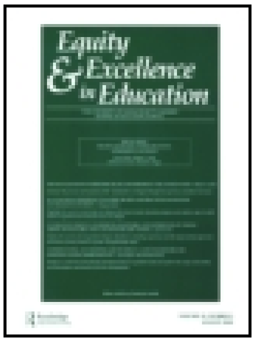

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"Not satisfied with stupid band-aids": A Portrait of a Justice-Oriented, Democratic Curriculum Serving a Disadvantaged Neighborhood

Brian D. Schultz

This study discusses my attempt to improve educational experiences of fifth-grade students living in public housing. The context of a social justice-oriented classroom is revealed through reconstruction of my thought processes while teaching and learning with students. The narrative portrayal that emerges demonstrates the impact our theorizing together had on our growth, outlook, and learning in an effort to make substantive change in the community. Although this curriculum was not explicitly grounded in a service-learning framework, the processes, activities, and results of the classroom typify the potential and possibilities of a justice- and service-oriented elementary classroom. Reflections of classroom occurrences and struggles I engaged in privately and with students are conveyed through vignettes of the change-focused, integrated curriculum based on students' priority concerns—particularly the attempt to replace their dilapidated school. The role of theorizing with students and curriculum realizing democratic principles in a poor neighborhood is depicted.

This inquiry discusses an attempt to improve the educational experience of fifth-grade students living in public housing in inner city Chicago. The format for the study is a reconstruction of thought processes while I was engaged in teaching and learning with students during the course of a school year. Using interpretive methods to portray what occurred in the classroom, why it may have occurred, and the struggle I engaged in privately and with students, I was able to theorize about justice-oriented classroom practice in an effort to improve our collective education and learning.

Attempting to keep the curriculum questions alive with students, I drew upon questions such as, "What is worth knowing, doing, being, and becoming?" (Schubert, 1986) A descriptive portrayal emerges about the impact these questions and the ensuing theorizing with my students had on our growth, outlook, and learning. This reflective study is revealed through my experiences with students engaged in an authentic, transformative, and integrated curriculum that focused on their priority concerns (Beane, 1997), particularly their fight to get a new school building for themselves and their community. In their quest to replace their under-funded and marginalized school, the students were "able to identify root causes of problems" and also ready and willing to implement "strategies that might bring about substantive changes" (Westheimer, Kahne, & Rogers, 1999, p. 46).

The storytelling explores how these African American fifth-graders and I co-created a year-long curriculum seeking to replace their inadequate school building. This curriculum is demonstrative of a praxis-based classroom that infuses and illustrates service learning throughout. The following narrative case represents a classroom that was authentic in its ability to respect its participants (inclusive to both the students and the community), had reciprocity, was relevant and meaningful, and incorporated sustained, deep reflection (Butin, 2003).

MODES OF INQUIRY AND SOURCES OF DATA

The methodology of this study is qualitative and interpretive. Specifically, ethnography (Wolcott, 1999), autobiography (Grumet, 1990; Pinar, 1994), and portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997) were used to make meaning in my classroom. Elements of other methodologies including: currere (Pinar & Grumet, 1976), narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), and teacher/action research (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992; Schubert & Lopez-Schubert, 1997) also were eclectically adapted (Schwab, 1971) to make sense of my classroom.

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The data are available through autobiographical accounts, student work, and public documentation. By drawing upon these critical artifacts, I triangulated them for corroboration. As my own practice was part of the phenomenon of interest, I am cognizant of the limitations of my subjectivity and acknowledge that if one of my students were to tell this story, it may be very different from my account. I focused on gaining insight from a plurality of perspectives and sources. Whenever possible in my writing, I used the participants' account in direct quotation in an attempt to make their voices prominent as I present their efforts to problem-solve not only to help themselves and their community but also to investigate and "effect systemic change" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004a, p. 242).

TELLING THE STORY OF A CO-CREATED JUSTICE CURRICULUM IN CABRINI GREEN

The noise level increased in Room 405. The fifth-grade students shouted out ideas as I quickly tried to keep up with their growing list. The intensity was beyond measurement as students called out problems that affected them: "teenage pregnancy," "litter in the park," even "stopping Michael Jackson!" A lot of the problems had to do with the school: "foggy windows pocked with bullet holes," "no lunchroom, gym, or auditorium," "clogged toilets," and "broken heaters in the classroom." Before it was all said and done, these fifth-graders had identified 89 different problems that affected them and their community, a challenge I had posed to them just an hour prior (Project Citizen, 2004).

As the list grew and I hurriedly marked up the chalkboard with their ideas, some students began arguing with one another that a problem they proposed had already been mentioned. Insightfully, Dyneisha cut through the ensuing debate and stated, "Most of the problems on that list have to do with our school building bein' messed up. Our school is a dump! That's the problem" (Schultz, in press). With this profound analysis there was a sense of affirmation in the room, and the students unanimously agreed the most pressing issue was the poor condition and inadequacy of their school building. As I looked out at the group of students gathered together on that cold December morning, most were wearing hats, gloves, and coats in the classroom, exemplifying the real problem they were living. They were very perceptive in citing the numerous problems having to do with the school. These students knew them well; they had lived this injustice their entire school-aged lives.

