

“Feelin’ What They Feelin’”: Pushing for Justice in Cabrini Green  
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Byrd Community Academy  
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363 W. Hill St.  
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*Dear State Senator of Illinois:*

*We are writing to tell you about exciting work our fifth-grade class is doing called Project Citizen. This project is sponsored by the Constitutional Rights Foundation of Chicago. It teaches us about how the government works and how we can affect public policy change even as fifth-graders. Our class has looked at all the problems that affect our community and have unanimously decided to focus our attention on the policy of building new schools in the City of Chicago. We have created an action plan that includes researching, petitioning, surveying, writing, photography and also interviewing and writing letters to people we think can help us fix the policy. We think and hope you would be interested in hearing about all the problems that our school in Cabrini Green is faced with everyday.*

*Our school building, Richard E. Byrd Community Academy, has big problems. There are too many problems to mention in this letter, but we want to tell you about some of the most important ones. These main problems are what we think are important issues: the restrooms, temperature in our building, the windows and the lack of a lunchroom, a gym and a stage. We need a new school because of these problems. It is really important for our learning so we can be great when we grow up.*

*The restrooms are filthy and dirty. There are spitballs all over the place. They do not get cleaned up properly. It is also really smelly in the bathrooms. Also, we do not have soap or paper towels or garbage cans. We do not have doors on the stall and have no privacy. The sinks have bugs in them and water is everywhere. As an example of how bad they are, sinks move and water leaks on the floor. 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. The windows are not efficient enough. There are bullet holes in the windows and there is tape on them. We cannot see through the windows and it is dark in the classrooms. We can hardly see what we are doing because it is so dark. This is not a good place to learn.*

*Another reason we need a new building is that we don't have a lunchroom. We eat in a hallway! The classes by the lunchroom are always getting distracted because of the*

*lunchroom in the hall. That is why we need a new lunchroom so the classes will not be getting distracted. Another bad thing about our lunchroom is we don't get to decide what we want in lunch. Also, we want vending machines so we can eat a little snack to give us energy so we can learn better. Our school really needs a new lunchroom because the lunchroom lady shouldn't have to tell students to be quiet. The teachers by the lunchroom shouldn't have to close their doors to teach.*

*Another example of the problem is the gym is not connected to our school. Whenever it's bad weather outside we have to walk through the snow. In fact, it is not even our gym. We borrow a gym from Seward Park across the street. It is dangerous crossing the street and we shouldn't have to cross the street during school. This takes up our gym period. When we have basketball practice we get locked out because Seward Park is not open. If we had our own gym in our school we wouldn't get locked out or be faced with the weather. When we walk to the gym its ice on the ground. One day a little kid got hurt from falling on the ice.*

*Finally, we also do not have an auditorium or stage at Byrd. This is a problem because when we have assemblies, people heads are in the way because we have to have the assemblies in a hallway. There is no seating and it is difficult to see. There are never enough seats for everybody and people have to stand. As an example, we had the Harlem Globetrotters come to our school. We couldn't see anything. If our school had a stage we would be happy because we would have a better chance to watch the show.*

*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 you time and interest.*

*Respectfully yours,  
The Fifth-graders in Room 405 of  
Richard E. Byrd Community Academy*

### **In the Beginning**

Prior to this provocative letter emerging from a student-driven action plan, the students of Room 405 were given the space and opportunity to co-create a curriculum that was meaningful and important to them. This approach to teaching and learning became an emergent curriculum, a curriculum that went beyond all of our wildest expectations as we worked together solving an authentic problem.

As a teacher, I was extremely frustrated by how I saw curriculum and the ways social class determined how students were taught. Questioning whether teachers should teach according to

the socioeconomic status of their students, I sought a space in my classroom that would motivate and engage my students in their learning, while teaching them the necessary skills to matriculate to the next grade level and beyond. Since I was challenging what I saw as an increasingly common view that perpetually pushed prescriptive curricula, essentially teacher-proofing classrooms, I began to ask the students and myself the perennial questions of worth. What knowledge was most important and worthwhile? How was the knowledge acquired and created? Who got to determine what was learned and why? (Schubert, 1986).

