Study Buddies/EstudiAmigos:  
Building Community and Resilience with Low-Income Students in Northern California 
Elena Lev, Scripps College ’22
Location and Dates: Sonoma County, CA, USA. May-August 2021

Goals of the project
I founded Study Buddies with the intention of providing free, bilingual, one-on-one tutoring for low-income children in Sonoma County. In creating this program, myself and my two co-organizers hope to connect young students with older students in a mentor-mentee relationship, to enable cross-cultural understanding and mutual growth.

Program intentions and using the funds
Study Buddies has been a success, this summer and throughout the academic year, thanks to funding from Davis Projects for Peace. I came up with the idea for this program with two friends, Liora Jacob and Miranda Dickerman, in August 2020, after seeing some families able to pay for expensive private tutoring for their children while other families were struggling to get by. Our organization pairs high school tutors with K-8 students: they meet weekly, in-person, near the student’s home, to provide and receive tutoring in the subjects the student needs help with, and in the learning style that works best for the student. The Davis Projects for Peace funding allowed us to provide our students and tutors with academic and extracurricular supplies for their tutoring sessions like notebooks, books, iPads, balls, and games; thank you gift cards for the spring and fall 2021 tutors; and an administrative stipend for myself, so that I could expand and operate the program over the summer.

Many of our tutors and students continued to meet over the summer, focusing on learning extracurricular skills like chess, French, and Mandarin. This focus on extracurricular education allows students and tutors alike to expand their understanding of what education can look like. We used some of the grant money to buy extracurricular supplies for the coming school year so that our tutors and students can continue to connect with each other outside of core school subjects, and discover personal passions that they perhaps couldn’t have afforded to explore otherwise.

The other organizers and I spent much of our time in late spring/early summer recruiting new tutors. Study Buddies has grown from 40 to 80 participants in 6 months; 25 of the 40 tutors, and 38 of the 40 students are continuing within the program for the 2021-22 school year.

Why is this program needed?
Though COVID-19 exacerbated the educational inequity in the US, it certainly did not create it. Educational inequity lies at the foundation of the United States education system, which is rooted in capitalism and has a long history of oppression of marginalized populations.¹ Teachers are overworked and not given sufficient tools to support their students, and the standardization efforts of the 2000-2010’s (No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top) flattened students’ learning styles and prevented them from accessing the individualized care that they need to best learn.² The exploitation of teachers and students is particularly prevalent among Chicanx/Latinx populations, who have been primarily treated as an uneducated workforce in the U.S.³ Study Buddies predominantly serves low-income Chicanx/Latinx families and students, and works to bring more nuance and less standardization into education through our one-on-one, bilingual, student-focused model.

Promoting peace
I define peace as mutual understanding and respect between all creatures. Study Buddies promotes peace by fostering education, mutual understanding, and by creating joy. Throughout the 2020-21 school year, many students struggled to find joy and connection in their education. By operating primarily in-person, promoting individualized learning styles, and facilitating one-on-one connections, Study Buddies returned joy and connectivity to our 80 program participants, and to their families as well.

In the long term, these students and tutors will know the value of personal connection and joy in education and strive toward that for themselves and their community. Perhaps some of them will become educators as well, and teach in a similar, community-oriented way. Founding this program has actually inspired my career path - before starting this program, I suspected I wanted to be an educator. Now, I know I want to pursue a career in grassroots educational organizing. I care deeply about educational equity and this program has further catalyzed that passion.

**Location and challenges**

Study Buddies operates in Sonoma County, California - primarily in Santa Rosa, a city of 180,000. We chose to focus on this city because there is a large population of low-income families and students here, and it is near to the home of myself and my co-organizers. I have a strong connection to Santa Rosa because I grew up one town over and my dad has taught in the Santa Rosa school system for 30 years.

Study Buddies was founded in August 2020 and has been growing since then, so at no point was I worried about this project not succeeding. However, at different moments my team and I have been stressed out about various project components. Helping our tutors and students connect emotionally was challenging, especially when they were meeting virtually (some met virtually and some met in-person, following local, country, and state COVID guidelines). Some tutors felt like they weren’t helping their students because they didn’t know how to measure qualitative progress. This summer, it was also challenging to decide what materials to buy that would be most helpful for the students and tutors; we conducted a survey of all our constituents and used that information to inform our purchases.

Most of our communication, between the organizers and the participants, has been virtual. Virtual communication challenged me to be persistent and thorough in my messages and phone calls since misunderstanding is easy via phone call and text. Most of my communication with the participating families is only in Spanish, which is also challenging - I’m fluent, but not a native speaker, and this makes it difficult to communicate with fluidity. Carla, a volunteer assistant who is a native Spanish speaker, has helped me translate and talk to Spanish-speaking families.

**COVID’s impact on Study Buddies**

COVID both created and impacted this program: we founded Study Buddies because of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and throughout the year, we moved from in-person to online and back to in-person, in accordance with CDC and county guidelines. Having a back-up plan was very helpful for running Study Buddies - when we saw COVID cases rising, we were able to quickly transition to digital tutoring sessions because we had a plan in place. When the shelter-in-place order was lifted, we knew how to transition back to in-person. We run Study Buddies mostly remotely, though many of the participants meet in-person. Each first tutoring session takes place on Zoom under my or the other organizers’ supervision. It is very convenient to conduct meetings remotely because there is no travel time for any parties involved. However, there is an element of personal connection missing from these meetings, and tutors who met consistently online voiced that as a reemerging problem - the students were digitally fatigued, and it was challenging to keep them engaged online. It’s also challenging to get in touch with people solely digitally - many working parents aren’t able to consistently answer the phone.

**Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to the Davis Projects for Peace Foundation for providing Study Buddies with the resources to expand this summer and continue with a strong foundation into the 2021-22 school year. Thank you, Mrs. Kathryn Davis. Thank you to Professor Armstrong for advising me. Thank you to Liora Jacob and Miranda Dickerman, my two co-organizers, for running this program with intention, creativity, attention to detail, and persistence.

**Personal statement**

Through the Study Buddies program, high schoolers connect with low-income K-8 students in a mentor-mentee tutoring relationship, enabling cross-cultural understanding and mutual education, which are foundations for peace. In conducting this project, I learned how integral one-on-one, joy-filled connection is for learning, and how much more work is needed to create a truly just education system within the United States.