In short order, these fifth-graders listed major problems in need of fixing. In posing the question, I had anticipated the students might decide on simpler tasks like "wanting fruit punch at lunch" or trying to "get recess everyday." Instead they went for a more challenging issue, one that had been in the community for years: a new school had been promised but was never built (Weissman, 1996; Chicago Public Schools, 1999). I wondered to myself, "Were these students really willing to take this problem head-on?" Before I could even ask, they were already coming up with ways they might remedy some of the problems with the school structure and constructing plans to get a new school built. Given the opportunity and challenge to prioritize a problem in their community, the children were not only willing to itemize the issues but were already strategizing ways to act and make change. And so this emergent curriculum began.

Setting the Stage for Project Citizen in the Classroom

Reflecting on how my classroom became this space, I recall that my principal encouraged me to attend a particular workshop at the beginning of the school year. I thought it was going to be another one of the sessions where I would be continually glancing at the clock, wondering when it would end, but this session was different. As I sat in the back of the room, purposely close to the exit in case I needed a quick getaway, I found myself intently listening to the presentation. I began to ponder how invigorating the concept could be not only for my students but also for myself.

The seminar was on a program called *Project Citizen* (Center for Civic Education, 2003). The session detailed a way for late elementary students to better understand public policy. By tackling an identified problem, students would learn how to effect change in their schools and communities. My mind raced as I wondered if the students in my classroom would be interested in taking on a problem that affected them. The concept seemed like a great way to change the typical routine of the classroom. Ideally, it would allow the students to engage in an integrated and authentic activity of their choice and allow me to meet both the needs of the students and my personal and professional growth as a teacher. After aspiring to create a classroom focused on practical inquiry and progressive education as a result of my immersion in curriculum studies literature, I saw the *Project Citizen* program as a great opportunity to achieve student-directed and co-constructed learning that encouraged justice-oriented themes in the classroom.

The presenters detailed the program, providing examples from fixing broken sidewalks at a nearby park, to getting the school administrators to mandate recess everyday. I immediately knew I was not going to be able to choose the project or topic for my students; rather, the priority problem would have to be determined and chosen by them. The coordinators cautioned teachers in the audience to think small—to try to keep the project within the school. This "think small" advocacy made some sense; it would allow teachers to easily manage and control the project, thereby steering it in the right direction and keeping it within the prescribed guidelines.

While I was receptive to the advice offered during the workshop, I had a different idea regarding my classroom. I saw this as a chance to develop something with my students, to further their interest without limits. I was not looking to impose an idea; I did not want to set any parameters on what they could deem a worthwhile project. I sat in the session feverishly taking notes, half listening to what was being presented while trying to conceptualize what could be. I wanted the students to choose a topic that would really raise the level of confidence in the classroom, to prove that they were not only able to do "big things" but also highlight their many capabilities. I was familiar with my students' abilities to problem solve and critically think about real problems. All of them had to problem solve on a daily basis outside of the classroom in their neighborhood. The unfortunate part was that I did not see the school recognizing these problem solving or critical thinking abilities, and I wanted to find a way to bring these street savvy, analytic skills into the classroom.

This project could be a perfect opportunity to push my students. Following the workshop, I wrote in my journal, "I wonder if they can motivate themselves to a greater good and strive for higher moral ground" as a result of the project. Then I could take the curriculum away from the scripted lesson plans and give it to the students to develop their unique interests.

Contextualizing Cabrini Green

In Chicago's Near North side is one of the most infamous and recognizable housing projects in the country. Notorious for drugs and gangs and synonymous with failing social programs meant to help low-income citizens, Cabrini Green was first constructed in the early 1940s as temporary housing for a diverse group of poor residents. As time went on, and for a variety of social reasons, the temporary housing concept fell through and the red and white high-density, tenement buildings and accompanying row houses became permanent homes for children and their families. The badly maintained buildings were an eyesore and their mismanagement became symbolic of urban blight and everything wrong with public housing in this country. Now comprised of 99% African American families, the residences have become so dilapidated and deteriorated that the housing authority has declared them unlivable.

The Chicago Housing Authority's (2004) plan to redevelop the area and make it available for mixed-income families has created a hotbed of controversy as gentrification efforts and the displacement of poor black children and their families occurs. A critical problem with this plan is that instead of making the new development accessible to its current residents, the city and housing authority are uprooting the African American residents out of this high profile, largely sought after land, which sits in the shadows of the luxurious buildings of the Chicago's affluent Gold Coast neighborhood.

