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Exploring Educational Equity: An Ethnographic Case Study of Non-Profit Initiatives in Early Childhood Education

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Exploring Educational Equity: An Ethnographic Case Study of Non-Profit Initiatives in Early
Childhood Education

by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Purpose of the Research.....	1
Non-profit	3
Exploring Volunteer Opportunities and Adapting to Unforeseen Challenges.....	5
Garden Program: A New Perspective.....	7
Chapter Two: Literature Review	10
Bronfenbrenner’s Theory.....	11
The Link Between Socioeconomic Status and Education	13
Non-Profit Organizations as Catalysts for Change.....	14
Chapter Three: Methods	19
Sample	19
Setting.....	21
Observation Work.....	22
Ethnographic Work.....	23
Data Collection	24
Data Analysis	24
Positionality Statement	26
Theme One: Challenges of Garden the Program	27
Theme Two: Love and Enthusiasm for the Garden Program	28
Chapter Four: Findings	30
Challenges of the Garden Program	30
Teachers: Balancing Academic Rigor with Garden Integration.....	30
Love and Enthusiasm for the Garden Program.....	33
Student Perspectives: A Garden of Joy and Discovery	34
Blossom of Knowledge: Cultivating Learning in the Garden	34
Growth Through Gardening: Impact on Behaviorally Challenged Students	35
Chapter Five: Conclusion	36
References.....	38

ABSTRACT

Quality early childhood education is acknowledged as a crucial factor in paving the way for academic success and societal contribution. Childhood experiences greatly influence individual life trajectories, significantly shaping future endeavors. This research delves into the intricate dynamics between socioeconomic status (SES), educational outcomes, and non-profit organizations, emphasizing the challenges faced by students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. While factors such as limited resources, financial constraints, and substandard living conditions have been linked to negative consequences on educational attainment, this research seeks to understand the specific role of non-profits in enhancing educational opportunities. By shedding light on collaborative efforts between local non-profits and communities, the study aims to distinguish how these organizations navigate challenges and work towards providing improved educational prospects for students facing socioeconomic disparities.

Recognizing the complexities associated with youth adversity and investing in early youth development are vital steps toward cultivating a more equitable and prosperous society for the future.

The research traces the evolution of the modern educational system, highlighting its transformative impact on American society, where non-profit organizations emerge as key players in addressing these challenges, providing funding and additional assistance where traditional educational institutions fall short.

Through qualitative research methods, utilizing observation and ethnographic work, the research aims to gain valuable insights into these organizations' founding, values, missions, and evolution, shedding light on their transformative impact on the educational landscape. Themes will be organized to provide a comprehensive understanding, exploring barriers such as teacher resistance and funding constraints and highlighting benefits through narratives from those involved in non-profit initiatives. This approach aims to provide a rich and contextual understanding of educational challenges and the transformative role of non-profit organizations in shaping a more equitable future.

Despite increased access to education, challenges persist within lower-income communities, contributing to educational disparities. The central question posed by this research is: "How do non-profit organizations contribute to overcoming educational challenges faced by low-income communities?" The study, therefore, offers an extensive exploration of the multifaceted relationship between socioeconomic status, non-profit organizations, and the unforeseen opportunities that arise in the pursuit of understanding and addressing educational challenges in low-income communities

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Research

Childhood experiences substantially influence future trajectories, often shaping the course of individuals' future (Metzler et al., 2017). A growing body of empirical research underscores the profound impact of early adversity on educational outcomes. Factors such as limited resources, financial constraints, constrained social networks, and substandard living conditions have been linked to negative consequences on educational attainment (Inbrief, 2007). However, another major thing that plays a significant role in education is Socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status (SES) refers to an individual's or family's position within the social and economic structure, encompassing income, education, and occupation (Dow et al., 2010). It matters significantly as SES influences access to resources, opportunities, and quality of life (Broer et al., 2019). It is pivotal in shaping one's overall well-being and determining educational outcomes. Extensive research has probed the intricate relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and educational outcomes, unveiling a complex interplay that profoundly shapes students' academic trajectories (Anyon, 1981).

This research explores the multifaceted dynamics between socioeconomic status and education, emphasizing the hurdles encountered by students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. It will particularly investigate the role of local non-profit organization in the Tampa Bay area, analyzing their contributions to these challenges and their endeavors to enhance educational opportunities. By shedding light on the collaborative efforts between local non-profit

and the community, this study aims to discern how they navigate challenges and work towards achieving the overarching goal of providing improved educational prospects for students facing socioeconomic disparities. Therefore, investing in early childhood development and equipping youth with the necessary support and resources emerges as a strategic investment in shaping our society's future.

While quality early childhood education and care can pave the way for academic success and societal contribution (Nordtveit, 2018), it is crucial to acknowledge that individuals are resilient and have triumphed over adversity despite limited resources. Humans possess an extraordinary capacity to adapt to circumstances. Nonetheless, exploring how low-income communities navigate challenges with minimal resources and the pivotal role of non-profit organizations in overcoming adversity remains an essential inquiry (Oakes & Limpton, 2002). Recognizing the complexities associated with youth adversity and investing in early youth development are vital steps toward cultivating a more equitable and prosperous society for the future.

Furthermore, the evolution of our modern educational system has, over the years, significantly increased access to education, transforming America socially and economically. However, educational achievement faces formidable challenges, particularly within lower-income communities. Despite advancements in educational access, disparities persist. Traditionally viewed as a solution to social problems and a means to reduce inequality, the educational system still needs to improve in providing equal opportunities (Jack, 2019). Throughout history, education has undergone numerous reforms. However, persistent issues remain, including a failure to recognize and cater to the diverse needs of students based on gender, race, and socioeconomic status. The current system's inherent limitations make it challenging to maximize

individual potential and contribute to the belief that societal problems will resolve over time (Labaree, 2012).

In examining educational institutions' historical and present landscape, it becomes apparent that certain privileged classes benefit more than others, contributing to alienation and isolation for students from less privileged backgrounds (Jack, 2019). Rather than serving as inclusive spaces for diverse backgrounds, schools can act as gatekeepers, hindering access to quality education.

This research asks: "How do non-profit organizations contribute to overcoming educational challenges faced by low-income communities?"

