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Mill River Park

Working with the kids at Mill River today was an extraordinary experience. My group was spreading compost on the lawn, and I am not a big fan of gardening or yard work, but I thoroughly enjoyed myself today. The kids were so excited, and from what some of them were saying, they had never done anything like this before. I spoke with the two boys who my group initially met last week, and they were just as excited as I was to participate in this project. Michael, the more outgoing of the two last week, was a bundle of energy, and he said that he had never done anything like this before. Adolfo, on the other hand, who was a boy of relatively few words last week, was an entirely different person today, and at times, I had trouble reconciling that this was the same boy whom I met a week ago. He spoke of how he helps his father work on a farm sometimes, and about how much he loves spending that time with his father. He even took on a small leadership role today, supervising the other Cloonan students in properly disbursing the compost. It was truly amazing to watch.

I was surprised by the energy that these young boys and girls exuded today. It would be wonderful if all middle school age students had an opportunity to participate in projects like this, even if it is just at their school instead of in the greater community setting. Twice a year, my children's elementary school holds a clean up day, and it is usually very poorly attended, with just a few handfuls of the local families joining in. One of the difficulties with our school is that it is a neighborhood school to an extent, but about half of the student population buses in from

the opposite side of town. These students and their families rarely attend evening or weekend events, possibly because of transportation issues, and possibly because it is just too far away.

This morning, while walking my kids to school, my five-year-old pointed to a bunch of purple and white tulips at the front of the school and asked if I remembered planting those with him last fall. Whenever there is trash near “his” tulips, he picks it up. It is as though he owns that small plot of land with the dozen or so purple and white tulips, although he shares it with my two-year-old because she threw down some of the dirt on top of the bulbs. To me, that day was about family engagement, and I wish that it could have happened during the school day with parents invited so more than a couple dozen families could have benefitted. I’m not sure that many parents know how to become involved in their children’s educations, particularly if the institution intimidates them or if there is a language barrier. This would be a prime opportunity to get them involved.

Another project that all of the students are involved in is the composting for vegetable gardens. All year, the classes have taken turns collecting food scraps that are compostable at the end of each lunch period and putting them in the composting pig that the city donated to the school. They have also been learning about seeds and planting, and they are weeks away from transplanting the lettuce and tomatoes that they have begun growing in their classrooms.

I love that my children’s school does this, and that the Cloonan Middle School students had an opportunity to participate in a community service project that is similar, but I wonder whether all schools are logistically able to do so. Thinking back to *Unequal Childhoods*, the urban school that many of the low-income families attended did not even have a grassy area to set aside for such projects. Their school was a drab building with an asphalt moat and chain link fence surrounding it. The lack of basic resources in the school hinted at the impossibility of

anything extraneous ever occurring. Then I look at the Harlem Children's Zone, and think about how it's not just about school, it is about community, and I know that anything is possible as long as someone is willing to fight to make it happen.

I am grateful that SPEF has initiated such a phenomenal mentoring program, and I am also happy that our class has teamed up with SPEF this semester on some relevant and fun service projects. I look at some of these kids, like Adolfo, and wonder what it takes to break down the barriers and bring them out of their shells. I wonder what it takes to make them believe in themselves when they spend hours each day with kids who have so much more than they do and who don't appreciate what they have, whether it is merely having a parent home when they get home from school, karate classes three times a week, or their own back yard. Today, with Adolfo, at least, I learned that it doesn't take much- just a rake, a shovel, and a big pile of dirt.