Most accounts of Chicago's poverty-stricken Cabrini Green describe the area as a haven for drugs and murder, gang-banging, misery, and mayhem. Even in an article lauding my students' work, the author described that "Cabrini Green Homes has all the stuff of which failure is made, and it often delivers door-to-door" (Brady, 2004, p. A19). Much of this portrayal may be accurate, but the story of the residents, especially the children, is rarely told. Within this community there are young kids with many needs. They require the same or better instruction, dedication, and nurturing as any other student in any other area. In addition, the students are capable citizens and good thinkers with untapped creativity needing the opportunity to demonstrate and practice their intelligences. Tavon articulated this idea best: "Even though our neighborhood has problems, we are proud of our neighborhood. This is why we are fighting for a better school. We think everyone should have a good home and a good school. Don't you agree?"

Because of the challenging conditions associated with the Cabrini Green ghetto coupled with societal issues and constraints, the perennial question of *what is worth knowing* is raised constantly by my students. At the Byrd Community Academy, a Chicago public school (CPS) enrolling 100% African American students of low-income predominantly from the housing project (CPS, 2004), an understanding of how these particular kids learn was imperative, as they continually adapt in a practical, pragmatic sense. Prior to our time together, they told me, there was little nurturing of the strengths or abilities learned out-of-school, but rather a devaluing of their adaptive and street intelligences. Many could not endure life in the projects without "bein' street smart or learnin' how to survive. . . because there are a lot of people who are gonna test you" (Project Citizen, 2004). At the same time they are seldom recognized in the school setting for their achievements outside of the classroom. If education were measured by the students' successes in their neighborhood via their own lived experiences, many would outperform their more affluent peers, not to mention their teachers. As I pondered this situation, I wondered how I might best be able to use their adaptability and street savvy in school. Could an emergent, authentic, socially justice-based, and integrated curriculum that focused on students' interests and concerns be successful in the "traditional" classroom?

Unfolding the Social Justice Curriculum: Documenting and Reaching Out

After the winter vacation, the class agreed that the first step included researching the history of Byrd Community Academy and the potential for getting a new school built. All of the students were very aware that a new school was promised six years earlier (CPS, 1999; Shute, 2004). Looking hard enough through the foggy bulletproof windows or peering through the only glass window that was cracked and pocked with bullet holes, the students could see the sign on the adjacent fenced-off, cleared property proclaiming "Site of the Future Byrd Elementary." If that was not disconcerting enough, the architectural plans depicting the new school design were on display in the lobby of our current dilapidated building, complete with selected paint colors, floor tiles, and even the type of soap dispensers in the bathroom. But what everyone knew, including our classroom, was that no action had been taken despite the promises by the Board of Education or City of Chicago (CPS, 1999). Obviously frustrated, but baffled by where to begin, the class talked about things we could do to get the problem of the school's inadequacy and shortcomings solved.

During a brainstorming session, the students began to create rough ideas of direction. In the midst of their intense discussion, they proposed ways in which they could take action and get the job done. From their dialogue these main results emerged: "people we can talk to," "getting in newspapers and magazines," and "putting pressure on people." They understood that they needed to approach the project from many angles. "The problem is too big, and we need to have lots of ways to make this happen if we are going to get a whole new school," Kamala acknowledged.

The list they were able to generate for "people we can talk to" was long and thorough. They brought up names of potential "decision makers" that I probably would have left off my own list. The list grew to include members of the school staff and administration, leaders in area politics and the Board of Education, and some corporate friends of the school. After determining the people they wanted to interview, the students then focused on the newspapers and magazines that they thought could help "get the word out" about their efforts to get a new school. They noted the *Chicago Tribune* and *Chicago Sun-Times* were the big papers in the city, and Tyrone exclaimed, "It be cool to have our mugs and story in the real papers!"

Also, Kamala commented that his grandma always read the *Chicago Defender*, a paper that served the Chicago African American community, and felt we would have "good chances of them bein' interested in us." There was discussion about getting Chicago television stations to cover their story. The students were readily in touch with means to actively participate in our democracy and take action. They had the foresight to include "ways to put pressure on" as a means to achieve their goal. Demetrius' comments reflected what most of the class was feeling when he said, "This is something that is new to me, but I figure we's gots to do it if we want to get anything done."

Their list of "ways to put pressure on" was specific, targeted, and comprehensive. It included: surveying students, teachers, and staff; petitioning; interviewing people with power in the community; writing letters to the legislature and inviting politicians to the school; holding a press conference; and producing a documentary video. If we were able to do all these things, not only was the curriculum in the classroom going to be driven by the students interests, it was going to be vibrant and exciting for all of us. All their ideas could not happen in a single class period or over a simple curriculum unit; they were ideas that were going to take research, investigation, planning, and dedication to get accomplished. I was more than willing to support them in these efforts, but I was skeptical regarding their willingness to follow through with their ideas. My uncertainty was premature, but I wanted to make sure we were not going down a dead-end path. Although I was excited, it was also nerve-wracking. I was in an uncharted situation, beyond my own experiences. Neither the students nor I had worked on such an extensive project before.