Non-profit

Non-profit organizations emerge as key players in addressing these challenges within our society. Their impact, especially on lower-income communities, is profound. In education, non-profit organizations are crucial in bridging gaps left unaddressed by traditional educational institutions, providing funding and additional assistance (Tiwari & Clotfelter, 1994).

In recent times, there has been a notable shift in perceptions across the political spectrum regarding the role of non-profit organizations in advancing social welfare (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2002). This shift is evidenced by growing support for initiatives such as the privatization of public services and President Bush's faith-based initiative (Davis, 2001).

However, this increased support is often driven as much by cultural and ideological preferences as it is by an understanding of non-profits' actual effectiveness. There is a prevailing belief among policymakers that non-profits are inherently better suited for promoting the public good due to their perceived flexibility, innovation, responsiveness to local needs, and efficiency,

unencumbered by the private sector's profit motives or the public sector's bureaucratic constraints.

However, the need for a comprehensive understanding of the capacity and effectiveness of non-profits poses a significant challenge. The non-profit sector encompasses various organizations, from educational institutions like Princeton University to community-based organizations like Better Education, each with distinct missions, goals, and approaches. This diversity makes it difficult to conduct broad impact analyses or assess organizational and programmatic effectiveness, even within specific areas such as micro-enterprise development.

More clarity is needed for non-profits seeking to refine their strategies and policymakers aiming to drive social change effectively. In addressing educational challenges in low-income communities, understanding the precise contributions of non-profits becomes paramount.

Despite the widespread acknowledgment of non-profits' potential, there remains a critical need for rigorous examination and evaluation of their impact to inform both practice and policy in this crucial domain.

The research methodology will primarily focus on observation and ethnographic work to unearth nuanced insights into the lived experiences of individuals within the educational landscape.

Themes will be organized to provide a comprehensive understanding, with Theme 1 exploring Challenges of the Garden Program such as teacher resistance and funding constraints. In contrast, Theme 2 will highlight benefits of the Garden Program, titled Love and Enthusiasm for the Garden Program where I would explain the joy of learning from the children's perspective.

This research will not only explore the history and evolution of non-profit organizations but will also delve into their specific role within the educational system. Through observation and ethnographic work, the study aims to gain valuable insights into the founding, values, missions,

and evolution of non-profit organizations dedicated to education. By understanding the challenges faced by these organizations, we can grasp their purpose and how they navigate an ever-changing societal and political landscape.

Exploring Volunteer Opportunities and Adapting to Unforeseen Challenges

My exploration into volunteer opportunities at the Tampa Heights Junior Civic Association (THJCA) was initially designed in the after-school programs that offer a dynamic space actively addressing educational challenges. This setting was poised to connect profoundly with the non-profit, students, and parents. However, financial constraints within THJCA compelled a recalibration of my engagement strategy. The absence of the after-school program prompted a thoughtful reconsideration of how I could effectively immerse myself in the community.

The alternative was volunteer work within THJCA's Town and Country Elementary School Garden Program. This shift marked a change in setting and a departure from the original plan centered on after-school programs. As I delved into volunteer work, the intricate dynamics of engaging with parents in a lower-income community came sharply into focus.

The absence of structured after-school programs highlighted the formidable challenge of reaching parents, making it evident that engaging them for interviews would be daunting. This revealed the intricate complexities rooted in their demanding schedules, where the prioritization of securing fundamental needs—such as ensuring shelter and putting food on the table—placed extracurricular activities, including participation in research interviews, lower on their list of priorities. My involvement in the Garden Program takes place midday at the school, representing a departure from the original plan that initially included after-school engagement. This shift in timing significantly restricts opportunities for interaction, particularly during the typical parent

pick-up moments at the end of the day. This adjustment further underscores the challenges of reaching parents for interviews within the current context. This realization became pivotal to my evolving understanding of the community's dynamics. The transition from a direct engagement approach to observation and ethnography was no longer merely a pragmatic response to funding constraints; it became an opportunity to delve into the daily lives and experiences of the community.

This shift in methodology allowed for a more profound exploration of the impact of non-profit initiatives on the ground. It became a lens through which I could uncover unexpected facets of resilience and adaptability within the community. Navigating the terrain of observation and ethnography brought challenges and unique opportunities to comprehend the intricate experiences of lower-income communities. The initial plan, which involved direct engagement and interviews, transformed. The altered approach required a more thoughtful and sensitive observation of the dynamics within the community and the Garden Program. This nuanced perspective shed light on aspects that might have been overlooked in a structured interview setting, offering a deeper understanding of the community's response to the absence of traditional after-school programs.

Despite financial limitations, THJCA continued to play a pivotal role in the community. Through careful observation, the multifaceted impact of the non-profit on educational challenges began to unfold. It became evident that THJCA was adapting to resource constraints while still making a meaningful difference in the lives of those it served.

This journey into volunteer opportunities and the subsequent adaptation to unforeseen challenges became more than a shift in research methodology; it explored the resilience and adaptability within a community facing financial constraints. While initially a hurdle, the absence of after-

school programs provided a unique lens through which to understand the community's priorities and how non-profit organizations, such as THJCA, continue to be integral in shaping educational outcomes despite the challenges they encounter.

Garden Program: A New Perspective

The unexpected challenge of insufficient funds prompted a shift in my research methodology, offering a unique perspective on how non-profit organizations navigate adversity. As I continue this exploration, the aim is not only to understand how educational challenges are addressed but to shed light on the resilience and adaptability of communities when faced with constraints.

Through a refined lens of observation and ethnography, this research endeavors to contribute a nuanced narrative to the broader discourse on the role of non-profits in overcoming educational challenges in low-income communities.

Despite the initial challenges, this shift allowed me to occupy a unique vantage point, providing insights into the intricate tapestry of experiences within the organization. The Garden Program is part of the Tampa Heights Junior Civic Association in-school support educational enrichment program. The unique setting of the THJCA non-profit organization's Garden Program, which has been situated at Town and Country Elementary School since its beginning in 2011, is created so the lower-income youth have an opportunity for unique services that enrich their education and showcase the support from the organization. This program offers an alternative learning environment for students, fostering engagement with various fruits and vegetables while instilling a sense of belonging through plant care. Overseen by Miss Dee, the program operates on donations and grant funding. Participation involves teacher endorsement, with a commitment of 30 minutes of classroom time for program activities.