As my students and I began to reflect on these questions, we wondered: What would happen if we, in one of the more infamous public housing projects in the United States, took on a project that allowed us to determine what was most important to study, based on our own priority concerns? What if students in this classroom were afforded the opportunity, like students in more affluent schools, to problem-pose, challenge, and deliberate instead of being expected to give the right answers and rule-follow as had become the expected norm? What would be the results of the experiment? Would the system embrace their questioning and demand for equity or would it crush, ignore, or continue to silence them? Could a curriculum of this type be successful? How could it be measured? Could we, teacher and students, together share authority in order to solve authentic curriculum problems? By adhering to the situational needs of the learners, could the curriculum be guided by student interest? Could we challenge the accepted norms to make the curriculum of, for and by us? Or as one of the students, Dyneisha, pointedly asked, “Who’s gonna listen to a bunch of black kids from Cabrini Green?” Together we were determined to find out.

### The Context of Cabrini

Just north of the Chicago River, in the third largest city in the country, sits one of the most notorious housing projects. Cabrini Green has become a symbol of the failure of social programs meant to help low-income citizens. Originally constructed in the early 1940s as temporary housing for a diverse group of people, especially veterans returning from World War II, the high-density, tenement buildings have greatly deteriorated. The temporary status vanished over time, and the buildings became permanent residences. The properties were so poorly maintained by the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), that the Authority itself eventually declared them unlivable. The tenements, many with boarded-up windows, or brandished with burn marks from fires, became an eyesore and the mismanagement became national news. African American families

now occupy almost every unit in the project, which at its height housed about 15 thousand residents.

Adjacent to Chicago's prestigious Gold Coast neighborhood, the Cabrini Green land has become extremely valuable, and the CHA is in the midst of a "redevelopment plan." Allegedly making the area available to mixed-income families, this gentrification effort has been touted by the city as a model for other urban spaces to follow. Critics, including many residents, see the redevelopment as a center of controversy as families are separated and moved away. While it is clear that the buildings are coming down, another realization behind the headlines of the revitalization is the (not-so) hidden message for the low-income, black families of Cabrini: The land you are occupying is worth more than you and as a result you will be displaced to make way for million-dollar single family homes and luxurious condominiums.

Most accounts describe Chicago's poverty-stricken Cabrini Green as an area riddled with trouble. From gang-banging and underground economies, to murder and drugs, the neighborhood is publicized as one of the most dangerous public housing complexes in the country. As accurate, yet depressing as many of the written accounts of the area are, there is a story of the children of Cabrini that is seldom told.

Within Cabrini Green there are young children with vast needs. Requiring at least the same dedication, teaching and nurturing that other students in more affluent areas receive, the kids often get lost in the shuffle and suffer as a result. I have learned that the students are capable young citizens and great thinkers. They have unbelievable ideas and enormous creativity. Many are seeking the opportunity to practice their many intelligences. The students understand firsthand how the environment affects their learning and want something better. In a journal excerpt, Tavon conveyed this message more clearly than I ever could, "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?"

Challenged with the conditions of living and learning in the projects, the question of what knowledge is of most worth is continually raised by the students. Students are rarely recognized in the school setting for achievements outside of the classroom. The street savvy and out-of-school-curricula is devalued in lieu of scores on high-stakes testing and outside measures of accountability. As Crown appropriately remarked after being questioned about enduring life in

the ghetto, he said, “bein’ street smart or learnin’ how to survive is real... there are a lot of people who are gonna test you and we has got to know how to make it.” This failure to recognize the students’ intelligences makes me question if education was gauged by my students’ successes in the world of their neighborhood, via their lived experiences, would they significantly out-perform their more affluent peers, not to mention their teachers? As I pondered this situation, I became driven to find out how I could best use their adaptability and pragmatic street-smarts in the classroom. These thoughts, coupled with an immersion in curriculum studies literature, provided a context for me to wonder whether an authentic and emergent curriculum focusing on my students’ priority concerns could integrate the curriculum and prove successful in the “traditional” sense.

