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# ARTICLE

## Living Savage Inequalities: Room 405's Fight for Equity in Schooling

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### ABSTRACT

*Elementary students from a Chicago housing project rise to the occasion and fight for an equal educational opportunity after being faced with shamefully, inadequate conditions at their neighborhood school. Challenged with the prospect of co-creating a curriculum based on their priority concerns, the young people developed an integrated effort to solve this dire problem. Their emergent curriculum not only highlights their fortitude, it is demonstrative of problems faced daily at their school and with school funding in general. Their hard work, hopeful struggle, subsequent attention and recognition, clearly elucidates the 'savage inequalities' lived by this group of inner-city African American children.*

Demetrius continued reading, "Soap, paper towels and toilet paper are in short supply. There are two working bathrooms for some 700 children" (Kozol, 1992, p. 63). As he took a breath, another boy called out, "This guy must've seen Byrd!"

As a class, we were reading a chapter in Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*. The fifth-grade students were working hard to deconstruct Kozol's text that was now over a decade old. Even though it may have been dated, the students sitting in Room 405 thought it was a precise portrayal of their school.

Why was a classroom of eleven-year-olds reading Kozol? In order to understand this situation, the dynamics of Room 405 need to be depicted. This class discussion stemmed from a [student-driven action plan](#) where the children of Room 405 were given the space and opportunity to co-create a classroom curriculum that was meaningful and important to them. This approach to teaching and learning became an emergent, "coherent curriculum" (Beane, 1995a, p. 3), a curriculum that went beyond all of our wildest expectations as we worked together solving an authentic problem. Rather than being shackled by prescriptive curricula, lack of resources, and destitute learning conditions, the fifth-grade students in Room 405 resist becoming just another statistic as they provide a counter narrative in the face of the "restoration of Apartheid schooling in America" (Kozol, 2005).

### Making Meaning: Methodological Approach, Sources of Data, and Contextual Framework

The methodology of this inquiry is qualitative and interpretive. Elements for the methodological approach are drawn from narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), autobiographical inquiry (Pinar, 1994; Grumet, 1990), and portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997) in an effort to better understand and make meaning of the yearlong classroom experience. Through storytelling of the classroom occurrences and my reflection about these occurrences, the phenomenon of a fifth-grade classroom in Chicago's Cabrini Green neighborhood using curriculum as a means to fight for an equitable and better educational opportunity can be more closely examined and better understood.

The data for the study are available via public documentation, student and classroom artifacts, and autobiographical accounts both from the students and the teacher. Since the inquiry is based on my own classroom teaching practice, I am readily aware of the study's limitations. My personal bias and subjectivity certainly inform the way the narrative is told. I realize that if one of the student participants were to tell the story, it may be very different than this account. By using a narrative lens to analyze the multiplicity of data sources, I am able to triangulate them for corroboration. At the same time, by gaining insight from this plurality of sources and allowing student voice to be prominent through direct quotation, my hope is that this account is not only credible, but trustworthy as well.

Part of the methodological approach to this inquiry is to weave the contextual framework into the narrative and autobiographical storytelling (see Ayers, 1998). My teaching was guided on a daily basis by my immersion in philosophical, theoretical, and sociocultural literature in education. Specifically, I often referred to curriculum studies literature to offer inspiration, hope, and guidance to my teaching and learning as I strove to create a democratic space in my classroom that allowed students' concerns to drive the curricular decisions. Rather than establishing an explicit theoretical framework section for this essay, and in an effort to parallel the way literature was woven into my teaching, I have chosen to provide a contextual framework throughout the essay (see Beane, 2005). By highlighting relevant literature that informed my teaching in context, the reader may see the theoretical guidance in action amidst classroom decision-making, instead of it standing alone in isolation.