The program utilizes a designated area on the school premises, featuring raised beds meticulously constructed by THJCA. This dedicated space serves as an interactive learning environment where children actively participate in planting, growing, and harvesting fruits and vegetables. The outdoor setting of the garden provides a stark contrast to the traditional classroom environment; the garden serves as a calming space where they engage in hands-on activities like planting seeds, transferring soil, and mulching. The tangible, delicate nature of the plants allows youth to redirect their energy and focus on singular tasks, resulting in observable changes in youths' participation, behavior, and focus.

By immersing myself in the day-to-day activities of the Garden Program at Town and Country Elementary, I gained a more profound understanding of the challenges and triumphs that unfolded in this community.

The Garden Program at THJCA surpasses conventional educational paradigms, seamlessly integrating academic concepts with hands-on gardening experiences. The program stands as a testament to the profound impact that thoughtfully designed and executed initiatives can have on shaping the educational journey of young minds.

The Garden Program's future vision entails expanding to multiple schools, aiming to provide more students with the enriching experience of hands-on learning and environmental engagement. To realize this goal, THJCA is actively seeking additional donations and grants.

The program can extend its reach with increased financial support, fostering a deeper connection to nature, healthy food choices, and a distinct educational environment among a broader student population. By expanding to multiple schools, the Garden Program has the potential to positively impact even more young lives, promoting sustainability, community involvement, and academic

success. THJCA endeavors to turn this vision into reality through continued advocacy and resource mobilization efforts, creating a brighter and greener future for future generations.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational inequalities endure in societies where socioeconomic status significantly influences students' academic paths. While scholars extensively discuss education's historical and evolutionary aspects, there remain gaps in addressing disparities in lower-income communities. Specifically concerning non-profit initiatives, the literature inadequately explores the extent to which these organizations are effectively tackling educational disparities among lower-income populations.

Thus, this literature review aims to explore the impact of non-profit organizations on mitigating lower-income educational disparities, with a specific focus on youth in elementary school and their development. Using the context of Town and Country Elementary, where socioeconomic status significantly influences students' academic performance, I delve into the role of non-profits in addressing these challenges.

The literature surrounding school garden education is a critical lens for examining the transformative potential of initiatives like the Garden Program at Town and Country Elementary School. Rooted in recognizing systemic injustices within the socioeconomic status and educational structures, school garden education is a grassroots endeavor that challenges entrenched power dynamics and fosters equitable access to educational opportunities. The Garden Program, situated within the larger context of school garden education, exemplifies this commitment to social justice by providing a platform for marginalized voices and communities to engage actively with education and opportunities given to them by non-profit organizations.

By integrating place-based learning practices, these programs cultivate a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between local ecosystems, food production, and social justice. In the case of the Garden Program, the emphasis on weekly educational sessions led by a non-profit organization not only exposes students to diverse practices but also instills a sense of ownership, interdisciplinary learning, and social and emotional development.

Furthermore, the Garden Program's focus on allowing older students to choose what to grow in the garden, such as flowers for special occasions, illustrates a commitment to honoring diverse perspectives and traditions within the learning environment.

The literature on school garden education underscores the transformative potential of initiatives like the Garden Program in fostering innovation and adaptation while empowering the educational learning environment. By actively engaging with these principles and practices, educational programs can catalyze positive change within local communities and focus on bettering the educational system.

Bronfenbrenner's Theory

Urie Bronfenbrenner, born in 1917 in Russia, immigrated to the United States with his family in 1923. He obtained a bachelor's degree from Cornell University in 1938, majoring in psychology and music. Furthering his education, Bronfenbrenner earned a master's degree in education from Harvard in 1940, followed by a doctorate in developmental psychology from the University of Michigan in 1942 (Tudge et al., 2022).

Bronfenbrenner's seminal work, the Ecological Systems Theory, revolutionized the understanding of human development. The theory suggests that human development is intricately intertwined with a multifaceted network of systems, including cultural, social, economic,

political, and psychological factors (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). This theory underscores these interrelated systems' crucial role in facilitating or impeding optimal development.

Moreover, Bronfenbrenner emphasized the significant influence of policies and programs in shaping these ecological systems. By acknowledging the impact of societal structures on human well-being, his theory highlights the potential of interventions to foster healthier environments conducive to individual growth and flourishing.

In the context of Bronfenbrenner's theory, the way children interact with their teachers and peers is a pivotal aspect of their development, both within and outside the classroom. The organization of the classroom environment plays a significant role in shaping the opportunities for such interactions and activities. However, it is essential to recognize the broader socioecological factors that influence children's development, including their socioeconomic status and upbringing.

Children who experience disadvantages such as lack of resources, food insecurity, or health challenges may face distinct challenges in engaging with teachers and accessing learning opportunities (Kleinman et al., 1998). Their experiences within the educational environment can differ markedly from those of their peers from more privileged backgrounds, where parental involvement, adequate resources, and stable living conditions are more prevalent.

Furthermore, children's interactions within the classroom are influenced by factors such as socioeconomic background and racial/ethnic identity (Watkins & Howard, 2015). Students with similar socioeconomic or cultural backgrounds may find it easier to relate to their peers and teachers, potentially shaping the dynamics of engagement and learning experiences within the classroom.

By considering these broader ecological influences, Bronfenbrenner's theory underscores the interconnectedness of individual development with the larger socioenvironmental contexts in which children grow and learn. This perspective highlights the importance of addressing systemic inequalities and creating supportive environments that facilitate optimal development for all children.

The Link Between Socioeconomic Status and Education

The connection between socioeconomic status (SES) and educational outcomes has been extensively researched, revealing a complex interplay that significantly influences the academic trajectory of students (Duke, 2000). Using Town and Country Elementary School as a case study, which has an 88% economically disadvantage student's enrollment in the 2023-2024 school year, I explore the distinction of this association and the potential implications for educational disparities (Ethnic Enrollment by School Year 2023-20204, 2024).