### Problems in the Community that Need Fixin’

The fifth graders were shouting out all sorts of problems and I was having trouble keeping up with their growing list. Their zeal to name the issues relevant to their world was apparent as I quickly scribbled down their ideas on the board. Intensity grew as students called out problems that affected them: “helping the homeless,” “cleaning up the park,” even “stopping gangs.” While they were able to name these big issues, many of the problems they listed had to do with the school building: “no gym, no lunchroom, or auditorium,” “broken windows with bullet holes,” “no heat in the classroom,” and “leaky sinks, broken toilets, and no soap or paper towels in the bathrooms.” Within an hour’s time, eagerly responding to a challenge I had posed to them, the fifth graders of Room 405 had identified 89 different problems that affected them and their community.

As I quickly marked up the front board in the classroom with their ideas, several students argued with one another that a problem they had mentioned had already been listed. Recognizing that the problems centered around one major theme, Dyneisha appropriately entered the ensuing debate, shouting, “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.” Her candid analysis created agreement among the group. The students responded unanimously to her reasoning; the biggest problem they faced was the inadequacy of their dilapidated school building. Dyneisha and the rest of the class were correct and they exemplified the reality of the situation that frigid December morning as they sat in the classroom adorned with hats, mittens and jackets. The heat had not yet made it to the fourth floor of Byrd school. Realizing they had a real problem they had

known so well, the students rallied together, pledging to solve the injustices they faced everyday in their school.

In just under an hour, the fifth-graders listed the major problems they felt needed to be fixed. When I had originally posed the question to them, I predicted the students might decide on simpler tasks like “getting fruit punch at lunch” or trying to get a mandated time for “recess everyday.” Instead, the students took on a more challenging moral issue, one that had been in the community for years: a new school had been promised but was never built. I wondered to myself if the students were really willing to take this problem head-on and not focus on an easier or more self-serving task. Quickly realizing I was mistaken for even questioning their motivation, they were already coming up with ways they might remedy some of the troubles with the school structure and constructing plans to get a new school built. Given the opportunity and challenge to prioritize problems in their community, the children were not only willing to merely itemize the issues, they were already strategizing ways to act and make change. And with their passion in place, the emergent curriculum began.

### Co-Creating Curriculum

“How’s we ‘posed to get this new school?” was the question my students pointedly asked me. Without answering, I asked them the same question in return. But did I ask them the same question simply due to good teacher sense? Did I want them to have ownership in the project? Or was I just stalling? Truthfully, just like the students, I was also questioning how to get the job accomplished and I wanted to learn from their insights.

As the teacher, I often felt like the ultimate authority figure in the eyes of the students. When I first started teaching, I thought I certainly wanted it this way. I felt I needed to be in control, and believed that if my authority were comprised, I was failing in my duties. In addition to authority in terms of classroom management, I thought I should know all the answers to the questions I posed. Wasn’t it my role to solve everything from a disagreement in the classroom to a math equation? This earlier perception was that I was the one who knew all the answers and should be able to “make everything all right.”

These were real questions regarding the project, however, and I found myself in a much more complicated and difficult situation. In some ways, I felt like I was letting down the students as an educator since I was accepting questions that I could not answer. This was dangerous territory for me. For the first time as a teacher, I was on an equal level to my students: neither of us knew

the potential outcome of our foray into the politics of the schools. None of us had ever faced this type of situation before, and, therefore, we had few experiences to guide us through the process. I wanted the new school as much as my students, but just like them, I did not know how to make this goal a reality.

The students were no longer trying to solve contrived textbook questions. Instead it was an authentic quest with real components, challenges, and obstacles. Triumph and tragedy would become part of our joint investigations. My expertise in getting a new school was limited, I did not know how to go about the task, but I realized that together, as a group, we would try our best to determine our direction. First, we had to confront the situation to establish our starting point. With much trepidation and humility, I told the students that I had never done anything like this before, but I was willing to give it my best shot with them. “We can only try and see what happens,” I told the fifth-graders and emphasized, “that if we believe in what we are doing and we are fighting for what is right, all we can do is put our best foot forward.” After coming to terms about my past experiences, and letting the students understand my personal origins, I suggested that we formulate a game plan to successfully accomplish our task of such magnitude.

