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An Examination of Early Literacy and Community Engagement with Raising a Reader

Growing up in a rural community as a first-generation, low-income (FGLI) student sparked my interest in educational equity and in expanding opportunities for students who live in underserved communities. From an early age, my mother reminded me that education and books could take me places and open doors that might otherwise remain closed. Her words became especially meaningful when I was accepted to Duke, an opportunity that I knew would not have been possible without the support, encouragement, and sacrifices of the people around me. Coming to Duke opened my eyes to the many educational resources and opportunities available to me, while also making me more aware of how unevenly those opportunities are distributed.

At Duke, I have had the opportunity to learn alongside incredibly talented and driven students who continuously challenge me to grow, think critically, and become the best version of myself. Being surrounded by people with such diverse experiences and perspectives has pushed me to consider not only what I want to accomplish personally, but also how I can use my education to contribute to the communities around me. My experiences at Duke have made me increasingly aware of the privilege and responsibility that come with having access to educational opportunities that are not equally available to everyone. While I have worked hard to take advantage of the opportunities I have been given, I recognize that hard work alone does not determine who has access to quality educational resources. Where a student grows up, their family's financial circumstances, the resources available in their schools, and the support systems

surrounding them can all significantly shape their educational experiences and future opportunities.

These realizations encouraged me to think more deeply about my own experiences and the people who helped me reach where I am today. I began to reflect on how meaningful access to books, supportive mentors, and educational encouragement had been throughout my childhood, and how different my own path might have looked without those resources. I became particularly interested in the role that community organizations can play in filling gaps that schools and families may not always have the resources to address. Organizations that provide literacy resources, mentorship, and educational programming can create spaces where children feel supported, encouraged, and empowered to see themselves as capable learners.

This growing interest in educational equity led me to explore how I could become more directly involved in efforts to expand educational opportunities for children and families facing barriers to resources. I wanted to move beyond simply recognizing disparities in education and gain firsthand experience contributing to a community-based effort to address them. I was especially drawn to the idea of working with an organization that understood the needs of the community it served and could provide support in ways that were both meaningful and sustainable. Through this lens, DukeEngage Boston stood out as an opportunity to connect my personal experiences and academic interests with tangible community engagement.

Ultimately, my decision to participate in DukeEngage Boston was rooted in a desire to learn from a community different from my own while contributing to work that aligns with my commitment to educational equity. As someone whose own educational journey has been shaped by the belief that books and education can open doors, I wanted to better understand how we can

help ensure that those doors are accessible to more children, regardless of their background or circumstances.

DukeEngage Boston is a program that allows students to engage with educational issues through partnerships with nonprofit organizations working to develop effective and equitable approaches to challenges affecting children, families, and communities. The program immediately appealed to me because it offered an opportunity to move beyond learning about educational inequity in the classroom and instead work directly with an organization addressing these barriers within a community. It also fulfilled my Laidlaw summer requirement, but my interest in the program extended beyond that requirement. I wanted to better understand what educational inequity looks like at the community level and how organizations can work alongside families and children to address these challenges.

Choosing Boston also gave me the opportunity to enter a community that was unfamiliar to me and to step outside of the environments I had previously known. Having never visited Boston before, I was excited not only to explore a new city but also to learn about the communities within it and understand the educational landscape from a local perspective. I knew that Boston had its own history, culture, and set of social and educational challenges, and I did not want to assume that my experiences growing up in a rural community would automatically translate to the experiences of children and families in Boston. Instead, I saw the unfamiliarity of the city as an opportunity to approach the experience with curiosity and an open mind.

I was particularly interested in understanding how factors such as access to resources, community partnerships, family engagement, and neighborhood environments shape educational opportunities for children. I wanted to learn more about the ways that organizations work

alongside schools and families to support children's academic and personal development, particularly when families face barriers to accessing traditional educational resources. I was also interested in the strengths that already existed within the communities I would be working with. Too often, conversations about underserved communities focus primarily on what they lack, rather than recognizing the knowledge, resilience, relationships, and community networks that already exist. I hoped to develop a more balanced understanding of both the challenges communities face and the ways community members actively work to address them.

Because I was entering a community that I did not know, I also wanted to be intentional about the way I approached service. Rather than assuming that I knew what a community needed or viewing myself as someone coming in to “help,” I wanted to approach the experience as an opportunity to listen and learn. I recognized that meaningful community engagement requires humility and a willingness to learn from the people who have firsthand knowledge of the issues being addressed. I wanted to understand the perspectives of children, families, educators, and community organizations before considering how I could contribute. This mindset was important to me because I wanted my work to be responsive to the needs of the community rather than based solely on my own assumptions or experiences.

I interned with Raising a Reader (RAR), a nonprofit dedicated to expanding literacy opportunities and improving access to books and reading resources for children and families around Boston. I chose this organization because I have always been a passionate reader, and I wanted to use my own love of literacy to help connect more children with the same opportunities. Growing up as a huge reader, I understand how books can shape a child’s imagination, confidence, education, and overall development. This made my experience with Raising a Reader especially meaningful to me.

Raising a Reader was founded in 1999 in response to a national literacy crisis, when one in three children entering kindergarten lacked basic pre-reading skills. Since its first pilot program in San Mateo, California, RAR has served more than 2 million children and expanded to over 3,000 sites across 40 states. Despite this growth and the organization's efforts to improve early childhood literacy, the issue that inspired RAR's creation continues to affect children in the United States today. Research from the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that early-grade reading proficiency remains low, particularly among children from low-income families and families of color. Children from high-poverty families and neighborhoods often enter kindergarten 12 to 14 months behind the national average in pre-reading and language skills. These disparities highlight why organizations like Raising a Reader are so important and why I wanted to be part of an organization working to make literacy more accessible to children who may not otherwise have the same opportunities.