We began by documenting the problems in the school by taking photographs and writing expository text about the building's shortfalls throughout the month of January. The students produced compositions that, given what society expect of these kids, were articulate and sophisticated. For example, one student wrote:

> Our school building, Richard E. Byrd Community Academy, has big problems. These three main ideas are what I think are important issues: bathrooms, temperature, and windows. We need a new school because of these problems. It is really important to learn so you can be great when you grow up.
>
> The restrooms are filthy and dirty. . . . They do not get cleaned up properly. It is also really smelly in the bathrooms. As an example of how bad they are, sinks move and water leaks on the floor. The sinks have bugs in them and water is everywhere. The hot water faucets have cold water. Kids don't like using the bathrooms since they are so gross and falling apart.
>
> In fact at Byrd the temperatures in the classrooms are broken. The heat is not turned on. It is really cold in the classrooms. As another example, we have to put on our coats during class because it is so cold. They cannot fix it because the pipes are broken. It is uncomfortable and hard to learn. Our hands are cold, and we cannot write. This needs to be changed.
>
> As another example, the windows are cracked. It is cold in our class because the windows are cracked. There are bullet holes in the windows. The windows are not efficient enough. We cannot see through the windows.

> There is tape on the windows. It is dark in the classrooms. We cannot hardly see what we are doing because it is so dark.
>
> You should come. . . . Since windows, temperature, and restrooms are not right, we should get a whole new school building. The problems are not fixable. (Demetrius in Project Citizen, 2004)

When asked how they were able to construct such amazing work on a first draft, Demetrius responded, "This stuff is really important, and I need to get the word out if I want something done." These rough drafts became the starting point, and getting the word out is exactly what they did. Quickly realizing that their drafts needed to be transformed into persuasive statements, the students compiled their individual work to create a powerful letter that was sent to school board and city officials, newspaper reporters, and concerned citizens. In this letter, dated the first week of February, the students documented "the big problems" about their school, explained the context of the efforts they were making toward their goal, and closed the letter by stating:

> We would like to invite you to see our school for yourself. We do not think that you would let your kids come to a school that is falling apart. Since the windows, the gym, the temperature, the lunchroom, stage, and restrooms are not right, we should get a whole new school building. The problems are not fixable and would cost too much to fix. Byrd Academy needs a new school building and the current policy has promised us one, but it has not been built.
>
> There are many reasons why we need a new school, and we think you would agree. A new school would be a better school, and we believe we will get a better education. We have the support of our teacher and of the administration of the school for this project. We look forward to hearing from you and thank you in advance for your time and interest. (Project Citizen, 2004)

As a result of the students' invitation, there were numerous responses. Phone inquires, letters, e-mails, and visits from legislators, as well as newspaper and TV reporters kept the students' project flowing with questions, suggestions, and encouragement. In reaching out beyond the four walls of the classroom, the students became quickly engaged in real life curricula. As the class made its concerns known, many people offered insight, assistance, donations, and the much-needed publicity. Taking into account advice from these outsiders, the students put together a comprehensive action plan that they believed would "help us get our perfect solution . . . a whole new school."

By the middle of February, the students' action plan became the epicenter of the entire curriculum for the remainder of the school year. Every subject lost its compartmentalization and became integrated and integral in solving the problem of getting an "equal" school. Reading, writing, arithmetic, and social studies were all blended together. Rather than using basal textbooks, the students researched pertinent information about how to solve their problem. Their search took them to texts that went beyond their reading level and aptitude, but they were willing to put forth the effort because it had value to their situation. While reading from Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (1992), one boy appropriately remarked, "I think this book was written 'bout us. The author must of come to Byrd school." And his statement was not far from the truth, as a *Chicago Tribune* columnist documented after visiting with and being given a "grievance tour" by students of Room 405 in March:

> Pupils welcome all to see their dreary reality. . . . The huge windows in teacher Brian Schultz's 5th-grade classroom are of bulletproof plastic that has frosted over with age . . . The translucent windows, several of them . . . pocked by bullet holes, rattle as the wind slips in. And since most thermostats are broken, temperatures fluctuate between the low 60s and mid 80s according to a daily chart the pupils are keeping. Sinks and water fountains leak, the bathrooms are dingy and buggy, and fences, doors and light fixtures are in disrepair . . . it has no auditorium or large meeting area, no gymnasium and no lunchroom. Pupils eat lunch in one hallway, hold assemblies in another hallway and walk to a nearby Park District field house for gym class. (Zorn, 2004a, p. B1)

Reading and language arts flowed into current events as students read and reacted to newspaper articles written about their work throughout the remaining months of the school year (such as the excerpt above; see also Brady, 2004; Chethik, 2004; Danna, 2004; Nader, 2004a; Zorn, 2004b). In addition they read about techniques for participation (Isaac, 1992), which "showed . . . how to do things like survey and petition." The students learned how to prepare documentation, including their survey results, photos, and written assessments, while incorporating data analysis and mathematics into their student-driven curriculum to gain support. After taking this documentation to the public, one student asserted, "No one who saw our folders could disagree with what we were saying about the school's problems." Their willingness in making sense of all the data certainly went beyond my expectations.