Together we decided to develop an action plan in order to solve the problem of getting a new school in the City of Chicago. “But where should we begin?” was muttered by several students. The excitement that I witnessed in the classroom earlier in the day had given way to concern and fear of not knowing how to get the job done, not being able to reach the ultimate ambition. I had some ideas, but my conceptualization remained as vague as that of the students. Rather than giving them explicit directions, I was interested in their thoughts. I was readily aware that if the students could come up with the topics and the ideas for action amongst themselves, they would tend to be more involved, and have ownership in their suggestions. This concept is commonplace in teacher preparation programs, but usually it was under the assumption that the teacher was going to manipulate the situation so that the students could feel as though they were in control, when in reality the teacher already planned the process and had controlled the outcome in some way. Typically, I observed educators feeling as though they were creating democratic principles in their classrooms, but usually these ideals were merely illusions to themselves and their students. In this case, I really did not know what would become of any of our ideas, but I was willing to risk the potential outcomes, even failures, so that the experience for the students could have genuine consequences—both good and bad—and the fight could be authentic.

The class needed a plan of attack, one that would allow the students to select areas that were of interest to them individually, while at the same time keeping them organized. I pondered, should I avoid teaching everyone in the class the same thing, or should we go through this systematically so that each member of the class can have the same, shared experiences? I did not know the answer. From my personal educational experience, I learned that it was customary to blanket the curriculum for all of the students in the classroom. “Don’t be too challenging or too easy. Teach to the middle group of learners” were words of wisdom I had heard repeatedly in my teacher preparation coursework. I abhorred this usual approach to teaching, and felt that it was grossly inadequate. As I began to brood over my questioning, I decided that I should allow my students to choose their own areas of interest and subsequently share their findings with the class as they progressed through it. Not having an educator that I could use as a model for my personal advice, I found myself reading about other teachers and curriculum theorists that had explored this type of approach, developing curriculum that could be tailored and adapted to each student needs.

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. 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. Furthermore, the students were well aware that the Local School Council, along with the school faculty and staff had picked out everything for the new building, including paint options, floor tiles, and even type of soap dispensers in the bathroom. But what everyone knew, including our classroom, was that there had been no action despite the promises by the Board of Education or City of Chicago. 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. I wrote in my journal, “whenever they do this they get really crazy and almost out of control, but they are really good about generating ideas, so part of me wants them to be as crazy and creative as

they want and can be.” 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.”

It was very interesting to me that the students were able to figure out that there were different directions they could follow in order to solve the problem. Rarely in class discussion, or problem solving in general, did my students ever consider that there were multiple approaches for problem solving. This project, however, presented with something that was genuine, and they seemed to open up. They understood that they needed to approach the project from many angles. My experience was that students in the classroom often wanted to go with the first idea or ask how to solve something with a step-by-step process—the process of how to do it, but now I was able to recognize that they were not going to be satisfied with just one avenue. “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,” as 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, in addition to some corporate friends of the school. We certainly had our work cut out for us and we were going to need to find effective ways to reach out to our resources.

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 as 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 on the various Chicago television stations with their story. No action on the television idea was taken at that time; however, the suggestion would eventually come back to the forefront as the campaign gained more momentum.

The fact that the students had the foresight to include “ways to put pressure” as a means to achieve their goal impressed me. The students were readily in touch with means to actively

participate in our democracy and take action. Familiar with the “lingo” and ways in which they were involved and engaged in this project, they had never been activists in this context before. 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.” While the proposed ideas for taking action were novel to most students, they knew the options that might work, and what they would entail.

