

*Revealing Classroom Complexity: A Portrait of a Justice-Oriented, Democratic Curriculum
Serving a Disadvantaged Neighborhood*

Abstract

This study discusses my attempt to improve educational experiences of fifth-grade students living in public housing. Through reconstruction of my thought processes while teaching and learning with students, the context of social justice-oriented teaching and classroom complexity is revealed. A narrative portrayal emerges demonstrating 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.

Introduction

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. In attempts to gain meaning of the contextual situation in which I taught, I reveal the underlying complexity of the classroom. 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 classroom practice in an effort to improve their education and my learning.

By outlining how exposure and interaction to relevant curriculum studies literature influenced me as a person and teacher, this study depicts the role of the literature on my experiences through narrative inquiry and storytelling. 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 (Hopkins, 1954; 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 rose to the occasion and were not only “able to identify root causes of problems” they were also ready and willing to implement “strategies that might bring about substantive changes” (Westheimer, Kahne, & Rogers, 1999, p. 46). The narrative explores how these African-American fifth-graders and I co-created the yearlong curriculum as they sought their goal of

replacing their inadequate school building. This co-developed curriculum is demonstrative of a praxis-based classroom that infuses and illustrates service learning throughout, although having a service learning goal, outcome, or framework was never the intention.

Theoretical Framework

The perennial question *what knowledge is of most worth* (Spencer, 1861) can be seen as a basis to this inquiry. As I continually asked myself this question and wrestled with its inherent idea, I was exposed to literature suggesting curriculum was not something merely offered or imposed on teachers and students without their input or advice. As I read, I came to understand 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 deligitimate 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. Reflection legitimizes teachers’ decision-making capabilities and permits them to make sense of lived classroom experiences in addition to making improvements and adjustments in their 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” (p. 111-112) and teachers must “help children...find and improve themselves through their own need-experiences” (p.112) since the purpose of education is for self-realization. How can 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, students become constructors of meaning vis-à-vis questions they seek to answer, while the teacher assists and supports them in their problem-posing and meaning-making. As a teacher, I must unfix knowledge ends and change subject matters if necessary, while allowing the students’ freedom to self-select those learnings that they deem most valuable.

Curriculum that allows for students to integrate and solve relevant questions meaningful to them creates a knowledge-rich environment. Students adapt and tailor knowledge to fit their needs as they seek to construct and answer their questions. As students investigate and solve pertinent questions, authentic construction occurs in contrast to prescribed lessons that control them. By offering this approach, the typical subject-area compartmentalization does not exist. Students “go beyond the information given” (Bruner, 1973, p. 218); they generate topics, teach and learn for understanding, and are assessed 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) must be embraced and the notion that there is official or high-status knowledge (Apple, 1993) must be thrown out. Those desiring to foster democratic schools construct an environment that realizes democracy is 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.

Allowing the space and opportunity for students to engage in what concerns them most certainly promotes democratic practices and citizenship. But what does it mean to teach good citizenship, what are the democratic ideals being 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, 2004, p. 1), it is important to consider that advocating for students to read their own worlds and co-create curriculum surrounding problems they feel need to be addressed is 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 (Westheimer & Kahne, 1996, p. 5). 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.

If 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 make the school fit the child*—instead of making the child fit the school” (Neill, 1960, p. 4). 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), providing a pathway for theorizing to occur between community members, especially between students and their teacher (Ayers, Hunt & Quinn, 1998). 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 support them in learning the skills and values of participatory democracy as well as the realization that they can be change agents. These teachers 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 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, 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 kids able to give back to their communities similar to the service learning that has become common amongst affluent schools, simultaneously challenging injustices?

Modes of Inquiry and Sources of Data

The methodology of this study is qualitative and interpretive. Specifically, ethnography, autobiography (Pinar, 1994; Grumet, 1988) and portraiture (Lawrence Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1995) are used to make meaning. My investigation seeks to enter a research situation, notably my own classroom, trying to discover meaning. I have selected several different interpretive methods I feel best work for this research study. I do not believe any one mode of inquiry would suffice as a sole way of making meaning and inductively portray this phenomenon. In addition to these main approaches to inquiry, my research also incorporates and borrows from other methodologies including: *currere* (Pinar & Grumet, 1976), narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), and teacher/action research (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992; Schubert & Lopez-Schubert, 1997). Since all these modes have differing parameters as essential features associated with them, it was necessary to match, adapt and tailor them so as to ultimately create a meta-methodology supporting the aim of my particular research and to generate a course of action fitting my concerns and needs.

