap” and the work of Dana Suskind at the University of Chicago. Dr. Suskind work shows the importance of an early language-rich environment on brain development and later literacy skills. (Suskind, 2015)

I am also reading in the area of summer learning. Some of the achievement gap in children is explained by a summer reading slide. I am interested in how this slide may correlate with other factors in the child’s ecology.

4 How is this research innovating the field of religious education?

I believe that public education in the U.S. is in crisis. It is a justice issue that the church cannot ignore. More than twenty percent of children in the U.S. live in poverty, and more than 50 percent of all children cannot read at grade level or compute at grade level. (CDF Children in the US report, 2014)

One of the questions we must ask is “how is the church a part of the ecology of education and what is its role?”

5 What is the status of the research at the time of the proposal (e.g. finished ethnographic research, at beginning of reading)?

I have read widely about the state of children the U.S., especially the reports from the Children’s Defense Fund.

I am in the midst of reading histories and talking with key members of the community. I am attending school board meetings and other community events. I will be observing the Freedom Schools program that will operate in Evanston this summer. It is a six-week program that will operate for seven hours a day.
Bibliography