## **Teaching According to Social Class?**

As a teacher, I was constantly frustrated by how I saw social class determining the way students were taught and what was expected of them in school (Kozol, 1992, 2005; Anyon, 1980, 2005; Apple, 1995). Questioning the ideology that 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, regardless of their social status. 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 is most important and worthwhile? How was the knowledge acquired and created? Who got to determine what was learned and why? (Schubert, 1986). Realizing I could not be complacent about my frustration, I posed the questions to my students allowing them to become “critical readers of their society” (Ayers, 2004, p. 1).

## **Asking Students What is Most Worth Knowing**

The noise level increased in Room 405 of Byrd Community Academy. The fifth-grade students shouted out ideas as I quickly tried to keep up with their growing list. The intensity in the classroom grew as students called out problems that affected them: “teenage pregnancy,” “litter in the park,” even “stopping Michael Jackson!” Many of the problems focused on the school: “foggy windows pocked with bullet holes,” “no lunchroom, gym or auditorium,” “clogged toilets” and “broken heaters in the classroom.” In responding to the challenge of solving a real problem, the fifth-graders readily identified [89 problems that affected them and their community](#).

As the list expanded, Dyneisha insightfully called out, “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.” Immediately, a sense of affirmation developed in the room with Dyneisha’s profound analysis. The students unanimously decided that the most pertinent issue was the poor condition and inadequacy of their Chicago public school building. The irony confronted me as I looked out at the group of students gathered together on that cold December morning. Many were wearing hats, gloves and coats in the classroom, exemplifying the actual problems they were listing. These fifth-graders were extremely perceptive in citing the numerous problems having to do with the school, but unfortunately knew them all too well; they lived with these injustices their entire school-aged lives.

Initially, when I asked about a problem they wanted fixed, I had anticipated the students might choose simpler tasks like “wanting fruit punch at lunch” or “getting recess everyday.” Instead, they decided on a more serious issue, one that had been in Chicago’s Cabrini Green community for years – a new school had been promised but was never built. As I thought to myself, were these students really willing to take this problem head-on, I soon realized they were already strategizing ways to fix the problems with the building and were developing plans to get a new school constructed. Given the challenge to prioritize a problem in their community, the young citizens did not settle with merely itemizing issues, but were figuring out ways to act and make change. In short order, the students of Room 405 listed major problems in need of serious remedy, and their emergent curriculum began.

## **Framing the Situation: The Context of Cabrini Green**

As I taught and learned with students who resided in Chicago public housing, I continually affirmed my notion that the role of a teacher is to provide opportunity and space to students. A teacher must embrace student intelligence, allowing them to leverage what they know, and what they already successfully accomplish. As students develop this fundamental opportunity, their creativity and imagination provide them with a passion for learning that will endure the injustice they face both inside their learning environment and in their neighborhood.

According to most media and motion picture accounts, one of the most infamous housing projects in the country is located on Chicago’s near north side. Notorious for gangs and drugs, 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 most of which were returning soldiers from World War II. As years went by, the high-density, tenement buildings and accompanying row houses became permanent homes to their residents. These poorly maintained buildings and their mismanagement were not only an eyesore but became symbolic of urban blight and all that is wrong with public housing in America. Now comprised of over 99% African American families, the residences have become so deteriorated

and dilapidated that the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) has declared them unlivable.

The CHA's plan to redevelop Cabrini Green and make it available to mixed-income families has created a hotbed of controversy as gentrification and the displacement of low-income black children and their families occur. A critical problem with this plan is that the new developments are not accessible to its current residents. The city and housing authority are uprooting the African American residents from this high profile, valuable real estate that sits in the shadows of the luxurious buildings of the affluent Gold Coast neighborhood, to make way for expensive condominiums and townhouses.

Nearly each account I have read or seen about Chicago's poverty-stricken Cabrini Green describes the area as a haven for drugs and murder, gangbanging, misery, and mayhem. Even in an article praising my students' efforts, the author insists, "[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 have some truth to it, but the story of the residents, especially the children, is rarely told. Within this community there are remarkable young kids with a multitude of needs. They require the same or better instruction, commitment, and encouragement given to other students who may have more access to essential resources. In addition, the children are capable citizens and great thinkers with untapped creativity. They need the opportunity to demonstrate and practice their many intelligences. One Room 405 student, Tavon, stated 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?" (Project Citizen, 2004).