I have chosen to apply these “multiple modes of inquiry” (Schubert, 1975) in an effort to “generate a conscious sensitivity among those who create and use research so that (they) might discover the degree that each mode best serves particular research purposes” (Schubert, 1980, p. 23). Since any one mode of inquiry would not allow me to tell the phenomenon of theorizing with students to develop a socially conscious, integrated curricula in an urban classroom, application of Schwab’s *Arts of eclectic* (1971) was utilized. This application constructed a meaningful framework that justified the need to combine different theories and approaches to my particular research. Embracing these eclectic arts enabled me “to discover research modes that most productively serve the massive problems confronting the daily flow of students into schools” (Schubert, 1980, p. 23).

The data are available through autobiographical accounts, student work and public documentation. Since the students’ yearlong curriculum centered on the work they did to achieve a goal, there are many tangible artifacts from the classroom in addition to material in the public domain. Numerous newspaper and magazine articles, television and radio programming, and several book chapters about the students’ trials and tribulations were used to gain understanding. In addition, I utilized the students’ publicly available website, <http://www.projectcitizen405.com>, as a data source. This website helped organize all the public documentation, in addition to, capturing visits by and student reactions to legislators, public figures, university professors and concerned citizens who got involved in the project. By drawing upon all these critical artifacts, I triangulate these multiple sources for corroboration.

This study is a reconstruction that depicts a social justice focused curriculum through storytelling and vignettes that articulate the pursuit of theorizing with and engaging in an authentic curriculum focusing on the students’ priority concerns, namely the inequity in school

funding and resources. Using public documents and student work, student voice is prominent and the vignettes attempt to show how these students embraced a meaningful problem to them that allowed us to develop and co-create justice oriented curriculum that engaged and motivated them while serving the needs of the community and attempting to solve larger social issues. Their needs and interests emerged as they struggled to discover ways to problem-solve not only help themselves and their community but also to investigate and “effect systemic change” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 2). Together we conceptualized, designed, and implemented a yearlong campaign lobbying for a new school as a basis for the curriculum. Embracing student desires through classroom-based community action allowed direct civic participation, teaching and learning for social justice, and analysis of progressive education techniques and democratic principles in a classroom serving a poor community.

As I studied my own practice as part of the phenomenon of interest, I am cognizant of the limitations of my subjectivity. I focused, therefore, on gaining insight from a plurality of perspectives and sources. Whenever possible in my writing, I use the participants’ and outsiders’ account in direct quotation and acknowledge that if one of my students were to tell this story, it may be very different than my account.

To be representative of the overall inquiry, the following vignette typifies the research in this classroom. This particular story gets at the essence of the classroom structure highlighting the intersection of a social justice oriented curriculum with that of a curriculum with service learning characteristics. Using autobiographic and portraiture lens, my goal is to bring the reader to understand my approach to theorizing with students to develop the integrated curriculum based on concerns of these students in inner city Chicago. Ultimately, through this storytelling of the events, encounters, obstacles and decision-making, this overview vignette (and a dozen

others) portray the adventure and journey of this classroom, exemplifying how students may enact curricula that has justice themes and service learning components.

Co-Creating a Justice Curriculum in Cabrini Green: An Overview Vignette

The noise level amplified 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, 2004). 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. The irony confronted me 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. 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.

Contextualizing Cabrini

As I taught and learned with my students who reside in Chicago public housing, I continually affirmed my notion that the role of the teacher is to provide opportunity and space to students. The teacher ultimately must embrace intelligence and allow students to leverage what they know, and what they already can successfully accomplish. As the students develop this essential opportunity their imagination, interest, and creativity allow them to create a love for their learning that will endure the travesties and injustices they face both outside and inside the classroom.

In Chicago’s Near North side is one of the most infamous 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 1940’s, 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 the 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 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.

Almost every account I have read about Chicago's poverty-stricken Cabrini Green Homes describes 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 said this idea better than I could ever write it: "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. An understanding of how students from this neighborhood learn is 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 was 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

We began by documenting the problems in the school by taking photographs and writing expository text about its shortfalls. The students produced compositions that were astonishing. I could not believe the level of sophistication in their writing. When asked how they were able to construct such amazing work on a rough 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 the students documented “the big problems,” about their school that were “not fixable” and promptly stated, “We would like to invite you to see our school for yourself. We do not think you would let your kids come to a school that is falling apart.” And with this provocative invitation, the stage was set for an adventure none of us will soon forget.

Responses came pouring in immediately. Phone inquiries, letters, emails, 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.”

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 Shaniqua and Chester documented, “The restrooms are filthy and dirty. It is really smelly in the bathrooms because the toilets don’t flush. As an example of how bad they are, sinks move and water leaks on the floor. The sinks have bugs in them and water leaks everywhere. And we do not even have soap or paper towels. Kids don’t use it in the bathrooms (a commonly used phrase that means to use the restroom facilities) no more since they are so gross and falling apart” (Project Citizen, 2004).

