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INTERNATIONAL PLAYGROUP:

Friendship Support for International Women Mothers/Parents in Greater Lafayette

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STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCH

Pamela K. Sari is a PhD candidate in the American studies program at Purdue University with a graduate concentration/certificate in women's, gender, and sexuality studies. Inspired by the Archival Theory and Practice class taught by Professors Susan Curtis and Kristina Bross at Purdue University, her career aspirations are to teach in higher education settings using service-learning as pedagogical and activism tools. This article reflects on her service-learning experience with International Playgroup, a community organization in Greater Lafayette that helps international mothers of preschoolers in their parenting journey by giving advice, providing monthly play activities, and providing swap activities of baby and toddler equipment, clothing, toys, and books. The service-learning experience with International Playgroup inspired her class, Religion and Feminism, which she taught as an Introduction to Women's Studies class (WGSS280) in fall 2016 and spring 2017.

INTRODUCTION

International Playgroup is a community organization in Greater Lafayette, Indiana, founded to support international mothers (and parents) of preschoolers in their parenting journey away from "home." As an international mother myself, I was introduced to International Playgroup back in 2014 when I had my first child, and I soon found a supportive community of women to help me navigate my new role as a parent (and graduate student). I conducted a service-learning project with International Playgroup after a conversation with playgroup leaders Debbie Townsend and Ginny Hyland. Debbie and Ginny communicated to me the playgroup's needs, first, to put into archives the group's institutional history, and second, to help with monthly programming in spring 2016. From a teaching and learning perspective, this conversation took place as I was designing a service-learning class (to be taught in fall 2016). This class would be offered as an Introduction to Women's Studies (WGSS280), in which I examined connections between feminism and religion in the form of service-learning term projects and a service-learning exhibition at the end of the semester.

To help me achieve such goals, Debbie and Ginny agreed to let me conduct a service-learning project with these primary objectives for International Playgroup: (1) writing and displaying the history of International Playgroup, and (2) helping International Playgroup design and carry out spring 2016 monthly programs and a small exhibition at the end of the semester. The objectives of the service-learning project for myself as a graduate instructor would be: (1) gaining direct experience in establishing a service-learning course that incorporates connections between gender and religion, and (2) gaining direct experience in creating a small exhibition as the culmination of my service-learning class. I conducted this service-learning project out of personal and professional interests and to meet the needs of my community partner, without faculty involvements.

DESCRIPTION

Unlike other groups that were more established, International Playgroup didn't have written history and

Figure 1 (banner image, above). Bethany Dickinson's artworks. (Courtesy of Ginny Hyland.)

archives. The group also didn't have a social media or other media platform (other than an e-mail list), despite having been serving international mothers and families in Greater Lafayette for about ten years. This community partner description is produced through interviews with and edits from Emily Berndt, Toby and Rachel Schmidt, and Ginny Hyland.

International Playgroup is a community group in Greater Lafayette, Indiana, started by Emily Berndt and Rachel Schmidt in 2007. Emily and her husband Tom have been working in the field of child development for many years. Emily has a master's degree in child development with specialization in early childhood, and she taught in the lab school preschool at the University of Minnesota. Her peer-reviewed publications in child development include the analysis of how children utilize motives and intentionality (Berndt & Berndt, 1975) and an analysis of play resources in the classroom (Getz & Berndt, 1982). Tom is a professor and the senior associate dean in the College of Health and Human Sciences at Purdue University. Rachel and her husband Toby were involved in the Lutheran Campus Ministry with the Redeemer Lutheran Church. Rachel earned an MS degree in education from Purdue University with a focus on English language education and ESL certification. Both Rachel and Toby were equipped with Montessori training and spoke Mandarin Chinese; Toby also taught English as a second language. Both families were well-equipped to work with international families, particularly mothers and children.

Emily brought her experiences creating playgroup activities for mothers of young children in Connecticut to Greater Lafayette when she moved. Her own story of raising a child as a graduate student in a university town made her seek opportunities to care for similar families in her new town. Emily met with Rachel, who shared similar passions and knew student mothers and/or spouses who needed a community in the middle of loneliness or the stress of both parenting and adjusting to new cultures. The two women started International Playgroup around September of 2007. They started by inviting four women whom Rachel knew from her ESL classes, and only two of them came. Emily and Rachel decided to keep the playgroup going for awhile, even with only a few in attendance.