Their list of “ways to put pressure on” was specific, targeted, and comprehensive. It included ideas such as: survey kids, teachers and staff; get a petition; interview people with power in the community; write letters to the legislature and invite politicians to the school; hold a press conference; and produce 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, but they were ideas that were going to take research and investigation, planning and dedication to get accomplished. I was more than willing to support them in these efforts, but I was still a little skeptical regarding their interest in following through with their ideas. My uncertainty was premature, but I wanted to make sure we were not going down a blind path. Although I was excited, it was also nerve-racking. I was in un-chartered situation, beyond my own experiences. Neither the students nor I had worked on such an extensive project before.

### Putting Action into the Plan

With the students’ ideas for engagement in place, together we began to document the problems in the school by writing expository text and taking photographs of the building’s shortfalls. The students produced compositions that were astonishing. The level of dedication and sophistication in their writing went beyond anything I had previously witnessed. I readily understood how much of a priority this was for them when I heard Jaris respond to my questioning of how he was able to do such amazing work, “This stuff is really important and I need to get the word out if I want something done,” he explained. The written drafts became the starting point for spreading the word to a wider audience. Realizing that their drafts could become powerful tools if transformed into persuasive letters, the students combined their individual efforts to create a potent letter that was sent to city officials, the Chicago school board, newspaper reporters and concerned citizens. In this letter (that opened this chapter) the students

documented “the big problems,” about their school that were “not fixable” and promptly invited people “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 their provocation, the stage was set for an adventure none of us will soon forget.

After the first wave of about 200 emails and letters the students sent out, responses immediately flowed in as a result of their persuasive letter. Whether it was phone inquires, letters, emails, visits from legislators, or the newspaper, radio and TV reporters, the students’ project garnered further inspiration as it was driven by questions, suggestions, and encouragement. As the students reached beyond the walls of the school, the perspectives from the outsiders created a conduit for the students to become engaged in real-life curricula. As they made their concerns and demands known, these outsiders provided much-needed assistance, donations, and most notably—publicity. The students took into account the advice, developing and expanding their action plan that, as Chester believed, would “help us get our perfect solution...a brand new school.”

The students’ plan became the focal point of the entire curriculum for the remainder of the school year. As a result, the disciplines of knowledge lost their compartmentalization. The students’ plan guided the curriculum allowing it to become both integrated and integral in solving the problem of getting a new Byrd for themselves and their community. All of the subject areas of the prescribed curriculum were naturally blended together in a fluid manner. Instead of relying on basal textbooks for instruction; the students researched pertinent information about solving the problem at hand. This research took them to books, magazines, and Internet postings that went well beyond their (supposed) reading level and aptitude. As Henessy said, “Before this project, I would never have thought I could read this stuff.” Rather than feeling overwhelmed or deterred, the students were willing to put forth the effort to make sense of these documents because it had value to their situation or as Darnell put it, “This stuff is how we’s gonna get a new school. We gotta read it all so we know everything! It’s gonna help us take care of fixin’ the problem.”

The student-propelled curriculum took us beyond my wildest imagination. For instance, while we deconstructed Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage inequalities* (1992), Artell 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 Darnell articulated to a local television news

affiliate when questioned about how condition of the building made him feel, “Other kids make fun of us cause our school is falling apart...It just makes me feel like I need to be in another school.” Our reading flowed logically into current events as students read and reacted to the multitude of newspaper articles written about their efforts and hard work. In addition they read about techniques for participation, which “showed us how to do things like survey and petition” not because it was a required part of the mandated curriculum, but because the students found it pertinent to their cause.

In order to continue the momentum of their project, the students learned how to prepare documentation including their survey results, photos, and written assessments as they incorporated data analysis into their student-driven curriculum to garner the support they sought. After taking this documentation to the public, Reggie asserted, “No one who saw our folders could disagree with what we were saying about the school’s problems.” As they recognized, “folks from all over the world is interested in what we doing,” the class determined that they needed to continue to “get more people involved and aware” which resulted in their development of a website (<http://www.projectcitizen405.com>) to “organize all the stuff” and “allow others to see our messed-up, bootleg school,” as Malik concluded. The web development became a comprehensive part of the curriculum. They figured out how to lay out the design, making sure to include all the pictures and writing from visits of politicians and researchers, link to hundreds of letters and emails written on their behalf, publish their journal entries, petitions, charts, graphs, surveys, and analysis so that others “could be inspired to help us and see that we really need a new and better and safer place for learning,” as Diminor so eloquently stated.