Reading flowed into current events as students read and reacted to newspaper articles written about their work. In addition they read about techniques for participation (Isaac, 1992), which “showed us how to do things like survey and petition.” The students learned how to prepare documentation including their survey results, photos, and written assessments as they incorporated 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 and fervor in understanding and making sense of the text went beyond my wildest expectations. The students felt they needed to “get more folks involved and aware” so they developed a website to “organize all the stuff.” This was no small task as they had pictures and writing from visits of politicians and researchers, hundreds of letters and emails 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 and left late and even came in on their days off to “get the job done” (Project Citizen, 2004).

“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, to inquiries from university professors interested in writing about the project, to concerned citizens like Ralph Nader paying visits, 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” (Schultz, 2004). I may have been guilty of being behind 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, “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 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.

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. They were not affected by peers' progress or limitations, but rather sought out opportunities that allowed them to feel comfortable working together while at the same time 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.

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 prep. Discipline problems simply did not exist, and attendance was at a sky-high 98%. In addition to their high achievement and although they never directly received any response from the decision makers within the school system, many of their listed problems within the school were remedied. Items that the school engineer had been asking to have fixed for years were all of the sudden getting the attention they had lacked. Lights were replaced, doors were fixed, new windows were delivered, and soap dispensers were even 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, the Illinois State Board of Education invited the students to Springfield to testify about inequities in school funding, and the Center for Civic Education had the students present at their national convention for *Project Citizen*. 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 and 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 problem 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.

Looking Back

Frustrated by a hidden curriculum based on social class, 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, and realizing that my students had pride in their community and 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).

Ultimately, what would happen if in a visit to our own Utopia (Dewey, 1933) in Room 405 at Byrd Community Academy, in one of the most infamous housing projects in the country, we took on an experiment of our own? What if the teacher and students were allowed to be treated in an educational capacity like their counterparts in the more affluent schools? Would the experiment prove to be a disaster, would the children be squashed by the system, or would this curriculum prove successful? Could the teacher and students share authority in the classroom as Oyler reported in her study of a first grade classroom (1996)? Could the students actually work together with their teacher in practical or cooperative inquiry? Could the curriculum be driven by student interest, as Dewey argued for in *Democracy and Education* (1916), to meet the situational needs at hand that Schwab proclaimed a necessity (1970)? Would others listen to our voices and concerns? Would anybody care? What would be the consequences for our actions? Would we be able to go beyond following the rules and assert creative ideals? Would it be possible to develop a social justice oriented curriculum that actually had “community impact” (Butin, 2003, p. 1684) providing *real* service to the community with a lasting effect (Kahne & Westmehimer, 1996)? Could we challenge the status quo to make the curriculum of, by and for us as Schubert and Lopez Schubert advocated (1981, p. 239)? Or as one of the girls in the class asked, “Who’s gonna listen to a bunch of black kids from Cabrini Green?” There was only one way to find out.

Using these questions as a framework for a democratic curriculum, and inspired by a *Project Citizen* workshop that I attended (Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago; Center for Civic Education 2004, 2004b), the space 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) was created. As I now look back, I remember a conversation with

several students in which one, 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.

Through the project, the students were given the opportunity and responsibility to be active participants in the development and design of their own learning. 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 are certainly risks involved in trying to solve authentic curriculum problems and create democratic ideals in a classroom. Students are no longer protected by contrived lesson plans and people will 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). Today, though, everyone, including the principal, would argue the lessons that were taken away from the project are immeasurable. 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!’”

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 engagement into the politics and civics result in direct action, opportunities to tell our story continue to emerge.

While putting this account together, 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 him, “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 provides opportunities to challenge the status quo and to engage educators and their students in meaningful and purposeful service through engagement.

Educational Significance and Importance

Narrative inquiry provides an outlet for this classroom's story of justice-oriented curriculum. In addition to the vignettes, there is 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 vignettes delve into 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; as well as, emergent counternarratives for students from public housing.

This inquiry is important to curriculum theorizers, teacher educators and their pre-service teachers in realizing the significance, implications, and consequences of promoting progressive and justice focused education practice in a classroom serving disadvantaged, poor students. 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 for not only myself, but for others who read the account.

The use of narrative in educational research allows the stories of classrooms—particularly PK-12—to be told, allowing a great opportunity for reflection to take place, voices to be heard, and learning to occur. Telling stories of social justice curriculum that seeks to not only 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 making this world better place. Through such storytelling and accounts, educators may be inspired to take such practices to their classrooms to 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 in their classrooms.

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