Because of rough conditions associated with the Cabrini Green housing projects, coupled with societal issues and constraints, the perennial question of what is worth knowing is raised constantly by my students (Spencer, 1861; Schubert, 1986). An understanding of how students from this neighborhood learn is essential, as they continually adapt in a pragmatic way. Prior to our time together, they told me that there was little promotion of their skills and abilities learned out-of-school, but rather a devaluing of their adaptive and street intelligences. Many of my students say they could not survive 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" as one student put it. At the same time they were seldom recognized at school for achievements outside of the classroom. If education were measured by the students' successes in their neighborhood via their own lived experiences (van Manen, 1977), many would out-perform their more affluent peers, not to mention their teachers. As I reflected about this situation, I wondered how I might best be able to use their adaptability and street savvy in school and reach them in a "culturally relevant" way (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 18)? Could an emergent, authentic and integrated curriculum focusing on students' interests demonstrate success in a traditional classroom (Dewey, 1916; Hopkins, 1954; Beane, 1995b)?

### **Documenting and Discussing the Disparity**

The initial step the student researchers took in the process was documenting problems of the school by taking photographs and writing expository text detailing its shortfalls (Schubert, 1995). The students produced astonishing compositions; I could not believe the sophistication of 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 a starting point, and getting the word out is exactly what they did. Quickly realizing their drafts needed to be transformed into persuasive statements, the students compiled their individual text to create a powerful letter they sent to school board and city officials, local legislators, 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." With this provocative invitation, they set the stage for an adventure none of us, the students or myself, would soon forget.

By utilizing Kozol's text, the students connected his writing to their experiences and thus furthered their self-directed curriculum. Although it was not easy for the class to work through the text, as it was written for adults, they were willing to give it a shot. Why? Because this book, and all words they deciphered, had great meaning and relevance to them. As the students struggled through the reading, they found it unbelievably detailed and specific to their cause. They connected many of the book's descriptions to their work and in turn became increasingly intrigued, as well as quite frustrated.

In a section titled Other People's Children, the students learned some of the reasons why schools in the suburbs were getting better resources. Chester read, "The answer is found, at least in part, in the arcane machinery by which we finance public education. Most public schools in the United States depend for their initial funding on a tax on local property,"

(Kozol 1992, 54). As he continued on with his reading, I began to see several students look up with confused expressions on their faces. Chester continued, "...they are likely to end up with far less money for each child in their schools.... 30 percent or more of the potential tax base (in larger cities like Chicago) is exempt from taxes" (Kozol, 1992, p. 55).

Before Chester could even finish the page, the students went from a quiet reading of the text to a full-fledged, class discussion. Kozol was attempting to explain the discrepancy in funding, and although there may have been many unknown words as they read through the text, the students were able to get the essence of its meaning. Baffled by what they read, the students pointed to all the problems they had previously cited. In a sense, Kozol was really describing their school. The examples he provided were just that—examples of what was occurring in schools, like Byrd, that served predominantly disadvantaged black and Latino students.

When Kozol asserted, "Equity, after all, does not mean simply equal funding" (Kozol, 1992, p. 54), the students wanted to know how they could influence change. Discussing the unfairness in the classroom was only part of the discussion, as the students already used Socratic method & shared inquiry (Great Books Foundation, 2005) during our deliberations. We relied heavily on these concepts to glean meaning out of the text at multiple levels. Rather than having one right answer, the shared inquiry method allowed the students to rely directly on the text to interpret meaning for themselves, eliciting individual reader response (Rosenblatt, 1938), essentially inviting them to deliberate their findings and understanding with each other.

The students had become comfortable in this approach, but it was always striking to hear fifth-graders utilizing some of the strategies to get their points heard. Dyneisha would have been the least likely to engage in this sort of shared inquiry at the beginning of the year. Previously she would overpower class discussions. Practicing not calling out and interrupting her peers, she said with a deep breath, "I agree with Tavon, but everyone needs to turn back to page 54 'cause you will see that there is more to it." As the others in the class followed her cue, she repeated what had been read by another classmate several minutes earlier, "How can it be that inequities as great as these exist in neighboring school districts?" (Kozol, 1992, p. 54).