The classroom turned into a headquarters for the fifth graders’ efforts and was the place to “make important decisions about who we should bring in to help us get the job done.” The students became so involved in the daily work of the project, they often came to school early, left late, and even showed up on their days off. Reggie commented about the dedication of his classmates, “We cannot afford to not get this job done. This is real work and if we slack off we won’t reach our goal...everyone knows it’s important and don’t want to screw it up.” Room 405 took on the aura of a campaign office; the students took on leadership roles, facilitating their mission. They embraced the opportunity to accomplish their goal and in many ways rose to the occasion. Similarly, Jaris commented in his journal after he sought out the opportunity to interview a local politician, “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.”

### Perseverance Pays Off

The students’ fortitude, initiative and perseverance paid off. Although originally there was some disappointment and frustration in not getting a direct and immediate response from “the decision makers at the board of education and the city,” other people certainly responded, hearing the fifth graders’ pleas for school equity. Local legislators visited and lobbied on the students’ behalf, university professors inquired about studying the class, and concerned citizens like Ralph Nader made visits. The students were recognized and rewarded for their tremendous efforts. And, even though at times, I was accused of “being behind this” because, as a Chicago Public School official ignorantly stated, “I have seen student led curriculum before and this is not it...there was no way that the kids from Byrd school are capable of doing work like this,” we as a class knew that it was the students that were responsible for the attention their work was receiving.

The project was inspirational to all who came in contact with the young activists. The best part to me was that the kids from Byrd were able to engage in such meaningful work, creating a counter narrative, since many people simply could not believe that the students responsible were “inner-city kids” that were doing “such amazing work,” as several emails of support indicated. The students recognized the accomplishments and the message their work was conveying, as Kamala commented, “We are finally getting on the news for somethin’ good!” This important recognition provided a means for the students to continue believing in themselves as they began to better understand their capacity and 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 Shaniqua put it.

The notoriety and publicity were not the only results. In a classroom with extremely diverse abilities and aptitudes, students worked at their own pace, taking on various roles 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 and provided the space to step out of their individual comfort zones when ready. Prior to engaging in the project, few students in this class valued their learning as exemplified by many

failing to participate in classroom activities, not completing homework, and being frequently absent from school.

Over the course of the school year's integrated curriculum, standardized test scores of most students increased over the previous year without direct time spent on skill-and-drill test preparation that is so common in many urban schools. The students' attendance was an unprecedented 98% and there were rarely discipline issues. In addition to their high achievement, some of their listed problems within the school were addressed. Issues that the school engineer had been asking to have fixed for years finally received the attention they deserved. Lights, sidewalks, and drinking fountains were replaced, doors were fixed, windows were ordered, and even soap dispensers were installed in the bathrooms!

But, "Not satisfied with stupid band-aids," as Chester put it, the students continued their fight and also continued being recognized. Emails and letters of support kept on coming, the U.S. Department of Education established an official 'case' investigating the matter, the class traveled to Springfield to testify at Illinois State Board of Education, and they were flown to formally address the Center for Civic Education national convention for Project Citizen. They were awarded *project* and *class of the year* designations from Northwestern University and the Constitutional Rights Foundation in addition to many other honors. Touted as "young warriors" and compared to "civil rights activists of 1960s," the students were empowered. According to their website, they were uplifted by the response of "people willing to help us that don't even know us."

Now awakened, the young peoples' intelligence and inspiration, interest and imagination certainly drove their learning. Rather than of relying on me to create lessons that focused on contrived activities, the students became responsible to figure out what was most important and helpful in solving this problem. By allowing the curriculum to come from within them, the students discovered the most worthwhile knowledge. Instead of succumbing to memorization and rote learning, the students naturally met standards of excellence since it was a necessity to solve the authentic problem. Their action plan encouraged them to interact with one another and with outsiders and experts that could potentially help them with their identified problem. As each student self-selected roles in order to enact parts of the plan, their efforts came alive and the public's reaction intensified. In order to make progress and get the attention they needed, the students' rigor naturally met 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.