Duke (2000) emphasized the persistent disparities in academic achievement among students from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds in American public schools. These disparities are evident in various aspects, including standardized test scores, graduation rates, and access to advanced courses (Reardon, 2018). The cumulative effect of these disparities contributes to a cycle of inequality that can persist across generations.

One key factor contributing to the SES-education link is the availability of resources. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds often benefit from greater access to educational resources, such as private tutors, extracurricular activities, and well-funded schools (Sirin, 2005). On the contrary, economically disadvantaged students may need more access to these resources, limiting their educational opportunities and hindering academic success.

The role of parental involvement in education cannot be overstated. Research suggests that children from higher SES families tend to have more involved parents who actively support their academic pursuits (Lareau, 2019). In contrast, parents with limited resources may face challenges participating actively in their child's education, potentially impacting the student's motivation and academic engagement.

The school environment also plays a pivotal role in shaping educational outcomes. High-poverty schools often face resource constraints, leading to larger class sizes, limited extracurricular offerings, and inadequate facilities (Duncan & Murnane, 2014). These challenges can create an environment that is less conducive to learning, putting students from low SES backgrounds at a disadvantage.

Furthermore, the cultural aspect of SES must be addressed. Town and Country Elementary School's high Latin ethnic enrollment underscores the importance of considering cultural factors in understanding the link between SES and education. Cultural differences can impact communication between schools and families, influencing the effectiveness of interventions to bridge the achievement gap (Valenzuela, 2002).

Non-Profit Organizations as Catalysts for Change

Regarding non-profit content, the literature does not fully address how thoroughly or even how the non-profit organizations are addressing lower-income educational disparities. The literature on non-profits that benefit the educational system in America is limited.

Non-profit organizations can play an important role in promoting evidence-based practice in schools as evidence-based practices are informed by rigorous research, data, and a systematic analysis of what works. Evidence-based practice in schools involves making educational

decisions based on the best available evidence of effectiveness, including research studies, data analysis, and evaluation results (Clegg*, 2005).

The thesis work is based on observation and ethnographic reviews. The data is collected through observation in school, which offers insight into how society and individuals function in educational surroundings. However, incorporating insights from various literature related to non-profit organizations, socioeconomic status, and communities can help me complete better research. Many non-profits' literature on intermediaries offers additional perspectives on factors influencing the effectiveness of organizations working in education and human service provision. Non-profits often operate with a mission-driven focus, aiming to address societal needs and contribute to the public good. However, their effectiveness in promoting evidence-based practice hinges on various factors, such as organizational capacity, leadership, and strategic partnerships (Jones, 2014). Trends within the non-profit sector further shape the landscape for evidence-based practice initiatives.

As I immersed myself in my research, I gained insights into the ways in which shifts in funding, collaborations, and public expectations impact non-profit organizations' efforts to improve the educational system. This aligns with the broader literature, which emphasizes the social mission of non-profits, prioritizing community needs over profit motivation (Sanger, 2004). Recognized as vital components of civic infrastructure, non-profits strive to enhance subjective well-being within communities through service provision, advocacy, and the cultivation of social capital. Firstly, non-profits offer services that enhance the quality of life for community members (Cheng, 2019). These services, which often address immediate needs such as educational support, better socioeconomic status, and healthcare access, contribute significantly to public welfare (Guo, 2012). Moreover, they foster the creation of various community assets, including

museums, schools, churches, and healthcare facilities, thus justifying state support due to their greater social value than state provision alone (Reich, 2011, p. 182).

Communities with access to a diverse range of non-profit services typically exhibit higher levels of subjective well-being, as evidenced by improved educational outcomes and overall satisfaction (Taylor et al., 2016). Non-profits not only address immediate needs but also provide avenues for leisure, recreation, and social interaction, all of which are essential for fostering happiness and community cohesion (Prilleltensky et al., 2001).

Additionally, non-profits serve as vital advocacy channels between the public and the government sector, often championing causes and policies that benefit marginalized populations (Taylor, 2010).

Lastly, non-profits contribute to the development of social capital by fostering networks of association and engagement within communities (Wilson & Musick, 2007). By providing opportunities for fellowship, collaboration, and integration, non-profits enhance social connections, which are strongly correlated with subjective measures of life satisfaction (Stiglitz et al., 2010).

Through their multifaceted roles in service provision, advocacy, and the promotion of social capital, non-profits significantly contribute to the subjective well-being of communities across America (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2002). Understanding these trends is essential for assessing the broader context in which non-profits operate and their potential influence on educational practices. To illustrate various aspects of the analysis, the research integrates my experience volunteering for a non-profit organization and the garden program within the elementary school. The observation and ethnography from my experience, with published literature, provide

practical insights into the challenges and successes faced by non-profits in promoting evidence-based approaches.

Furthermore, Tampa Heights Junior Civic Association emerges as a noteworthy non-profit organization tackling educational disparities in Town and Country Elementary. Through close Collaboration with schools, parents, and the community, this organization pioneers comprehensive programs designed to elevate early childhood education in the pursuit of equitable learning opportunities. Examining the THJCA as a case study provides a rich opportunity to deepen our understanding of non-profit organizations dedicated to educational enrichment. THJCA's multifaceted approach to community engagement, particularly through its Garden Program, offers valuable insights into the effectiveness of grassroots initiatives in addressing educational disparities. By researching THJCA's strategies for resource allocation, community partnerships, and program efficiency, we can uncover best practices and lessons learned that hold relevance for similar organizations striving to make a meaningful impact in education. I aim to provide insights that avoid generalizations about all non-profits, instead focusing on common themes highlighted in the literature. While not definitive representations of all non-profits, these insights can serve as guiding principles to better understand similar organizations.