As she emphatically recited these lines out loud to the class, Dyneisha explained to the class that when the representative from the Illinois House of Representatives comes tomorrow we should ask him about these funding questions like this author did in *Savage Inequalities*. She continued, "He better be able to provide us with some answers" about these issues and maybe help us get our new school. Dyneisha said, "We should give that [Illinois State Representative] Willie Delgado guy all of the letters we be getting and then ask him about the money!" I was very glad that I had allowed the students to drive the discussion, and was happy to hear that she and others were readily connecting the various pieces of project together.

## **Responses and Reactions**

The letters that Dyneisha spoke of were coming in every day. It was great that outsiders were telling the students how smart and how brave they were. These were things I always told them, but they had come to expect those sorts of accolades from me. When others were writing to them, it was quite different. All the letters were so encouraging and positive; the students could not resist feeling great about the attention. One of the students in the class remarked that he "never got any mail at my house and now I gets stuff everyday."

Imagine being a fifth-grader at Byrd school and receiving complimentary feedback like this in the mail each day:

'Each of you are smart, creative and talented and deserve to have the facilities that would enable you to flourish as individuals.'

'Your children have an undeniable zest for learning and serve as an inspiration to me.'

'You've taken a stance on a huge issue and have handled it with the utmost maturity.'

'You are making a difference in the learning environment at Byrd, in your own lives, and the hearts and minds of those with whom you share your work.' (Project Citizen, 2004).

Each day, when the mail arrived at the school, a student from the class headed down to the office to claim the letters. Each relished the positive attention. From an educational standpoint, it was great because we always had authentic reading and

writing in which to respond. There was no convincing or forcing of the work on the students; it was the students taking control of their own learning because it all had a central theme and was geared towards their ultimate shared goal.

When State Representative Willie Delgado came to the school, the class was extremely interested in what he had to say; especially about the issues that Dyneisha had raised the day prior. Although they already had many other visitors at the school before this, this was the first elected official that paid a visit. Because Dyneisha had taken the lead in asking such poignant questions during the class discussion, the class decided she should be the lead interviewer. Dyneisha used her interview guide and developed additional questions to address the inequities the students had uncovered.

We studied the problem about our community, about our school being messed up and stuff," Dyneisha said to Representative Delgado. As she went through detailing all of the problems, Delgado attentively listened and then responded,

"You know guys, I was not surprised... because I was a student, once upon a time and I came from a real poor community. I went to a school just like you. That does not mean that we are idiots and that does not mean that we should be treated less than anyone else. We are all still human beings." (Project Citizen, 2004)

Immediately connecting with the students by sharing their pain of a poor community, he portrayed his own childhood in a similar light to what they were experiencing. He won them over in the first minutes of his visit. All the students willingly stayed involved in the interview, probing with follow-up questions about inequity in schools and wondering how they could take action. In response, Delgado commented, "The action that you have taken, even though you cannot touch and cannot hug it yet, to get our attention, you have done more than most people do in their entire life!" (Project Citizen, 2004). As he continued praising, talking and treating them respectfully like mature individuals, he congratulated the group on all their hard work.

As I looked around the room, each student was holding their head high in response to Delgado. As Dyneisha continued her questioning, Delgado was able to step up his rhetoric to deal with the raced and classed issues Dyneisha raised. "It should not be this way... the public schools for our kids, kids of color should not be this way!" exclaimed Delgado, stressing, "The content of your character is the most important thing." As he passionately expressed his disdain and "shame on the grown-ups for building million dollar homes and not taking care of a school," the representative vigorously supported their perspective on the gentrification and urban renewal they were all witnessing.