Eventually, word spread, and many more women and children began attending the group. The playgroup got bigger, and by December of the same year, they had to move their meetings to the Lutheran church, the Schmidt family's home, and the Berndt family's home. As the

group grew, Toby took leadership of the group alongside Emily and Rachel Schmidt. Toby organized parties and combined playgroup and other international student events. He also gave his points of view on marriage and childrearing issues as a husband, father, and pastor. International mothers liked the additional viewpoints Toby presented. They seemed to be impressed with the warm marriage and family life that Rachel and Toby had. They also liked how Rachel and Tony coped with regular childrearing problems (e.g., sleepless nights, feeding, and sickness) as a real team—two people who loved each other and appreciated each other's strengths and gifts.

Annual holiday events (Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas) brought business to International Playgroup. It seemed like Emily and Rachel organized events nonstop. Every year, they kept saying to each other, "We can't do this anymore." However, somehow it was impossible for them to stop. They heard stories about how, in the beginning, international women or parents were lonely, did not have many friends, and felt like they were raising children on their own. When these women or parents came to International Playgroup, they said they found such a needed community, as well as advice and encouragement for themselves and their families. How could Emily and Rachel stop after listening to such powerful stories?

International Playgroup organized holiday events, cooking and bread-making classes; they also presented traditional meals and stories during holidays like Thanksgiving, Fourth of July (Independence Day), and Christmas. The group explained how to prepare their school-age children for holidays by lending costumes, teaching how to make Valentine's cards, or showing where to buy candies for Halloween. They organized baby showers for expecting mothers and meal trains for new mothers. Alice Stroshine and Ginny Hyland, who later became playgroup volunteers, added sharing activities into their monthly programs. For example, everyone brought pictures of themselves when they were babies and told stories. International mothers and parents also gave presentations about their countries and served their traditional foods. These activities allowed international attendees to share their traditions, which sparked further discussions about communities and cultures.

International Playgroup also came up with the idea of a baby clothing, toys, books, and equipment swap. Emily and the volunteers gradually started collecting these baby and toddler items, and members would recycle and reuse them through swap activities. These activities worked well, especially with baby and toddler needs that

have fast use turnarounds, and they worked well in a university town where students and scholars moved in and out. When families left behind furniture and household items, some of them were still in good condition and could be passed along to other families, instead of being thrown away.

Emily and Rachel had always wanted to have a Bible study linked to International Playgroup (but separate from playgroup activities). There had always been very limited religious elements to the playgroup (e.g., prayers before meals and the celebration of Christmas). Of course, there would be no pressure for the mothers to attend Bible studies. Emily and Rachel got the Bible study set up and they allowed children to be part of the activity. During Bible studies, mothers were free to nurse or change diapers, while Emily was standing by to attend to these mothers' needs, like handing them diapers or helping when the kids fought over the same toy. Rachel had to speak louder to lead the mothers in learning something from the Bible. Overall, they welcomed all kinds of motivation, levels of participation, and involvement. Some of the women were interested in what Christians believed. Some others went through difficult times and wanted someone to pray with. Others weren't interested in the Bible study, which was completely acceptable.

Throughout the years, International Playgroup received help from volunteers with different church backgrounds and affiliations. These volunteers worked hard with Emily to continue a ministry that had benefited many families by providing rides, setting up play equipment for children to use, preparing programs, bringing food, calling new attendees and caring for their needs, and introducing playgroup to international friends and mothers.

Rachel and Toby moved so Toby could pursue a seminary degree, and he is now a pastor at a Lutheran Church in Minnesota. International Playgroup inspired Rachel to pursue a master's degree in marriage and family therapy at a university in Minneapolis. Her entrance interview included sharing with the panel her experience founding and volunteering for the group. Emily Berndt retired from International Playgroup in a parting celebration in spring 2015, although she and her husband Tom continued to visit international families on a regular basis.

In spring 2016, International Playgroup lead volunteers Debbie Townsend and Ginny Hyland and I agreed that my service-learning project would be: (1) putting the International Playgroup history into writing, and (2) helping International Playgroup design and carry out spring 2016 programs that culminate with an exhibition

called Faith and Motherhood. The projects were a unique experience; they were not available to students on a regular basis. To accomplish the first project, I interviewed Emily Berndt and Ginny Hyland to gain information about the organization's history. I was also able to contact Rachel and Toby Schmidt, and they contributed in editing the history I have written here. The history of International Playgroup in the earlier part of this article was the result of my first project.