As we unravel the intricate relationship between non-profits and educational disparities, it becomes evident that their impact extends far beyond conventional classroom boundaries as a beacon of hope for a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape (Yates, 2012). A distinctive feature of Tampa Heights Junior Civic Association's approach is the implementation of garden programs, transcending traditional classroom-based interventions to address systemic

issues linked to socioeconomic disparities. The garden program enriches educational experiences and confronts nutritional challenges prevalent among children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Through hands-on learning, children in the garden program connect the week's letter with the fruits, vegetables, and plants they cultivate, fostering a practical understanding of academic concepts and instilling a sense of curiosity and exploration. Beyond academics, the organization addresses nutritional challenges by involving students in cultivating their food, contributing to a holistic approach to education (Rosenfield, 1992). As the Tampa Heights Junior Civic Association exemplifies, non-profit organizations collaborate closely with schools to supplement curriculum-based learning with enriching activities. This multifaceted approach ensures that children are enveloped in diverse learning environments. Importantly, beyond the school setting, students can extend these plant-based learning experiences to their homes, creating a continuum of educational engagement that transcends traditional classroom boundaries. This approach also facilitates parental involvement, creating an environment where parents actively participate in their child's education.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Sample

Town & Country Elementary School is a public school in Tampa, Florida, in a spacious suburban environment. The school caters to a student body 383, from pre-kindergarten to fifth grade. Within this diverse cohort, approximately 48% are female students, while 52% are male students. Notably, Town & Country Elementary School is committed to inclusivity by enrolling 88% of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, reflecting its dedication to providing equitable education opportunities to all members of its community (Ethnic Enrollment by School Year 2023-20204, 2024). Since its inception in the fall of 2021, this program has become an integral part of Town & Country Elementary's educational landscape, offering enriching experiences beyond traditional classroom learning. In education, the Garden Program at Tampa Heights Junior Civic Association (THJCA) emerges as a transformative initiative catering to children between the ages of 4 and 11. The qualitative research design chosen for this study emphasizes an in-depth exploration and understanding of the intricate dynamics and background associated with the contributions of non-profit organizations to overcoming educational challenges in low-income communities.

The Tampa Heights Junior Civic Association chose the classrooms for this study on the Garden Program for the 2023/2024 school year based on specific criteria. It is important to note that the sample was preexisting prior to the research, comprised of teachers and students who were already engaged and interested in the program and other criteria. The primary determinant of participation in the program is the willingness of teachers to allow the program into their

classrooms for 30 minutes each week. However, stringent measures are in place to ensure the suitability of participating teachers. These measures include the completion of a questionnaire, which the THJCA executive director and program manager then review. Subsequently, an interview is conducted to assess the teacher's suitability for the program. The size of each participating classroom is determined based on the financial resources available to the non-profit organization. Additionally, student participation in the program is voluntary, with parental consent required by signing a contract. This approach ensures that the sample selected for the study is aligned with the goals and objectives of the Garden Program while maintaining rigorous standards for participant selection.

Eighty-eight students were included in the sample for this school year, representing various grade levels and participation contexts within the program. Specifically, the sample comprised two pre-K classes, each with 22 students (10 male, 12 female), one first-grade classes with 25 students each (8 male, 17 female), one second-grade students with 21 students each (10 male, 11 female), a behavioral class with 5 male students aged 10, and an after-school garden program with 15 students (8 male, 7 female) different ages but they are not part of the other mentioned classes . The student body's diversity reflects the program's inclusive nature, offering educational opportunities to children from various backgrounds and demographics. Through systematic observation and qualitative data collection, this study seeks to elucidate the program's effectiveness in promoting environmental literacy, fostering a sense of community, and enhancing student learning outcomes.

Setting

By being the driving force behind the dedicated leadership of Miss Dee, this program operates on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, offering carefully curated activities that seamlessly blend into the curriculum while fostering a connection to gardening.

The setting of the Garden Program encompasses both indoor and outdoor environments, providing a dynamic space for students of different ages to engage in educational activities. The program's flexibility allows for seamless transitions between indoor and outdoor settings, catering to students' diverse learning needs and preferences. However, outdoor activities are contingent upon favorable weather conditions, ensuring the safety and comfort of students while fostering an appreciation for different learning opportunities. One notable aspect of the indoor/outdoor setting is its integration with the curriculum, offering students tangible connections between classroom lessons and real-world experiences in the garden. For instance, pre-K students explore the letter "A" through hands-on activities involving apple seeds or fruits grown in the garden. The program aligns with their alphabet learning curriculum. Each week is dedicated to a specific letter, influencing the choice of plants. For another instance, when the letter of the week is 'C,' children plant carrots, cabbage, and other seasonal produce beginning with that letter. This intentional integration of education into gardening cultivates a love for nature and reinforces foundational academic concepts.

Similarly, older students can select and cultivate plants based on their interests and preferences, incorporating elements of mathematical education through activities such as measuring plant growth. They can explore a broader spectrum of fruits and vegetables. This year, older students expressed a desire to grow flowers, giving them a garden learning experience and the

opportunity to share their creations with loved ones on special occasions like Mother's Day or birthdays.

One distinctive class within the program caters to behavioral needs, including five boys. The outdoor setting of the garden provides a stark contrast to the traditional classroom environment, offering a therapeutic outlet for the boys. Despite their hyperactivity and potential challenges with focus, the garden serves as a calming space where they engage in hands-on activities like planting seeds, transferring soil, and mulching. The tangible, delicate nature of the plants allows them to redirect their energy and focus on singular tasks, resulting in observable changes in behavior.

Furthermore, the program extends beyond regular school hours, offering an after-school component where Town and Country Elementary School students actively participate. Each child is allocated a garden bed, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility. The practical aspect of cultivating their produce becomes a source of pride as they are involved in the growing process and prepare and enjoy meals using the harvested fruits and vegetables.

Overall, the indoor/outdoor setting of the Garden Program facilitates immersive and interdisciplinary learning experiences, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation for the garden while still allowing them to partake in the educational realm.

Observation Work

Over the past six months, I have actively participated in and closely observed the Garden Program's day-to-day operations, allowing me to capture the lived experiences of the individuals involved. This immersive approach allows for a comprehensive examination of how teachers and students interact during Miss Dee's weekly educational sessions, shedding light on implicit

practices and underlying dynamics within the program. By employing observational methods, this study seeks to uncover the multifaceted realities of non-profit educational initiatives and their impact on stakeholders' experiences and behaviors.

Ethnographic Work

Ethnography entails a more immersive and participatory form of research.