During his time in Room 405, he pushed the students to examine the issues surrounding change in the area and ultimately ended with "What about you?" His call for action showed his support for their cause. He told them how he was going to raise the issue with the school board and question the members as to why the students had not heard a response. Before going on a tour, Delgado praised the students "on the bang-up job" and encouraged them to keep fighting, "trying to convince the grown-ups at the Board of Education to listen to you because... you are right." As he made his way around the school, he commented on the conditions throughout. Perhaps his most powerful statement came as he walked into the girls' lavatory, "There are not doors on the stalls and nothing to keep you sanitary! How can we expect young ladies to become women if this is what we give them? This makes me sick!" (Project Citizen, 2004).

As the legislator connected with the students in the classroom and on the tour, I looked forward to what the students would write about the visit in the journals the next morning. In their written responses, they expressed enthusiasm for his visit and eagerness for inviting other legislators because they saw how it could influence the decision makers. Fortunately, they had already scheduled the Chairperson of the Education Committee for the Illinois State Senate the following week.

Tavon commented that his "favorite part of the interview was when [Delgado] got on his knees and pretended to beg for more money." Others also connected with the representative because of what he said about "never giving up" and the fact that "he was very impressed with us" or because he actually "knew about and has come to the Greens [Cabrini Green Homes]." The students were able to sort out and make sense of the discussion with Mr. Delgado about gentrification in the neighborhood. Malik aptly commented in his entry about the difference between being mad about not getting a school, and being affected by other people moving in to the Greens. He did "not care if people move here but I just wants a better school." Reggie pointed out, "Mr. Delgado thinks that everyone should be treated equally" and as many of them remarked, they thought Delgado "could help us get a brand new school" (Project Citizen 2004).

While the students prepared for the Illinois State Senator's visit for the following week, they were still receiving correspondence from their supporters. I had actually been asked to present the students' work to the Board of the Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago (CRFC). Representatives from Project Citizen (a middle grade curricular

program promoting competent and responsible participation in government sponsored by the Center for Civic Education (CCE) and supported locally by CRFC) were interested in having their Board hear testimony from a teacher regarding the project to see if it was something they wanted to continue to support. Thinking it would be a great way to continue the momentum of the project, I was interested, but wanted to have students involved. As I wrote in my journal, "They would definitely be the best ambassadors for the project." Apparently though, from their response to my suggestion of this possibility, the board of directors was not interested in having the students come out for the visit at the time. Looking back, I wished I had expressed the realization I had come to embrace: that as much as I can try to provide valuable interpretation, I could not present the same elucidation as an African American child from Room 405 who was living the savage inequality.

Fairly frustrated with the response, I could not figure out why they would not want to have the students' perspective. I questioned in my journal whether it was "because they don't want a couple of black kids running around their law offices or if they are just not prepared for fifth-graders at this meeting." Whatever the reason for denying the kids as the presenters, which most likely was nothing more than the need for expediency rather than having to do with race, the students and I still felt it was an opportunity to have the efforts presented to a wider audience that potentially had more reach; "Cause the more people that know the better it be," as one student put it.

A few days later, I spent the lunch hour with about fifty CRFC board members. They were genuinely interested in the students' efforts and many decided to correspond with the students. One email in particular stood out from the rest. It provided me the opportunity to bring up some difficult issues with the class about what would happen if they did not get what they wanted.

Dear 5th Grade Class at Byrd:

I am a Board member of the Constitutional Rights Foundation of Chicago and recently had the pleasure of meeting your teacher Mr. Schultz. He told us then of your mission to affect the decision making of the school system and the state in order to secure a better learning environment. I also read Mr. Zorn's [Chicago Tribune, 23 March 2004] article discussing the steps you have taken and will continue to take.

Your commitment to this project is outstanding. You are right to want to be in an environment that is more effective for your learning needs as you move through your school career. I encourage you to keep working towards your goals especially in the professional manner you have already demonstrated. In school, just as in a business environment, there will always be issues to tackle and better solutions to seek out. The most important thing I have learned is to keep working towards what you think is the right solution. If you don't reach the "perfect" solution you had originally intended, I have learned that spectacular things happen along the way and superb alternatives also appear.