This was particularly notable in their ability to analyze the data they had collected during their survey of the school community. They compiled documents and visual representations that helped them to articulate their struggle for a new school including pie charts and bar graphs. What really caught my attention was the students' ability to conduct analysis on the survey data when we had not "officially" covered the topic. It was before Spring Break, and my students were excelling in areas I had not anticipated covering during this school year, let alone in March! According to the Illinois learning standards, this sort of data interpretation was not expected of fifth-grade students. But these children were readily making sense of it as they discussed means, medians and modes of the aggregated results. Why was this? Perhaps, the reason lay in the fact that the data belonged to them from the start.

Rather than using a direct instruction approach to teaching about data analysis, the hands-on experience was a better way for the students to understand the material. From the inception of determining what questions to ask, to actually interpreting the charts and graphs, these students were delving deep into data analysis. What was most refreshing about the activity was that we were not opened to Chapter 12 in our math book. They were experientially demonstrating their understanding of the data they collected from tangible, real-world experiences that they initiated and care about deeply.

The students realized the power in their ideas, but felt that they needed to take their work to the next level and "get more folks involved and aware." Building on their original plans, they developed a website to "organize all the stuff" (http://www.projectcitizen405.com), which they launched the week after their spring vacation in April. This was no small task as they had pictures and writings from visits of politicians and researchers, hundreds of letters and e-mails written on their behalf, journal entries, petitions, charts, graphs, surveys, and analysis.

Room 405 became the headquarters to "make important decisions about who we should bring in to help" and was a think-tank for investigating ways "we can better get others involved." The classroom transformed into a campaign office. The students assumed roles of leadership in their quest and as Jaris commented in his journal, "Being an interviewer . . . makes me feel like a business manager. . . . It makes me feel real important, and other kids look up to me. This has never happened to me in school before." The eager students were so involved in the development of their curriculum they often came early, left late, and even came in on their days off to "get the job done" (Project Citizen, 2004). This zeal for not only accomplishing tasks but comprehensively following through on their action plan provided an outlet for emergent leadership, peer teaching, and coaching to occur. While students shared authority with each other and me in our classroom, they debated issues like the motives of legislators wanting access to their classroom. In addition, they helped each other to fine tune their tour-guiding and interviewing skills in order to best represent themselves in their quest for justice.

"Reactions Came Rollin'"

Their initiative and perseverance paid off. Although there was some disappointment and frustration in not getting an immediate response from "the decision makers at the board of education and the city," other people certainly responded, hearing the cries for equity in schooling. From local legislators visiting and lobbying on the students behalf from March to June, to inquiries from university professors interested in writing about the project, to concerned citizens—including Ralph Nader—paying visits (Nader, 2004b), the students were applauded and awarded for their fine work. At times, though, I was accused of "being behind this" because, as a high-level, Chicago Public School official stated, "There was no way that kids from Byrd school were capable of doing work like this . . . we have gotten too many letters." I may have been guilty of being behind it, supporting my students, but they were the ones strategizing and fighting to solve their problem, not me. Such comments were frequently made since many people simply could not believe that "*these* inner city, black kids" were capable of doing such amazing work. As Kamala commented in reference to stories on TV, radio, and in print that featured their work, "We are finally getting on the news for somethin' good!" And this recognition was truly the most important. The students began believing in themselves and understanding their capabilities as evidenced by their public speeches, presentations, and even the way they carried themselves in the school hallway. As they worked through the issues of their project, they realized they may not get what they were asking for, but the "process was the best part because people listened to us and agreed with us," as one student put it in a journal entry toward the end of the school year.

The students' efforts did get results. In a classroom that had vastly diverse abilities and aptitudes, students worked at their own pace and took on various roles so as to have the most impact on the outcome of their plans. Students sought out opportunities that allowed them to feel comfortable working together while also stepping out of their individual comfort zones when ready. Prior to engaging in the project, few students in this class valued their learning, as typified by many failing to participate in classroom activities, not completing homework, and being frequently absent from school. Now, they naturally became active participants in their learning (Holt, 1967) and enthusiastically worked with each other, guiding and developing classmates as they pursued their shared vision.

Over the many months of the project, the standardized test scores of most students increased over the previous year, several significantly, without direct time spent on test preparation (i.e., 35% of students previously not testing at the national norm in reading on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, achieved scores at/or above the 50th percentile—see CPS, 2004). Discipline problems noticeably diminished and attendance was at 98%. In addition to the high achievement and although they never directly received any response from the decision makers within the school system, by May, many of their listed problems within the school were remedied. Items that the school engineer had been asking to have fixed for years were suddenly getting the attention they had lacked. Lights were replaced, doors were fixed, new windows were delivered, and soap dispensers were installed in the bathrooms.

