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Critical Reflection Report #2

Since my last critical research reflection, I've done most of the "crucial" parts of my summer research project: I've cemented my research question and methodology, interviewed my subjects, and analyzed my interview notes for conclusions. All that remains is for me to synthesize my ideas into a final product for my community partner. As it was in the beginning of my project, completing the research steps has been a continual exercise in flexibility. It took me nearly a month to discuss my research question with other RESPECT members, so I suppose I should have expected all the other parts of the process to be just as delayed. Nonetheless, I became frustrated that the interviews were so drawn-out. Overall, the summer's project has been frustrating, but also satisfyingly useful.

My project involved interviewing parents of my NGO's SMART Kids program about their attitudes towards the program. At first I hoped to interview all 60 SMART Kids' parents, thinking that since I had four entire days each week to devote to interviews, I could contact the whole parent's roster. Professor Whetten suggested drawing a sample of 20 parents first, however, so I did, expecting to draw another sample when I was finished. Unfortunately, I didn't even finish the first group—I only interviewed 15 parents total. This was primarily because I needed a RESPECT volunteer with me during all of the interviews to lead me to the houses, introduce me to the parents, and act as a "translator" for those subjects whose English was different from mine. There were several volunteers who enthusiastically offered to help me with my research. On days when I had scheduled with one of the volunteers to walk around with me, however,

the volunteer often either cancelled, didn't show up, or showed up so late that it was no longer possible to interview parents. To be fair, it was a very busy time for my NGO, and many of the volunteers were occupied with planning for a conference at the end of July. But there were also times when we didn't interview parents because my Liberian counterpart forgot, decided it would be a "bad day" to interview, or took a nap instead. Since I'm not the most punctual person myself, showing up a bit late for an interview doesn't really bother me—but disappearing volunteers really do.

The interviews themselves also made me uncomfortable at times. I've had relatively extensive interview experience through my multiple documentary projects, but I still felt that it was difficult to put some parents at ease. My white, foreign skin is hard to escape, and sometimes I felt like the parents were a little tongue-tied at my presence. I had figured that having a RESPECT volunteer along with me would ease this unfamiliarity, but in fact the volunteer was often more awkward than I was. (He would look down, shuffle his feet, and mumble, so much so that parents had to ask him to speak up multiple times as he was introducing me.) In addition, I found out from many parents that the RESPECT volunteers had only spoken to most parents once, and only briefly, so my "guide" to parents' homes was in some ways as foreign as I was. As a result of these interactions, the necessity of having a RESPECT volunteer with me came to feel like a limitation on my project, even though it was theoretically a great idea.

Because I was foreign, I also wonder if parents were unwilling to tell me certain 'negative' information. My RESPECT counterparts had told me that no one would want to reveal that they were illiterate when I did the informed consent process, for example, which is understandable. I therefore explained the form orally to every parent and

emphasized the contact information, asking for signatures only if the subjects asked questions directly from the sheet. I think this unwillingness to tell me ‘negative’ or embarrassing information extended to the interview, however. Many parents told me that their children had attended SMART Kids programs faithfully, even though I had been teaching in the program and knew for a fact that their children had missed multiple meetings. For this reason and because my sample size was so small, I don’t know how scholarly rigorous my interview data is.

Despite these frustrations, however, I was still feel the research was valuable, because it revealed (surprisingly, for me) that parents weren’t at all aware of the SMART Kids program’s activities or mission. Most had allowed their children to attend because they figured if it was called SMART Kids it would make their kids smarter—but many asked me what the aims and activities of the program were. Parents gave additional reasons for low attendance, but I think the lack of parent connection to the program is a big barrier to attendance that may be more subtle than reasons like sickness or Saturday chores. As it became evident from my interviews that parents weren’t aware of the SMART Kids’ activities, I began to ask parents how they learned about their children’s performance in “regular” school, to gauge whether it was common for kids to be independent. Most parents were fully informed of their child’s activities and performance in “normal” school, however, leading me to believe that parents’ disconnect from SMART Kids had more to do with the program than any cultural attitudes towards education.

As a result of this finding from my interviews, I’ve typed up a project proposal for my NGO about creating a parent’s newsletter. In addition to the proposal, my final

product for RESPECT will be a report about parents' interview responses, presented in paper format and in a Powerpoint presentation. I haven't formally presented the full proposal to the RESPECT volunteers on the camp yet, but so far they seem ambivalent about including parents in SMART Kids. I find this very frustrating, both because I think a parent connection would help the program, and because it seems like my fellow volunteers still don't consider my research to be especially useful. One of the other volunteers still refers to my project as "Lindsay's research thing," for example. I think this is partially because my initial conversations about a research project (back in February and March) were held mainly with the country director for RESPECT, who is Ghanaian and lives in Accra—and who recently hasn't had as much contact as usual with the Liberians on the camp (due to various unrelated reasons). As a result, I think the Liberian volunteers I work with directly were less involved in research discussions from the beginning than I originally thought. Since most of the refugee volunteers haven't had much experience with research, this is an unfortunate combination—and a lesson for the future about direct communication.

When the summer ends, I think I'll look back on this as much more of a volunteer experience than a research experience. But my volunteer experience was absolutely wonderful—the other volunteers were extremely excited to have me run workshops, teach, and suggest program ideas, and overall I highly respect the work of my NGO. More importantly, the information I gleaned from my research was the very least of what I learned. By living in the camp, working with Liberian refugee volunteers in a grassroots CBO initiative, and teaching in a school on camp, I learned more about refugee life and education policy than I could have from any study.

I've also learned quite a bit about my own problem-solving style by dealing with the summer's frustrations. I've realized that I like to take a step back and evaluate problems before I dive in and tackle them, which can be both a strength and a weakness. While evaluating a situation allows me to better address it, I often feel like I wait too long to act, which is especially detrimental in the immediacy of an "on-the-ground" experience. It's much easier for me to think of solutions when I'm at home in the library, connected to high-speed internet and in air-conditioning, than when I'm in the midst of a frustrating experience or painful situation. Yet, it's when I'm "on-the-ground" that I can do the most, and I know that when I go home I'll be frustrated that I can't deal with social problems more directly. After working with RESPECT for almost eight weeks I've thought about many projects I'd like to do with the kids I teach, for example, but most of them have occurred just recently, as I'm about to leave the country. I'll do my best to suggest programs and projects via the internet, but I'd still like to be able to be here.

Overall, I had a great learning experience this summer. My research may not have turned out the way I expected, but I've learned more about dealing with frustrating situations and grassroots NGOs than I ever would if I'd worked with a larger, more bureaucratic (and perhaps more punctual) organization. I'd like to work with other CBOs in the future, and this summer gave me a taste of both the frustrations and the satisfying collaboration that could ensue.