I commend your approach to this problem and your passion for it as well. Even though I am not at school with you, I have learned a great deal simply by hearing of your actions and plans. While you seek a better environment for your education, it seems as though you have already, through your own efforts, elevated your education.

My best wishes for your continued crusade. (Project Citizen, 2004).

The students really liked the letter and felt that it brought up some great issues. For me it was the perfect timing to raise the idea of not reaching the "perfect solution." I had been struggling quite a bit with the idea that the students may not get the school they had been so admirably fighting for. How was I going to deal with the consequences associated with their authentic problem solving? This was not one of the safe, contrived consequences found in textbooks or a basal reader. The way this letter articulated the issue, it allowed for discussion with the kids about problem solving and the potential disappointment of fighting for something you believe in, but not getting the results you seek. Together we were able to figure out many different ways in which the students had already won, even if they did not get the "perfect solution." Although there could certainly be disappointment and frustration at the outcome, the students were able to acknowledge their many achievements that had already occurred. I prompted them to write about "what will happen if you do not reach the perfect solution to your Project Citizen plans." Many were able to recognize the "superb alternatives" that had already appeared:

If we do not get a new school we still learn something about how to have a petition and to have lots of stuff.  
Like an example we did a survey and we handed them out to the whole school and asked them what they

think about the school. (Project Citizen, 2004)

Others in the class were also getting the message from the letter. They understood about having “spectacular things happen” that they did not expect. For instance, Shaniqua wrote,

The author says that we have learned great things along the way superb alternatives also appear. I believe that we can get a new school. They have started by fixing the school sidewalk. The story says that we have elevated our education and really I think we have. (Project Citizen 2004)

Or as Diminor commented about having the notoriety associated with their efforts, “we was on the [radio and television] news and in the [news]papers showing what was wrong with the building.” Artell agreed by writing, “I get to do things that I didnt do be for” ([Project Citizen, 2004](#)).

In addition, while doing things they had not done before was important, some of them were able to see that they were learning no matter what the outcome was. Jaris wrote,

If we do not reach the perfect solution I think we can still learn alot. In the letter it says, I commend your approach to this problem and your passion for it as well. Another example is through your own efforts, you elevated your education. I have done so many thing that I never did before and now school is for something. (Project Citizen, 2004)

I was glad the students were able to articulate how they felt; there were good things about the project regardless of the end result. They were in touch with their learning. The students understood they were experiencing new and different things. Many of them were even able to be specific about what it was they were experiencing and why it was different. I was thankful this email letter had prompted our discussion about this topic because I had not known how to raise the dreaded outcome of the possible failure of not obtaining a new school.

Whatever the final results, I understood I was going to need to keep up this discussion for the remainder of the project. Regardless of the outcome, the students needed to know that they were doing great things and making great strides. They needed to know that while they were fighting for what they believed in, they were accomplishing, receiving, and experiencing “superb alternatives” even if they did not get the perfect solution.

An example of these great alternatives that were unexpected events that “happened along the way” was when the students received [a letter from the Office of Vice President Richard Cheney](#). They had written to him in their first batch of letters and were surprised to have actually gotten a personalized response. The letter stamped with an official seal was specific to the students’ request:

Dear Friends:

Thank you for contacting Vice President Cheney for assistance in dealing with an agency of the federal government, the Vice President has asked me to respond.

We are forwarding your matter to the Department of Education. That agency will review the facts and either start a case, reopen your old case, or explain their previous decision on your former case, as applicable. We have requested that they respond directly to you with a copy to us for our files, and we expect this to be done at the earliest possible opportunity.