To accomplish the second project, Debbie, Ginny, and I planned the monthly activities for spring 2016 that focused on the theme faith in motherhood. The theme was chosen to invite reflections around identities, faith, and motherhood as Playgroup's central activities. During the monthly playgroup meetings, children made arts and crafts that invited reflections on their identities. We also invited mothers and parents to create arts and crafts that reflect the theme, and we invited them to share these at the International Playgroup exhibition on June 9, 2016. Participants who submitted their works were Claudia Aeschlimann, Elizabeth Gutwein, Bethany Dickinson, Ginny Hyland, Stephanie Johns, Lyailya Telgarina, Leza Beecher, Nabila Adani, and myself. The volunteers and I displayed the arts and crafts at our regular playgroup area in the Redeemer Lutheran Church. We also displayed a photo collage and written history of International Playgroup, as well as a children's artwork corner. We provided refreshments for participants and attendees and a play corner for the children.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

The interview, writing process, and spring 2016 activities allowed International Playgroup volunteers and members to reflect on how playgroup has been helping international mothers find supportive communities in their parenting journeys. At the same time, playgroup activities also allowed members to reflect on meaningful racial,

Figure 2. Exhibition set up. (Courtesy of David Krismartanto.)

Figure 3. Claudia Aeschlimann's handmade dresses, bow, and basket. (Courtesy of Ginny Hyland.)

ethnic, national, and cultural identities. Participants had opportunities to share these reflections through their stories, conversations, and arts and crafts that they created.

One participant, Claudia Aeschlimann, pointed out through her handmade dress, bow and accessories, and wooden basket how she loved making wearable arts for her daughters. Her stories also highlighted how, in her interracial marriage, her mother-in-law had been an important person in teaching her how to plan ahead and do creative projects around the home. Claudia recalled how, when she got engaged, her mother-in-law gave her a family cookbook with recipes that she could make daily, and there were even a couple of Claudia's own recipes in the cookbook. Claudia's mother-in-law taught her to weave, and it had been an annual tradition for them to weave together during summer. Claudia enjoyed the opportunity to present her work at the exhibition and to think about her identities, but she talked about how she also really benefited from having a time where her children could play and she could have conversations with other mothers.

Another participant, Elizabeth Gutwein, mentioned that making bows and accessories for girls reminded her of her passion for teaching and the memories she made with her students in Indonesia. Originally from Sumatra, Elizabeth taught kindergarteners for five years before moving to Greater Lafayette with her husband, who is native to the area. She was inspired to make bows

because her little girl students and nieces loved playing dress-up with her. The art teacher in her school loved making bows from flannel fabric, so Elizabeth started learning to make the time with her students and nieces even more special. For her, creating or making became a vehicle to navigate identities and memories.

When these women's creations were displayed together and shared through conversations with other international mothers, the stories revealed another level of creation processes—the creation of home. Elizabeth's work, and the work of some other women in the group, revealed how they treasured memories and traditions from their countries of origin, while continuing to seek ways to understand, enter, and adjust to their current homes and communities in Greater Lafayette. International Playgroup, its monthly meetings, and the opportunities it gave the mothers to get to know each other allowed the curation process to happen. Even when discussing a similar season of parenting young children in a different culture, playgroup activities allowed international women and mothers the delicate balance of walking between cultures: honoring traditional wisdom; living and (re)creating memories, friendships, and mentorships; and learning to value (or challenge) new cultural wisdom these international women were presented with. Seeing through my critical race studies lens, playgroup activities provided an important discourse of “counterstorytelling” that acknowledged people of color, including many of these international women and mothers, as possessing, creating, teaching, and transforming wisdom and knowledge (Bernal, 2002; Rolón-Dow, 2005).

The projects I did with International Playgroup also allowed volunteers and myself to think about group sustainability. The organization was struggling to maintain its programs and activities. It did not have clear organizational structures and leadership, and it had

Figure 4. Elizabeth Gutwein's bow projects. (Courtesy of David Krismartanto.)

relied solely on volunteers (who came from different affiliations and backgrounds). Volunteers at International Playgroup also stated the lack of partnership with other entities in town, including Purdue University. Because International Playgroup had not been working with campus communities, the group was not prepared with structured activities or programs for volunteers. At the same time, International Playgroup volunteers were members of Greater Lafayette communities who had the knowledge, skills, and deep care about the needs of international mothers and preschoolers. They were mothers or grandmothers themselves, church or community volunteers, and Sunday school teachers. Some of them had a lot of experience serving international communities. In this way, they were prepared to collaborate, exchange ideas, and discuss project plans.

STUDENT AUTHOR IMPACT

I came into the projects with two goals: (1) gain direct experience establishing a service-learning course that incorporates connections between gender and religion, and (2) gain direct experience creating a small exhibition as a culmination of my service-learning class. Although I had taken service-learning classes and had observed faculty members teach such classes, I was not adequately prepared when facing the reality of how much effort it took to establish this kind of project. Through working with International Playgroup, I learned about contacting a community partner, establishing projects, applying for a grant, carrying out the activity, getting to know the community members the partner served, reflecting on activities with the community partner, and even developing sustained relationships.