But "Not satisfied with stupid Band-Aids," as one boy put it, the students continued their fight and also continued being recognized. Letters of support kept on coming, an official case was established with the U.S. Department of Education in April, the Illinois State Board of Education invited the students to Springfield to testify about inequities in school funding in May, and the Center for Civic Education had the students present at their national convention for *Project Citizen*. By the close of the school year, they received numerous awards and "project of the year" designations from the Constitutional Rights Foundation and Northwestern University. Called "young warriors" and compared to "civil rights freedom fighters of 1960s," they were empowered and uplifted by the response of "people willing to help us that don't even know us" (Project Citizen, 2004).

Now awakened, the young peoples' intelligence, inspiration, interest, and imagination certainly drove their learning. Instead of relying on me to create lesson plans that tailored and contrived different activities, the students had the responsibility to figure out what was most important to solving this problem. They were discovering the most worthwhile knowledge, and it was coming from within them. Instead of focusing on memorization and rote learning, the students were meeting standards of excellence because it was necessary for solving the authentic curriculum at hand. Their action plan forced them to interact with each other and with a system that could potentially help them solve the problem identified. As each student self-selected roles in order to enact parts of the plan, their efforts came to life and the public's reaction became more intense. In order to make progress and get the attention and see the changes they desired, the students' rigor met and exceeded the standards and objectives expected by the city and state. In fact, their efforts went well beyond any standards or prescriptions because they wanted and needed to learn the skills necessary in order to actively participate in their project. Simultaneously, the students' push for justice exemplified what a community-based learning experience could be.

POSITIONING A CLASSROOM IN AN AUTHENTIC, DEMOCRATIC, AND JUSTICE-ORIENTED FRAMEWORK

The *Project Citizen* workshop certainly inspired a space within the classroom for the students to strive for equity and justice, but my exposure to curriculum studies literature guided my teaching. By positioning this classroom in literature written about authentic, transformative, and democratic curricula, as well as justice-oriented space in schools, the context of the classroom through this conceptual framework may shed light on my thinking, planning, and teaching.

Frustrated by a hidden curriculum based on social class (Anyon, 1980), I was looking for a compromise that would keep my students motivated and engaged in their learning, while at the same time teaching them the necessary skill-base to progress in school. Challenging the notion of teaching socioeconomic classes differently, realizing that my students had pride in their community, and understanding that they wanted to help not only themselves but others, I sought the equity in teaching and learning that I so strongly felt my students deserved. My initial wondering led me to revisit the perennial questions with my students: "What knowledge is most worthwhile? Why is it worthwhile? How is it acquired or created?" (Schubert, 1986, p. 1).

This question of what knowledge is of most worth can be seen as a basis to this inquiry. As I continually asked myself this question, wrestled with its inherent idea, and was exposed to curriculum studies literature, I began to understand that curriculum could be more than something merely offered or imposed on teachers and students without their input or advice. As I read, I came to realize that teachers must, and do, theorize everyday, almost every moment. This conceptualization of teachers as researchers theorizing in their classrooms could include deliberation and transactions among teachers and students. Schubert and Lopez-Schubert (1997) assert:

> Teachers' purposes and their experientially derived knowledge are diminished by researchers who delegitimate their capacity to do all but implement prespecified curricula and administer tests [which hinders] teachers . . . from keeping alive a spirit of theorizing about their work and lives with students. (p. 204)

Good teachers always are reflective of their daily practice. My reflection legitimized my decision-making capabilities and permitted me to make sense of lived classroom experiences in addition to making improvements and adjustments in my practices.

When Hopkins (1954) questioned what makes the curriculum, he acknowledged that adults outside the classroom were responsible for creating it, but he asserted, "according to their own evidence, however, the learning results are unsatisfactory" (p. 111). Hopkins insisted, "each pupil is making the curriculum through his own self-selections from the available materials in his environment" (p. 111). Advocating that students already reflect and theorize about their learning, he stated, "children or pupils or college students or behavers should make [curriculum]. They have made it in the past and they will continue to make it in the future" (pp. 111–112) and teachers must "help children . . . find and improve themselves though their own need-experiences" (p. 112) since a major purpose of education is for self-realization. How could this occur without students reflecting and theorizing with their teacher to make the meaning purposeful?

Students who are provided this opportunity help redefine the role of students and teachers. No longer is the teacher the supplier of knowledge filling vessels with already constructed knowledge (Freire, 1970; 1995). Instead, in this case, my students became constructors of meaning vis-à-vis questions they sought to answer, while my role as teacher provided assistance and support in their problem-posing and meaning-making. As a teacher, I had to unfix knowledge limits and change subject matters if necessary, while allowing the students freedom to self-select those learnings that they deemed most valuable.