Thank you for contacting the Vice President. Best wishes. Sincerely,

Special Assistant to the Vice President (Project Citizen, 2004)

The kids were elated that the “VP had actually cared bout us at Byrd!” Although this action seemed like a public relations ploy and a hollow commitment, within two weeks the students had received [a letter from the Department of Education \(DOE\)](#). To my amazement, the DOE actually started a case and addressed the specifics of the students’ initial inquiry:

United States Department of Education Office of the Deputy Secretary  
W.H. ID-WH144524

Dear Fifth-graders:

Thank you for your letter to Vice President Richard B. Cheney regarding the need for a new school facility to house the Richard E. Byrd Community Academy. We appreciate hearing your concerns. The White House has referred your letter to the Department of Education for review, and I am pleased to respond.

I read your very detailed description of the many problems and limitations of your existing school building, and I certainly understand your desire for a new school. I also appreciate the efforts of your class to learn about our government and help bring about change through Project Citizen.

One fact you may have learned about our system is that the three major levels of government traditionally have had different areas of responsibility. For example, the federal government is largely responsible for national defense, while local governments generally maintain police forces to help ensure safety and order in local communities.

Under our system of education, state and local governments have primary responsibility for financing and administering elementary and secondary education. The limited role of the federal government has been targeted to helping States and schools. Districts meet the instructional needs of special populations, such as economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities, and not on basic functions such as maintaining, renovating, or building schools.

You already may have learned that the Chicago Public Schools began an extensive capital improvement program several years ago that aims to renovate or replace decaying schools facilities. Under this program, almost \$700 million is budgeted during the current year to reduce overcrowding, improve the physical condition of existing schools, and help bring technology into the classroom. Based on your description of the conditions at the Byrd Academy, I would hope and expect that your school is scheduled for renovation or replacement in the very near future.

Thank you again for your letter, and I hope each of you continues to take an active role as citizens and future voters in our democratic government.

Sincerely, Director, Budget Service (Project Citizen, 2004)

The students saw this kind of attention, especially from the federal level as quite a victory. Although much of the content of the letter presented very little new information to them, they were excited that the U.S. Department of Education knew about the problems at Byrd and expected that something was going to happen at the local level. I was agitated as I reflected on the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation that was constantly trickling down to the local level but hardly supported the learning environment for these particular students. Regardless of the irony this letter presented, I was impressed by the accountability of the various high-level departments of the government in responding to the fifth-graders, albeit not to take any action to really support the students efforts.

As the letters continued to come in, the students' elaborated action plan became the epicenter of the entire curriculum for the remainder of the school year. The disciplines of knowledge and subject areas lost their fragmentation and compartmentalization and became integrated and integral in solving the problem of getting an equal school (Beane, 1997, p. 616). Reading, writing, arithmetic and social studies were all blended together. Rather than using basal textbooks, the students continued to research pertinent information about how to solve their problem. This search took them to texts, such as Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*, that went beyond their reading level and aptitude, but they were willing to put forth the effort because it had value to their situation. Kozol's work was not far from the truth at Byrd, as Shaniqua and Chester had 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)

Our reading time flowed naturally into current events as students read and reacted to the multitude of newspaper articles written about their work. In addition they read about and applied "[techniques for participation](#)" (Isaac, 1992, p. 155), 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." 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, communication, 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. The students even developed several video documentaries to highlight the shameful inadequacies of their school with an eye towards using the productions for publicity as they demanded something better.

View the video documentary ([Windows](#), [Mac](#)) and [other videos](#).

Room 405 had become the headquarters to "make important decisions about who we should bring in to help" and it was a think-tank for investigating ways "we can better get others involved." The classroom transformed into a campaign office. Students assumed roles of leadership in their quest as many rose to the occasion. 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 showed up on the weekends to "get the job done!"

### **Perseverance Pays Off**

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 the local legislators visiting and lobbying on the students behalf, to inquiries from university professors interested in writing about the project, to visits from concerned citizens like [Ralph Nader \(Nader 2004\)](#), the students were applauded and awarded for their fine work. At times, though, I was accused of "being behind this" because, as a Chicago Public Schools 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 my students, but the eleven-year-olds were the ones fighting to solve their problem, not me. These disparaging comments were frequently made in light of the fact that many people simply could not believe that these "inner-city, black kids" were capable of doing such amazing work, but their efforts, recognition, and results were testimony of their high achievement. As Kamala noted, "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 realizing their capabilities. As they worked through the issues of their project, they understood 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 their plans. They were not affected by peers' progress or limitations, but rather sought out opportunities that allowed each to feel comfortable working together while at the same time stepping out of their individual comfort zones when ready. Prior to engaging in the project, few students in this class valued their personal school learning; typified by frequent absences, many failing to participate in classroom activities, and not completing homework.