Sociological ethnographers often adopt a part-time participant observation approach, concentrating on specific work or social institutions instead of the traditional immersive method (Hammersley, 2006). The segmented nature of large societies and practical considerations in modern academia has made me choose ethnographic research best to utilize efficient data collection. I have embedded myself within the community, focusing on the Tampa Heights Junior Civic Association and Garden Program. Ethnographic work allowed me to understand better the cultural, social, and organizational contexts that shape non-profit interventions and their impact on educational challenges.

The study aims to uncover the subjective experiences, values, and meanings attributed to non-profit programs by employing a qualitative research design. This approach allows for the exploration of not only the "what" but also the "how" and "why" behind the observed phenomena. Additionally, qualitative research is well-suited for capturing the complexity of human interactions and the contextual factors influencing educational disparities.

The emphasis on qualitative methods aligns with the research's overarching goal of providing a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how non-profit organizations, exemplified by the Tampa Heights Junior Civic Association, contribute to addressing educational disparities. This approach recognizes the multifaceted nature of the educational landscape. It aims to generate

insights beyond numerical data, focusing on the lived experiences and social dynamics that shape the effectiveness of non-profit interventions in low-income communities.

Data Collection

This study's primary data collection methods involved active participation in the garden program, approximately 8 hours per week. Over two days, engagement occurred with six classes, encompassing a diverse range from pre-kindergarten to 2nd grade, including a behavioral class. The data collection process was structured around the garden program, wherein each week presented varied assignments tailored to the student's specific needs and educational objectives. This approach facilitated a comprehensive and firsthand understanding of the program's dynamics, allowing for the observation of how students from different age groups and backgrounds interacted with the garden activities. The diversity in class levels and incorporating a behavioral class added depth to the data, offering insights into the program's effectiveness across various educational contexts. The systematic participation in different classes and adherence to the garden program's evolving curriculum contributed to a robust dataset that reflects the multifaceted impact of the Tampa Heights Junior Civic Association's initiatives on educational experiences within Town and Country Elementary.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved thoroughly examining the accumulated information from active participation in the garden program, spanning approximately five months of work. Across two days, interactions were observed and documented with six distinct classes, covering a spectrum from pre-kindergarten to 11 years of age. Each week's diverse assignments within the garden program served as the focal point for the data analysis, allowing for a nuanced exploration of how students from varied age groups engaged with the educational activities. The

data collection process involved recording participants' engagement levels, emotional connections, and behavioral variations before, during, and after each class within the garden program. Additionally, close tracking of the evolution of ideas and interactions related to the garden program provided insights into participants' willingness to engage and the program's educational impact.

The analytical approach encompassed a systematic review of observed patterns, emerging themes, and the impact of the garden program on different class levels. Including a behavioral class, they have enriched the dataset, providing valuable insights into the program's effectiveness in addressing diverse learning needs. This comprehensive data analysis aimed to uncover major aspects of the Tampa Heights Junior Civic Association's initiatives. It explains their contributions to educational experiences across the contexts of Town and Country Elementary. Thematic analysis will identify recurring themes and patterns within the observational and ethnographic data.

The interpretation will involve:

- developing meaning from the identified themes and patterns,
- comparing them with existing literature and
- concluding the contribution of non-profit organizations to overcoming educational challenges.

The chosen methodology aligns with the research focus on understanding how non-profit organizations, exemplified by the Tampa Heights Junior Civic Association, contribute to addressing educational disparities in low-income communities through evidence-based practices and innovative programs. The qualitative approach ensures a deep exploration of the multifaceted aspects of these contributions.

Positionality Statement

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) define positionality as sharing personal narratives about social identities, personal biases, beliefs, and values. When conducting non-profit research within lower-income communities, researchers must critically reflect on their roles as instruments in addressing societal challenges (Jones et al., 2014).

Growing up in Europe, my formative years were shaped by the prevailing notion that education was inherently equitable, transcending geographical boundaries. The belief was that regardless of one's location, everyone had access to the same quality of education, fostering unity and collective investment in the education system as a societal equalizer.

Upon relocating to the United States, I encountered a stark contrast in the educational landscape. Unlike the egalitarian model I was accustomed to, the American education system exhibited a pronounced income-based disparity. The quality of education was intricately linked to one's financial circumstances, dictated by income codes and socioeconomic status.

In this new context, I witnessed how family income profoundly influenced a student's educational experience. Disparities in resources, facilities, and opportunities highlighted an education system where access and quality largely depended on economic factors. This stark contrast between my European upbringing and the American reality underscored the profound impact of income inequality on individuals' educational journeys.

Realizing this income-based educational divide heightened my awareness of systemic challenges within the American education system. It prompted reflection on broader implications for social mobility, reinforcing that educational opportunities should be accessible to all, irrespective of economic background.

Furthermore, observing the challenges faced by these communities, I recognized the urgency for further exploration. My background and experiences shaped diverse reactions to the issues despite simultaneous awareness. Sharing individual positionalities and reflections is essential to understanding the complex dynamics within non-profit and lower-income community research. While researching, I encountered the urgency of non-profit research within lower-income communities through various avenues. During my involvement in non-profit organizations, I witnessed the transformative potential of community initiatives. My exposure came through my engagement with educational programs to uplift underprivileged youth.

I emphasize non-profit initiatives' transformative power in addressing systemic issues within lower-income communities, as my experiences highlight the importance of inclusive and sustainable community development strategies. I reflect on the complexities of navigating the non-profit landscape and the evolving role of researchers in contributing to positive social change.

Through my research, I aspire to catalyze positive change and advocate for equitable opportunities within the non-profit sector and lower-income communities.

Theme 1: Challenges of the Garden Program

Two prominent themes have surfaced within the complex framework of the afterschool program, offering insights into the challenges faced by the organization and the individuals involved.

Firstly, the theme of teacher resistance emerges as a nuanced interplay between institutional structures and individual perspectives. As previously discussed, the Gardening Program's success hinges upon teachers' willingness and capacity to incorporate this additional curriculum into their classes, which can prove challenging given statutory testing obligations and varying openness to external educational initiatives. Secondly, the availability of transportation significantly impacts

students' participation in the afterschool Garden Program. Only a few students can be picked up or walk home after the Garden Program, while most transition to the Boys and Girls Club afterschool program. The Boys and Girls Club of Town and Country provides extended hours beyond what the Garden Club can offer, thus influencing students' decisions regarding program attendance. Consequently, this resistance underscores the importance of comprehending the organizational dynamics that influence the reception and implementation of afterschool endeavors. Unraveling these layers becomes crucial for identifying strategies to enhance program effectiveness and garner support from key stakeholders.