### Reflecting Back on the Experience

Examining the initial questions about how a classroom could be organized and inspired by a Project Citizen workshop that I attended (Center for Civic Education; Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago), a framework for a democratic curriculum evolved in Room 405. The space for students to embark on an experience in learning how the government works and ways they might become change agents to help themselves and their community developed as a result. As I now look back, I remember a conversation with several students in which one, Dyneisha, summarized our work with the project as a “way to learn how the government works and ways to work the government.” By embracing this meaningful problem, the curriculum became a catalyst for authentic, natural, and integrated learning to occur.

Students were given the opportunity, space, and responsibility throughout the project to be active participants in the design, development, and implementation of their own learning. Recalling a conversation with Crown, a chronic truant prior to participating in this classroom, I am reminded of the strength of this curriculum, “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.... It did not feel like the boring school I was used to.” His transformation and engagement in schoolwork, along with his attendance, demonstrates the power of a democratic classroom. Every student was allowed to be a critical member of the team and was able to embrace their own ideas of what was worthwhile.

As their teacher, I learned that content can come from the students rather than be driven into them by forcibly preparing concrete objectives from prescribed, teacher-proofed curricula. Similar to schools that serve higher socioeconomic class students by encouraging and rewarding for insight and creativity, these urban, African American students, had their voices heard through purposeful action. No longer silenced, these fifth-graders articulately voiced a counter narrative as a result of their determination and fortitude.

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 with such magnitude. 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.” Everyone now, including the principal, would argue the lessons and learning that resulted and continue to emerge from the project well exceeded anyone’s expectations. 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!’” Certainly there were spectacular things that happened to all of us as a result of co-creating the curriculum in Cabrini Green.

Reflecting on this experience, over a year after our official relationship as teacher and students ended, I am still in contact with many of my former students, and I constantly realize that I am still learning from them. The curriculum we developed together has had a lasting impact on all of us. As opportunities to tell our story continue to emerge, the students continue to rise to the occasion. While putting this description together, I thought it was not only appropriate, but essential to involve students in deliberation about how the account was arranged and to have them provide me with feedback on the writing.

Curious if the class’ rhetoric regarding the project still held true to the mantra “the process not the product,” I eagerly listened to what my former students had to say. As I went through the text with several, I presented what I had written and asked about their lasting memories of the project. Interested in hearing what they thought 12 months later, Malik’s comments affirmed my perception, “Last year was my best year ever in school....instead it bein like school it was more like family...and I learned a lot too, like learning how to write and interview and ask good questions.” As we reminisced about some of the adventures our project had taken us on, Malik made sure to add, “I did things I ain’t never done before and if I had the chance, I would do it all over again.” Likewise, Demetrius felt the year was “one to remember.... Even though we tried hard to get what we wanted and didn’t get it, we did so much. Instead of doing boring school things we did cool stuff and had reasons to do what we were doing...it was real.” Other students were also able to recognize that the efforts and the fight were well worth it, as Shaniqua commented, “I remember when we felt like we wasted our breath for the whole year, but now I

feel like every kid should do this kind of thing in they schools. And, even though it was a lot of work—too much work—it was great and we got chances to do things other kids never get to do.”

As we discussed the writing, several of the students made adjustments and alterations to the text based on their perspectives and recollections. While changes were being made, I got into a discussion about race, class, and privilege in terms of the project with Crown. I asked him, “Who am I as a white, middle-class teacher to write about you guys?” Crown looked directly at me and without hesitating he stated, “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’.”

Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity and confidentiality of the students involved in this account.

### References

Schubert, W. H. (1986). *Curriculum: Perspective, Paradigm, and Possibility*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

This account was prepared with the help of several former Byrd Community Academy students, including Tywon Easter, Manuel Pratt, Daviell Bonds, Lamarius Brewer, Paris Banks, Kaprice Pruitt, and Ricky Wallace.

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