Over the many months of the project, standardized test scores of most students increased over the previous year, several significantly, without direct time spent on test preparation. 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, some of their listed problems within the school were remedied. Items the school engineer had been asking to have fixed for years were all of the sudden getting the attention they had lacked. Doors were fixed, lights were replaced, and soap dispensers were installed in the bathrooms!

But, "not satisfied," as one boy put it, the students continued their fight and also continued being recognized. Letters of support kept on coming, the Illinois State Board of Education invited the students to Springfield, and the Center for Civic Education had the students present at their national convention. They received several 'project of the year' designations from the Constitutional Rights Foundation and Northwestern University and also received many awards. Called young warriors and compared to civil rights freedom fighters of the 1960s, they were empowered and uplifted by the response of "people willing to help us that don't even know us."

The students were now more awakened, as their intelligence and inspiration, interest and imagination, fueled their

learning. Instead of depending on me to create lesson plans that tailored and forced different activities, the students took on the responsibility to determine what was most important to solving this serious problem as they “self-selected the learnings” they believed to be most valuable (Hopkins, 1954, p. 224). They were discovering the most worthwhile knowledge and it was coming from within each of 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 chose roles in order to enact parts of the plan, their efforts came to life and the public’s reaction intensified. In order to make progress and get the attention they needed, the students’ rigor met the standards and objectives expected by the city and state (and even NCLB). In fact, their efforts went well beyond any standards or prescriptions because they wanted and needed to learn the necessary skills in order to actively participate in their project.

### **Reflecting on the Experience**

Frustrated by a “hidden curriculum of schoolwork” based on social class (Anyon, 1980, p. 90), I challenged the notion of teaching socioeconomic classes differently. Wanting to teach against the idea of high-status, official knowledge and not wanting to perpetuate cultural reproduction (Apple, 1993, 1995), I sought the equity in teaching and learning I so strongly felt my students deserved. As I recall my initial curiosity, wondering what would happen if, in one of the most well known housing projects in the country, we took on an experiment of our own by outlining a Utopian classroom in Room 405 at Byrd Community Academy (Dewey, 1933)? What if the teacher and students were 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 could this curriculum prove successful? Could the teacher “make room for students” and “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 (Schwab, 1969)? Could the curriculum be driven by student interest, as Dewey argued for in *Democracy and Education* (1916), and generate alternative courses of action to meet the situational needs that Schwab proclaimed a necessity (1969)? 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? Could we challenge the status quo to make a “curricula that are of, by, and therefore for students” as Schubert and Lopez Schubert advocated (1981, p. 239)? Or as one of the girls in the class asked, was anyone “gonna listen to a bunch of black kids from Cabrini Green, anyway?”

Using these questions as a framework for a democratic curriculum, and inspired by a Project Citizen workshop I attended (Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago, 2003), I created 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). As I now look back, I remember a conversation with several students in which one 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 and integrated learning to occur, while simultaneously highlighting the savage inequalities in education Kozol has so vividly described years earlier.

Through the project, the students were given the prospect and responsibility to be active participants in the development and design of their own learning, fostering an “enabling education” (Ayers, 2003, p. 57). 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.... It did not feel like the boring school I was used to.” His turnaround, 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 most worthwhile. In addition, it shows that black students from inner-city housing projects, such as Cabrini Green, care about and are willing to fight for an equal educational opportunity – an opportunity that is unfortunately non-existent in many urban areas.

As their teacher, I learned content can come from the students 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 particular 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 as they fought vigorously in hopes to get a fair and equal school building.

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 real problems. 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). Over a year later, 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!"

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