Simultaneously, the pervasive issue of funding emerges as a recurrent theme, casting a shadow on the program's sustainability and the depth of its impact on the community. Navigating the delicate balance between aspirations and financial constraints becomes a central focus, with insights from Johnson and Garcia (2019) reinforcing the importance of strategic planning and resource allocation within non-profit organizations facing such challenges. This exploration of barriers provides a holistic view of community-based initiatives' obstacles to making a meaningful impact.

Theme 2: Love and Enthusiasm for the Garden Program

Despite facing challenges due to limited resources, compelling stories of resilience and accomplishment have emerged, showcasing the transformative impact of the Garden Program. Supported by the non-profit organization THJCA, the experiences of Miss Dee and the dedicated teachers at Town and Country Elementary are prime examples of the positive influence committed individuals can exert. Teachers who wholeheartedly participate in the Garden Program offer students a valuable avenue for exploration, enhancing their educational journey by integrating hands-on activities focused on science, language, phonetics, and writing skills into

the traditional curriculum. Furthermore, Miss Dee's approach introduces a fresh perspective to the educational landscape, providing children with 30 minutes to immerse themselves in the garden, fostering a sense of accountability and achievement. Additionally, delving into the joy of learning from the children's perspective illuminates the intrinsic value of these programs beyond conventional metrics. The experiences of the young participants serve as a testament to the intangible benefits that extend beyond the classroom. This aligns with the research of Smith et al. (2018), which emphasizes the importance of community engagement programs in fostering positive outcomes for children in low-income communities.

As the exploration of emergent themes unfolds, the research takes on a dynamic quality, weaving together the challenges and benefits inherent in after-school programs. The barriers faced by the THJCA program serve as critical touchpoints for understanding the intricacies of community-based initiatives in the face of limited resources. Simultaneously, the uplifting narratives of resilience and success provide a counterpoint, emphasizing the potential for positive transformation even within constrained environments.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The central question driving this research to uncover the profound impact of non-profit organizations in addressing educational limitations is: "How do Non-profit Organizations Contribute to Overcoming Educational Challenges Faced by Low-income Communities?" Insights drawn from empirical data collected through observations and ethnographic inquiries shed light on the meaningful contributions of non-profit organizations in addressing educational obstacles within low-income communities.

Challenges of the Garden Program

Integrating the garden program into the academic curriculum presents opportunities and challenges for teachers and students. Teachers play a pivotal role in orchestrating the seamless integration of the garden program within the academic framework. However, the data reveal the difficult balancing act they must perform, navigating the demands of standardized testing, curriculum devotion, and classroom management alongside the incorporation of garden activities.

Teachers: Balancing Academic Rigor with Garden Integration

In the busy environment of Town and Country Elementary School, a significant initiative was underway: the integration of a garden program into the academic curriculum. This endeavor required careful navigation by the school's educators.

Despite recognizing the potential benefits, teachers faced considerable challenges in implementing the garden program effectively. One major obstacle was the limited timeframe allotted for garden activities, often just thirty minutes. Many tasks that come with participating in

the Garden Program must be considered. It is more than just being part of the standard educational setting and switching to the Garden Program. Rather, these tasks include maintaining a quiet demeanor, tidying up their workspace, stowing away their materials, forming orderly lines, and proceeding to the garden area with care and consideration for their peers. These tasks for young students can sometimes be challenging and take away much of the Garden time. For those reasons, teachers and Miss Dee are responsible for talking with children and providing extra attention to those who need it. Even so, Miss Dee has created extra tasks for students, such as assigning a compose champion weekly that gives them a sense of ownership to maintain classroom order.

Furthermore, despite the shortness of the timeframe, the efficient execution of these tasks is essential to ensuring that every minute in the garden is maximized for meaningful learning experiences. However, it was not always easy. Besides maintaining order in the classroom, it also meant for teachers to orchestrate a symphony of transitions, from quieting the chatter of eager minds to lining up for the journey outdoors; every moment had to be maximized. For some, the challenge lay not in the curriculum but in the delicate art of transitioning between subjects. How do you seamlessly switch gears from fractions to flower beds without missing a beat?

"I have a little secret," one teacher shared with a smile. "I actually prefer having garden time scheduled before the lunch break. It seems to make the transition much smoother for my students."

However, such luxuries were not afforded to every classroom, leaving it up to the ingenuity of individual educators to navigate the smooth transition and discipline to ensure a productive session.

Moreover, among their already packed schedules, teachers found themselves grappling with the added weight of standardized testing and curriculum devotion. Every minute was precious, and every lesson was meticulously planned to ensure their students were prepared for the academic challenges ahead. Teachers were intensely aware of the significance of student behavior and engagement, particularly given their evaluation based on standardized test scores. This imperative to optimize every instructional minute underscored the high stakes associated with effective classroom management.

The introduction of a new program, "progress monitoring," by the Department of Education under Governor Ron DeSantis, termed the Florida Assessment of Student Thinking (FAST) exams, has added another layer of complexity. This new testing framework, implemented three times a year, has shifted teachers' focus towards ensuring students are adequately prepared for these exams, affecting participation in extracurricular activities like the Garden Program (FAST Assessments).

Moreover, the after-school program posed yet another challenge in terms of transportation availability. Limited options for getting home after the Garden Program meant that students faced barriers to participation. For many students, especially those from lower-income communities, parental availability for transportation was often constrained by job responsibilities. As a result, students were left with few alternatives, often relying on walking home, if feasible, or turning to extended-hours programs like the Boys and Girls Club for supervision and care until they could be picked up. This reliance on community resources or independent travel further underscores the complex dynamics surrounding after-school programming and the need for accessible, inclusive solutions that accommodate the diverse needs of students and their families.

Lastly, financial constraints emerged as a significant impediment to the sustainability and growth of the garden program. Every part of the program, from obtaining essential resources like soil supplies to funding instructional materials, was contingent upon financial support. The need for consistent funding underscored the program's dependence on external resources to maintain its operations and expand its reach within the school community. Without sufficient financial backing, the program faces limitations in providing enriching experiences and meeting the evolving needs of students and educators alike. This reliance on financial support highlights the imperative for strategic planning and resource allocation to ensure the long-term viability and impact of community-driven initiatives like the garden program.