Curriculum that allows for students to integrate and solve relevant questions that are meaningful to them creates a knowledge-rich environment. These students adapted and tailored knowledge to fit their needs as they sought to construct and answer their questions. As the students investigated and solved pertinent questions, authentic construction occurred in contrast to prescribed lessons that control them. By offering this approach in Room 405 at Byrd Academy, the typical subject-area compartmentalization ceased to exist. Students went "beyond the information given" (Bruner, 1973, p. 218); they generated topics, were taught and learned for understanding, and assessment occurred in context.

In order to create a climate honoring everybody's stake and participation, "access to a wide range of information and the right of those of varied opinion to have their viewpoints heard" (Apple & Beane, 1995, p. 13) was embraced and the notion that there is official or high-status knowledge (Apple, 1993) had to be thrown out. Those desiring to foster democratic schools construct an environment that realizes democracy was constructed in social context "enabling teachers and students alike to become more powerfully and self-consciously alive" (Ayers, 2004, p. 1). When schools do not draw on democratic principles, they are often authoritarian (Goodman, 1992) where the "the teacher knows the answers or will find them, know the rules and will enforce them, knows the score and will settle it" (Ayers, 2004, p. 7). These classrooms are typically anesthetic and have the excitement and curiosity of children conspicuously removed. On the contrary, the democratic environment enabled the Byrd fifth-graders to be active participants in the development of their learning.

Allowing the space and opportunity for students to engage in what concerned them most promoted democratic practices and citizenship. But what does it mean to teach good citizenship, what are the democratic ideals sought, and what are the means for attainment? As a result of differing views on what "educating the 'good' citizen" encompasses and "the spectrum of what good citizenship is and what good citizens *do*" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004a, p. 241), it was important to consider that advocating for students to read their own worlds and co-create curriculum surrounding problems they felt need to be addressed was inherently complex. Teachers fostering this sort of social action as curriculum, inculcate citizenship that goes beyond the notion of being "personally responsible" or simply "participatory" as they seek to make the curriculum "justice oriented" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004b, p. 237). Teachers that work with students to identify and transform injustices inherently foster students to become agents of change. Furthermore, these teachers challenge the ideas of service learning curriculums that have charity, rather than change as its foundation (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). Through the development of deliberate action plans, these classrooms delve deep into the inner workings of politics as they work to solve social problems and in turn strive to better themselves, their communities, and improve society.

When given the chance, students search for meaning within their own lives. They work for change and transform themselves and their community because they are the best interpreters of their social worlds. Democratic classrooms become incubators for students seeking to improve their world since they strive to center and adjust the school around the needs of the children rather than forcing students to conform and adapt to something already established without them in mind. A democratic curriculum promotes socially responsive citizens because the freedom that exists is "guided by an unshakable commitment to working with human beings to reach the full measure of their humanity" (Ayers, 2003, p. 48). Kesson and Oyler (1999) building on Beane (1997), point out that when classrooms are constructed this way, "learning emerges from the students' own questions about the world, is driven by their own problem-posing and inquiry processes, and is geared toward taking meaningful action in the world" (Kesson & Oyler, 1999, p. 140). Teachers who encourage students to become involved in social action issues avoid being shackled into mediocrity and forced to standardize their teaching, foregoing the practical philosophizing that gives teaching its strength.

Unfortunately, incorporation of integrative, transformative, and democratic ideals into classrooms are hallmarks of progressive schools typically observed in higher socioeconomic settings (see Kozol, 2005). There is an assumption that affluent students have opportunities to think for themselves and should be granted creative teaching innate to their social class (Anyon 1980; 2005). This suggests that only elite-class children are capable of doing and responding to curriculum questions of worth and in addition, that they have something to give to others in the form of community service or by volunteering as commonplace in service learning frameworks (see

Butin, 2003). It has also been inferred that these students have choices in their lives, and are afforded opportunities reserved for them but that should not be granted to students of working class and poor families. Why does this occur? Can transformative pedagogy, learning for engagement and consciousness, and progressive concepts be successful if introduced into schools that serve poor neighborhoods and work for all children (Semel & Sadovnik, 1999)? Can schools in poor neighborhoods provide the same opportunities as ones that have vast resources and a different view of student capabilities? And further, are inner city children able to give back to their communities similar to the service learning that has become common in affluent schools, simultaneously challenging injustices? Typifying this idea, one of the girls in the class pointedly asked, "Who's gonna listen to a bunch of black kids from Cabrini Green?"; there was only one way to find out.

Looking Back

Using these questions to frame a democratic classroom, and inspired by the *Project Citizen* workshop, the space was created for the students to embark on an experience in learning how the government works and ways they might "be active agents in bringing about social change" (Cobb, 1991, p. 5). Dyneisha summarized our work in the classroom as a "way to learn how the government works and ways to work the government." By embracing a meaningful problem, the curriculum became a catalyst for authentic, integrated, and change-focused learning to occur. The comments of Crown, who was a chronic truant prior to participating in this classroom, resonate strongly: "I did not feel school was a place for me. I didn't think it would help me in my life, but this project made me like coming to school cause I was makin' a difference. . . . It did not feel like the boring school I was used to." His turnaround and newfound dedication to schoolwork and attendance demonstrates the power of a democratic classroom where all students are critical members and are allowed to embrace their own ideas of what is worthwhile.

