Yvonne Thevenot: Building Cultural Relevance into a Teen Science Cafe Program

Creating a safe and nurturing space that provides programming steeped in cultural relevance and that incorporates culturally relevant teaching into the curriculum will be critical to the success of the Harlem Teen STEAM Club, as can be evidenced in prior programs that have been developed and implemented by Yvonne Thevenot, founder of STEM Kids NYC.

The utilization of mentors and teachers who resemble the identities of the participants enables those participants to become interested in STEM, as those who facilitate the programs look like them. Further, those participants who initially have not ever thought of themselves as a CodeSter or an Engineer, have readily adopted such STEM identities, after participating in culturally relevant programs that involve more than simply having mentors that come in to speak. Rather, those who participate look like the participants and are OF the STEM world and can provide real time, real world and relevant experience and access to STEM in ways that eliminate a perceived and often actual barrier to entry.

Moreover, it’s even more important that those who facilitate the programs not only look like the participants, and can identify with the life paths of the participants, but also that they are consistent in their participation. Yvonne is diligent with understanding the ‘why do you want to help?’ answers that come from the program mentors and teachers, so that she can ensure that the answer to their ‘why’ is delivered, and they continue to come back. In addition, because most of the program mentors and teachers are not living in the Harlem neighborhood, and are not experiencing the direct economic and social issues that plague the participants’ lives, Yvonne holds ‘pep talks’ to acknowledge the mentors for what they are doing and how relevant the impact they are making on the participants’ lives, as it’s often not as clear to the mentors and teachers of how little by little they are chipping away at the often subconscious self-doubt that has entered the psyches of those growing up in marginalized communities.

Yvonne ensures that the mentors and teachers do not hold a belief of meritocracy (“I made it out, so you can too”), as this belief system is often detrimental to the progress of uplifting the mindset of those who have no direct proof of what ‘making it out’ looks like. Yvonne also provides weekly notes to the mentors and teachers regarding small wins that have occurred in the program and with the participants’ lives, as well as involves them in all parent engagement sessions and field trips that are provided.

The word, culture, is not simply relegated to the ethnic class of an individual; but rather, culture also encompasses the societal aspects of a particular community. To that end, cultural relevance becomes more than simply about race, or class, but about an all encompassing community relevance that supports the growth and progress of those who are a part of that community and its culture.

In summary, cultural relevance, when steeped in a STEM program located in an urban setting that is inhabited by those who are of the marginalized class, will promote interest in STEM field and activities, as well as help to generate within participants a STEM identity that enables them to know that they can.