Love and Enthusiasm for the Garden Program

The journey of exploration into the Garden Program has been nothing short of enlightening, revealing a collection of memories and deeply enriching experiences. Witnessing the genuine excitement and enthusiasm radiating from the children engaged in the program has been profoundly inspiring. Each week unfolds with prominent anticipation as students eagerly await Miss Dee's arrival, brimming with curiosity for the upcoming activities. What stands out remarkably is the unwavering dedication demonstrated by the students. Their pride and enthusiasm are noticeable as they eagerly commit themselves to learning and actively engage in memorizing and reciting past activities. This steadfast engagement has yielded remarkable results, evident in the tangible improvements in their cognitive abilities. Enhanced memory retention and expanded vocabulary, particularly in identifying and pronouncing various fruits and vegetables, speak volumes about the transformative power of hands-on learning experiences provided by the Garden Program.

Student Perspectives: A Garden of Joy and Discovery

The Garden Program resonates deeply with the students, offering a vibrant and dynamic learning environment that surpasses traditional classroom boundaries. It provides a refreshing departure from standard learning methods, allowing students to immerse themselves in hands-on experiences that spark curiosity and foster a sense of excitement. As they explore the Garden, they engage with the soil and plants and the concepts of growth, responsibility, and accomplishment.

The joy of the Garden Program can be told through the story of the student whose initial exclusion from the program was due to their parent forgetting to sign the proper paperwork to be able to participate. Despite the setback, the student's unwavering enthusiasm and anticipation for participation remained evident. When the situation was finally overcome, the sheer joy and excitement radiating from the student were palpable, underscoring the program's profound impact on their sense of belonging and fulfillment. Excitedly, the student dashed towards me, exclaiming,

"Miss J, I can finally participate! My dad signed off on the document, and I do not have to watch from the sideline anymore!"

The Garden Program serves as more than just a patch of soil—it is a gateway to a world of discovery, learning, growth, and empowerment for the students involved.

Blooms of Knowledge: Cultivating Learning in the Garden

The Garden Program has proven to be a fertile ground for accelerated learning, which is evident in the remarkable progress made by students with each passing week. Miss Dee's method of reinforcing prior lessons has yielded impressive results, with Pre-K students demonstrating enhanced color recognition and recall of fruits and vegetables from previous weeks. Their

phonetic proficiency has also visibly improved, as evidenced by their engagement with reading materials and coloring pages during garden sessions. An illustrative example of this learning occurred during a rainy-day activity, where students delved into Lois Ehlert's "Eating the Alphabet" book. As we flipped through the pages of the book, a student eagerly remarked,

"I remember planting that fruit the other day—it's strawberries!"

Furthermore, on the other occasion, while exploring the garden, another student inquired,

"Will this plant have flowers? Can I pick them to give to my mom for Mother's Day?"

This type of events underscored the depth of their engagement and connection to the learning experience provided by the Garden Program.

Growth Through Gardening: Impact on Behaviorally Challenged Students

The transformative impact of the Garden Program extends even to the behaviorally challenged boys in the classroom. Initially, their lack of attention and disinterest posed significant challenges. However, as weeks passed and their efforts in the Garden began to bear fruit, a noticeable shift occurred. Their once-difficult behavior gave way to enthusiasm and eagerness as they witnessed the tangible results of their labor in the form of growing plants. This newfound sense of accomplishment motivated them to engage in the garden program actively and fostered a deeper sense of responsibility and gentleness towards the plants they tended. Through firsthand experience, they learned the invaluable lessons of patience, effort, and nurturing touch required for growth, reflecting the profound impact of experiential learning in the Garden on their personal development and behavior.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Researching the Tampa Heights Junior Civic Association (THJCA) Garden Program has offered significant insights into how non-profit organizations tackle educational obstacles in low-income communities. This examination sheds light on the organizations' strategies and approaches to address educational disparities and empower marginalized populations.

The data collection process embraced qualitative research through ethnographic and observational methods, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the program's impact. Engaging in direct observation of educational programs, such as the Garden Program at Town and Country Elementary School, offers invaluable insights into the practical dynamics of non-profit initiatives. Observation serves as a methodological approach to verify the alignment between reported actions and actual behaviors, addressing potential discrepancies that may arise (Ostrov & Hart, 2013). In educational settings, observation enables an adequate understanding of organizational functioning and interpersonal dynamics between staff and program participants. Furthermore, sociological frameworks like Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory have guided this research and illuminated the complex societal influences shaping educational outcomes.

Despite facing obstacles like funding constraints and increased demands from standardized testing, the adaptive nature of both teachers and students underscores the resilience of non-profits in achieving their goals. The success of the Garden Program in enhancing educational outcomes, from improving students' knowledge of fruits and vegetables to positively impacting behavior, highlights the effectiveness of targeted interventions.

The THJCA Garden Program offers many benefits beyond traditional educational environments, enriching students' experiences and fostering community empowerment. As a small part of the broader system, this non-profit exemplifies the transformative potential of hands-on learning experiences and interdisciplinary approaches.

This underscores the importance of supporting non-profit initiatives and recognizing their ability to enact meaningful transformation even in the face of adversity. This research advocates for continued collaboration between academia, non-profit organizations, policymakers, and communities to pursue educational justice. By amplifying the voices of those most impacted by educational disparities and implementing evidence-based interventions, we can work towards leveling the playing field for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background.

Through sustained research, advocacy, and community engagement, we can aspire to create a more fair and inclusive educational system for future generations.

In conclusion, the THJCA Garden Program is a testament to the efficacy of community-driven initiatives in addressing educational disparities. By delving deeper into the specificities of this program, we gain valuable insights that can inform the practices of similar non-profit organizations. While recognizing that each non-profit operates within its unique context, these insights offer guiding principles that can facilitate a better understanding of their roles and contributions to educational equity. Through collaborative efforts and a commitment to evidence-based practices, we can collectively work towards building a more just and equitable educational landscape for all.

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