As their teacher, I learned that content can come from the students, especially curricula that focuses on their community and taps into their street-savvy, rather than be driven into them by forcibly preparing concrete objectives in an artificial manner. Just as students in the more affluent schools are encouraged and rewarded for their insight and creativity, these urban, African American students now could have their voices heard through purposeful action and determination. And in this particular case, their voices were no longer silenced.

There were certainly risks involved in trying to solve authentic curriculum problems and create democratic ideals in the classroom. Students were no longer protected by contrived lesson plans and people may cast doubt as to whether students, especially inner city African Americans, are capable of taking on a real problem. Even the school's extremely supportive principal initially had reservations about the lessons they might learn from the project. In a National Public Radio interview he said, "If they don't see things happening, I am afraid that they are going to say, voice all you want, but your voice is a small voice and doesn't matter" (Glass, 2004). Looking back, though, everyone, including the principal, would argue that the lessons that were taken away from the project are immeasurable.

During the final week of the school year, the Chicago Board of Education voted to permanently shut down the Byrd Community Academy. Even though thousands of dollars of improvements to the school had been made in the months leading up to the announcement as a direct result of the students' crusade, the "decision makers" articulated the school's low enrollment as the reason for their decision. Not surprisingly, there was no mention about the shameful conditions the students had brought to the public's attention as part of their rationale. Although students felt let down, angry, and extremely frustrated by the decision, there was hope about the experience. LeAlan succinctly summed up this idea in a journal entry, "We would love to get our perfect solution of getting a new school built, but we have figured out that great things can happen when you fight for what is right. . . . Even though we are not getting a new school we have done great things . . . like it said in one of the letters supporting us, 'Spectacular things happen along the way!'" Although the Chicago School Board decided to close the Byrd school down at the end of the school year as a result of the gentrification, the experiences, practical applications, and learning that occurred have already been transferred by the students to other situations.

As I write this over a year later, I am still in contact with most of my former students. The social justice curriculum the students and I developed together has had a lasting impact on all of us. This adventure in a meaningful and relevant curriculum was certainly not charity or service merely for service's sake; it was purposeful, deliberate, and action-oriented as it intended to truly make a difference in the lives of people in this community. Not only did their service-learning in praxis and engagement into the politics and civics result in direct action, opportunities to tell our story continue to emerge.

While putting this account together many months after the year's adventure ended, I thought it was essential and appropriate to involve students in some dialogue about how this piece sounded and to give me insight about my writing. As I went through the text with one boy, Crown, I asked, "Who am I as a white, middle-class teacher to write about you guys?" Crown looked directly into my eyes and said, "To me you ain't speaking outta turn because you not talkin' bad or nothin' about black people. . . . You taking they side and feelin' what they feelin.'" Crown continued, "We all gots to tell this so we can see that kids don't go to schools like this no more and somethin happens!" As I reflect about the inherent messages in Crown's dialogue with me, I cannot help but realize the power of justice-oriented curricula; curricula that provide opportunities to challenge the status quo and to engage educators and their students in meaningful and purposeful service through engagement.

Discussion of ideas, hopes, and possibilities about teachers and students working together to co-develop curriculum that is relevant and meaningful to those involved and one that serves a greater good exists as well. These stories discuss ideas of sharing the classroom, students actively participating in democratic action, definitions of citizenship and reasons for service-learning, student achievement and attendance, impositions of culture, issues of risks for teachers and students, notions of teacher as activist, need for administrative and parental support, use of curriculum studies literature as a guide for classroom teachers, and, as importantly, emergent counter-narratives for students from public housing. This inquiry is important to curriculum theorizers, teacher educators, and their preservice teachers in realizing the significance, implications, and consequences of promoting progressive and justice-focused education practice in a classroom serving disadvantaged, poor neighborhoods. In addition, the theory and practical pedagogy of using progressive education and social justice-oriented teaching with inner city youth may offer opportunities for transformation and promote change not only for myself but for others who read the account.

Telling such stories of social justice curriculum that seeks not only to foster good citizenship but underscores the fact that students are willing and able to make change in their lives and the lives of others no matter how complex the circumstances and how vast the barriers may be. There is a need for all educators to imagine and envision what social justice-focused curriculum and engaged service learning can be, not only for fostering "good citizenship" but also for making this world better. Through such storytelling and accounts, educators may be inspired to take such practices to their classrooms so they, too, can foster such ideals with their students. Ultimately the questions like "Of what use is it?" (Butin, 2003, p. 1674) and "What kind of citizen?" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004b, p. 237) can be readily and emphatically answered via accounts such as this, and teachers may become inspired to work toward such justice-oriented goals with their students in their classrooms.

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