I was aiming to develop a critical service-learning pedagogy and projects for my Introduction to Women's Studies class that encourage:

a critical consciousness, allowing students to combine action and reflection in classroom and community to examine both the historical precedents of the social problems addressed in their service placements and the impact of their personal action/inaction in maintaining and transforming those problems Further, a critical service-learning approach allows students to become aware of the systemic and institutionalized nature of oppression. (Mitchell, 2008, p. 54)

Through my work with International Playgroup, I learned the importance of centering my project on community partners' and their members' wisdom and knowledge, as

well as how this knowledge operated in larger political, socioeconomic, and cultural institutions. I learned how International Playgroup volunteers and members weaved together concerns of motherhood, faith and religion, and home and belonging. I also learned the importance of sustained leadership, structure, and partnerships for community organizations to thrive. If I were to work with International Playgroup again in the future, I would focus on opportunities to develop partnerships, especially with organizations and programs at Purdue University that are interested in issues of faith and motherhood.

With knowledge I gained from working with International Playgroup and goals for a critical service-learning class, I focused on developing my WGSS280 class (Introduction to Women's Studies: Religion and Feminism) in summer 2016 by seeking a lot of advice from offices and mentors within Purdue University, as well as the wisdom of my community partners. I sought the advice and mentorship from Purdue Office of Engagement (Dr. Lindsey Payne), Purdue Library (Catherine Fraser-Riehle), Purdue University Research Repository (Sandi Caldron), the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program (Dr. Venetria Patton), and my academic advisor (Dr. Susan Curtis). I included some of these mentors as guest speakers in my class and invited them to attend my students' presentations.

In the effort of focusing on the wisdom and knowledge of my community partners, I learned that service-learning collaborations between religious institutions and the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program were not a common experience. I was surprised that my community partners' introductory questions were not about the service-learning projects themselves, but mainly about my intentions as a "representation" of a women's studies class. My community partners (religious institutions) asked if I was interested in building walls, or bridges, with them. I learned that for me to pedagogically build a bridge between feminism and religion through my teaching, I had to practically build that bridge myself by physically being in the community partners' spaces, explaining who I am, asking and answering questions, and finding connections and differences. With the practice of working with International Playgroup to understand how faith, motherhood, and other facets of identity intersect in the lives of the international mothers, I laid the theoretical and practical groundwork for my students to find the same connections (and differences) with their community partners.

I was able to offer, teach, and complete the WGSS280 class (Introduction to Women's Studies: Feminism and

Religion) in fall 2016 and spring 2017. Throughout these two semesters, my students worked with St. Thomas Aquinas Church, Greater Lafayette Islamic Center, Faith Church, Purdue Christian Campus House, Chapel of the Good Shepherd, and Purdue Hillel. The experience that I gained from organizing an exhibition with International Playgroup had helped me organize a public exhibition of my students' work in spring 2017. Similar to the experience of organizing the International Playgroup exhibition titled "Faith and Motherhood," my class exhibition allowed my students, as well as the community partners, to share their diverse projects and stories of connecting feminism and religion.

Learning from my work with International Playgroup and the importance of bringing people who cared about the group's sustainability into mentoring and partnership plans, I made it part of my teaching goals to mentor students who were interested in service-learning pedagogy. Several of my students volunteered to present our class projects at the Second Annual Engagement and Service Learning Summit in spring 2017. One of my students, Keslee Dilorio, was interested in the *Purdue Journal of Service Learning and International Engagement* (PJSL) and the possibility to produce publications out of her classwork. Dilorio published an interview article in the *Purdue Journal of Service Learning and International Engagement* that stated how the project helped her confront the fear of engaging with differences:

I am working with Purdue Hillel. Because I do not identify as Jewish, I feared offending the Jewish community members with questions. I was concerned that my questions might hinder establishing rapport with them, especially with student members. I chose to face this obstacle for the purpose of self-interest and research, so I asked the questions anyway. What I found was that when I asked the questions (even about political issues), my community partner was gracious and gave detailed explanations. (Dilorio, 2017)

CONCLUSION

In spring 2017, lead volunteers Ginny Hyland and Debbie Townsend decided to put International Playgroup activities on hold. The group was in a dire need for leadership to organize all playgroup activities. The group also

mentioned that they were in a great need to reestablish connections with Purdue campus communities to be able to co-organize events and partnerships. This article was written as my reflection of working with International Playgroup in 2016 to help them put the organization's history into writing, and to help them organize the spring 2016 monthly activities. I also wrote this article to invite Purdue faculty members, staff, and students who have been involved with service-learning and who are interested in connections between faith, motherhood, and international communities to think about establishing connections with International Playgroup.

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