To address this literacy gap, Raising a Reader developed a program that is implemented through a train-the-trainer model in early childhood, school-age, and family education settings. The organization works with schools, childcare centers, and other community organizations to provide caregiver workshops and help families build consistent reading routines at home. Children are given red bags with three to four books that they can take home and read with their caregivers. Each week, they return the books and receive a new set to bring home. This allows children to have regular access to new books while also encouraging parents and caregivers to spend time reading with them. After completing 13 to 26 weeks in the program, children "graduate" and receive their own Blue Library Bag with a library card inside that they can keep.

Repetition is an important part of Raising a Reader's program because reading needs to become a regular habit in order to have a lasting impact. Building a new habit can be difficult,

and small challenges can easily get in the way. Things like parents feeling unsure about reading with their child, teachers being overwhelmed, or the program not being used consistently can all affect its success.

To help prevent these challenges, Raising a Reader works with each agency to choose books that are appropriate for the families and communities they serve. The organization also provides training and resources that help teachers and staff work directly with parents to build shared reading routines at home. The weekly book bag system makes the program easy for teachers to use because the books and materials are delivered and ready to go. Raising a Reader also shares successful strategies across its different affiliates, which helps organizations maintain the program and work through challenges. In addition, the program uses assessment tools to measure its effectiveness and understand how it is helping children and families. Overall, these different parts of the program help make reading a consistent routine rather than something that families only do occasionally.

Raising a Reader also focuses on creating lasting change for children and families beyond the end of the program. Before completing the program, families are connected with their local or school libraries, and children receive a Blue Library Bag to keep and use when checking out books. This helps families continue the reading routines they developed during the program and gives children ongoing access to books. The program also aligns with several organizational, federal, and state education goals, including Head Start, Common Core Standards, and provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Over the past 20 years, Raising a Reader has participated in 39 program evaluations, which have shown that the program helps families develop stronger reading habits at home while supporting children's school readiness and

language development. These findings demonstrate the broader impact of the organization and its approach to improving early childhood literacy.

During my internship, I supported Raising a Reader Massachusetts' development and fundraising efforts in several ways. I helped raise \$600 during the FY26 Spring fundraising appeal by supporting the development team's donor outreach initiatives. I also created content for social media and newsletters to increase awareness of RAR-MA's programs and fundraising efforts. In addition, I supported event logistics and fundraising at KISS 108 FM's Lisa's Book Club events with Lisa Donovan. I assisted with donor communications, acknowledgments, and stewardship, while also joining weekly Development team meetings and participating in planning for FY27. I collaborated with both the Development and Program teams to draft donor-facing communications for FY27, which gave me the opportunity to better understand how different parts of the organization work together to support its mission.

All of these responsibilities helped me grow in ways that I did not expect. Some of the roles I took on were outside of what I originally imagined I would be doing during my internship, but they gave me the opportunity to step outside of my comfort zone and develop new skills. I would not say that I approached each of these roles knowing exactly what I was doing, but that was part of what made the experience so valuable. Some of the tasks I took on definitely had a learning curve. I had to learn as I went, ask questions, and become more comfortable taking on responsibilities that were new to me. For example, it was challenging at first to adjust to a professional setting that was very different from the academic environments I was used to. In school, assignments usually come with clear instructions, expectations, and deadlines, while my internship often required me to take more initiative and figure out the next steps on my own. I learned how to ask questions when I needed clarification, manage my time when deadlines were

not clearly defined, and take ownership of my responsibilities. In addition, many of the tasks I was assigned were more mundane than I initially expected, which challenged me to sit with boredom and discomfort while still approaching my responsibilities with a positive attitude. Although these tasks were not always exciting, they taught me the importance of patience, consistency, and finding value in even the less stimulating aspects of a job. More importantly, the internship helped me better understand myself as a professional. I realized how much I value social interaction, collaboration, and opportunities to connect with others in the workplace. Ultimately, this experience not only helped me develop professionally but also gave me a clearer understanding of the type of work environment and responsibilities I want in a future career.

From this role, I also quickly realized how challenging it can be to manage the financial side of running a nonprofit. For example, some of the work such as reaching out to donors, cultivating relationships with potential supporters, communicating an organization's mission effectively, and demonstrating why that mission deserves investment all require considerable effort. Nonprofits must not only do meaningful work but also continually find ways to communicate that work to people who may have the resources to support it. This experience helped me understand that funding is not separate from a nonprofit's mission. It is often what allows the organization to sustain and expand its impact. From my own supervisors, I saw the tremendous amount of time, energy, and dedication they poured into an organization they cared deeply about. Their calendars were often filled with meetings, conversations with donors, planning sessions, and other responsibilities that were not always immediately visible from the outside. Watching them navigate these responsibilities made me appreciate how much work goes into keeping a nonprofit running. It also showed me that working toward social change requires persistence even when the results are not immediate or easily measured. A successful nonprofit

depends on people who are willing to consistently invest their time and energy into a mission, even when much of their work happens behind the scenes.

Ultimately, Raising a Reader taught me a lot about what it means to make an impact in the nonprofit sector and in Boston's education community. I came into the internship mainly thinking about literacy and the importance of giving children access to books, but I left with a much broader understanding of everything that goes into making that work possible. I saw how much time goes into fundraising, communication, planning, and building relationships with donors and community partners. I also learned more about myself and the kind of work environment I enjoy. Looking forward, I still carry the same interest in educational equity that brought me to Boston, but I now have a better understanding of the different ways I can contribute to that work. More than anything, this experience made me want to continue exploring work that combines education, community, and opportunities to interact with and learn from other people.

