



Action Learning Fellowship – 2020 Final Shareout Series

By Shilpa Jain, BKF Board Treasurer

A BKF Fellow reflective of the Tasmanian Devil? In the very best way!

That's how Valentina Helo-Villegas, one of this year's BKF Fellows, was introduced by Jonathan Fong, the BKF Fellowship Community Weaver. Little did Jonathan know that Taz is Valentina's favorite cartoon character, and his boisterous energy, passion and ability to turn things around FAST is a hallmark of her *modus operandi* too.

I was so thrilled to meet Valentina in a recent sharing program by some of the Fellows. Her commitment to community, family, parent and child well-being is so inspiring, and all the changes she has made to meet the challenges of Covid times, reflects that resourceful, go-get-um, fiery Taz energy.

Originally from Colombia, Valentina is a trained psychotherapist, specializing in severe trauma, and is currently working as Director of Parent Program at The Primary School. She has helped to launch a new initiative that merges education, healthcare, and parent support. The Parent Program focuses on the relationship between parent well-being and whole-child. Wellness coaches accompany parents in their journey to self-actualization through deepening relationships with themselves, their families, and the community while building Protective Factors to mitigate the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences. Valentina's work with the Parent Program is currently in East Palo Alto and Hayward, CA, and plans to expand Early Childhood and Elementary services to include Middle School in the coming year

Valentina roots herself in integrity – which is expressing her emotions as they arise – and flourishes in paradoxes, of which there have been many in recent months. As she works with over 350 students and their families at The Primary School, she strives to bring love, justice and this integrity in a holistic, multi-generational approach.

The Parent Program hinges on parents to be part of the team, to address Adverse Childhood Experiences, in order to create long-term healthier and happier lives. Valentina has seen that by starting early, integrating services and partnering with parents, they are able to create protective factors for resiliency and healing, like: stable homes, social/emotional competence, self-efficacy; and supportive community. This trauma-informed, culturally-responsive, whole-child approach, engaging with parents through group and individual coaching, was going great and generating the supportive community and intentional transformation they were seeking.

And then Coronavirus hit.



Within two days, Valentina had to shift all of her work from in-person to online. It was here that she realized the strength of the personal relationships she had been developing over the year. She and her team started touching in weekly with families, who expressed a lot of gratitude for the care. Especially as many of the families were struggling. When they started the program, only 4% of families didn't have any income; now, due to the virus, 56% don't have any income and the rest have decreased income. Also, food security was a serious issue, especially for families who are not registered in government programs.

Within one month, Valentina and her team made 458 referrals – for housing, food security, and legal aid. They focused on stress management to prevent child abuse and domestic violence, addressing crises, and helping children access educational opportunities. In her words, it was all about “humans being with humans and navigating things together.” As teachers worked with students and coaches worked parents and family adults, Valentina's team was able to stay in permanent contact with 99% of their families, a figure that is unheard of in most school settings.

In addition to this powerful work, Valentina's reflections on her BKF Fellowship experience also moved me. She said, “When I started the Fellowship, after that first retreat, I thought, I really value the connections that were created here, so I will be better about connecting virtually. I had never used Zoom before this fellowship. And, then, the synchronicity, this team of angels that have my back that are helping me navigate things that I didn't even know were going to be a challenge. I cannot express enough gratitude that I feel for this fellowship.”

Valentina shared how excited and scared she was to shift her work to online, to create virtual groups – and how she asked for support from the BKF Fellowship Cohort. “This has built my capacity on many many levels,” she shares, “and I feel how BKF is about coming up with good things, and helping people bring their ideas to fruition in a generative way.”

In the days ahead, Valentina is moving with full force to keep developing the Parent Program. All the parents currently have smartphones and soon they will get tablets to enable continued learning in these quarantimes. We have no doubt that her authentic commitment and generative passion will enable all the growth that is essential for the next phase. And, the BKF community is here to support her. After all, it's better to clear the way for, rather than stand in the way of, the Tasmanian Devil.