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ARTICLE

A Review of B.D. Schultz's *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way: Lessons from an Urban Classroom* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press. 192 pp., \$19.95. ISBN 978-0-8077-4857-2)

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Brian Schultz, author of *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way: Lessons from an Urban Classroom*, serves as a model for innovation in co-constructing democratic curriculum with students and for challenging the resource, expectations, and funding gaps that exist for students who are marginalized on the basis of race, culture, language, or socioeconomic status. In a climate of assessment and prescribed curriculum, Schultz resists complacency and engages in critical pedagogy. The story that Schultz details in *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* provides lessons for pre-service and in-service teachers in development, motivation, learning, intelligence, culture, and assessment, as well as Schultz's unraveling of the complexities and the rewards of being a reflective practitioner who learns alongside students in an authentic, student driven, curriculum.

How does a teacher purposely lead a group of fifth-graders to acquire a set of understanding and skills when the students lack motivation to be in school and are more concerned with other life-demanding issues? The answer rests with the students. In *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way*, Schultz takes the reader to the Cabrini Green Housing projects on Chicago's North Side, located between two of the most affluent neighborhoods: the Gold Coast and Lincoln Park. Historically, Cabrini Green has been associated with poverty, drugs, and gangs to the point that the name, Cabrini Green, is now synonymous for problems associated with public housing. But inside Room 405 at Carr Academy, fifth-grade students on any given day can be found brainstorming problems, creating action plans, conducting interviews, deconstructing literary works, analyzing survey data, or creating a documentary. For certain, things are happening as the students work to solve their self-chosen curricular problem of the year: getting a new school.

While Schultz's primary aims of this text are not necessarily to detail and dissect the inequalities that exist in education, indeed, it would be reprehensible to ignore them. In fact, voters across all demographic groups indicate that they are most concerned about education, second to the economy (Lau, 2004). Yet, in the Education Trust's annual 2007 report, despite that some states are improving in equitable funding for all school districts, it is still clearly communicated to low-income and minority students, through a funding gap between school districts with high-poverty and high-minority students in comparison to districts with fewer minority and low-income students, that an equal education is not an entitled right (Arroyo, 2008). This inequity is clearly portrayed in *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* as students frequently work in winter hats, gloves, and coats because the heat does not work. They eat in the hallway because they do not have a lunchroom. Their windows are either so cloudy or full of bullet holes that they cannot see out. The toilets are perpetually clogged, the sinks are broken, and the pipes leak. To think that soap and paper towels are stocked is preposterous.

While Room 405 students confront these physical inequities, Schultz works to reduce many hidden inequities. Nieto and Bode (2008) define social justice in education as a process that involves the following four components: challenging, confronting, and disrupting misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to inequality and discrimination; providing all students with resources needed to learn to their fullest potential; drawing on students' talents and strengths; and, creating a learning environment supportive of critical thinking and social change. Schultz is a model of social justice and of equity in education. First, he gives his students the opportunity to be democratic citizens who challenge and confront inequity in their lives by identifying a problem, the school is "a dump," and centering the curriculum around this authentic issue. Second, he allows students to draw on their practical and creative intelligence, intelligence not typically valued in a classroom, to develop and carry out an action plan to reach the ultimate goal, a new school. Through multiple grants, Schultz creates an environment with equitable material resources such as wireless laptops, word processors,

digital cameras, and digital video equipment, as well as partnering with the Collaboratory Project, a Northwestern University initiative that provides training and resources to K-12 teachers and students who are interested in integrating technology in education. Through this collaboration, doctoral students studying literacy mentor the students daily. Finally, motivated by a workshop presentation on Project Citizen, Schultz creates a learning environment where students co-construct curriculum in which they confront difficult, and often times prohibited, issues such as the relationship between race, class, and school inequities.

Horowitz, et al. (2005) state, “children’s abilities to think and reason have been shown to depend on the extent to which they are familiar with the content being reasoned about and have had a range of experience upon which to draw” (p. 102). Instead of canned and compartmentalized curriculum, the curriculum in Room 405 becomes authentic and purposeful, and Schultz creates an environment where students can draw on their “street intelligences.” Prior to participating in Project Citizen, many of Room 405 students may have been considered chronic truants, but by creating a purposeful curriculum that is led by students, they come early to school, stay late, and even show up on weekends.

In addition to creating an environment that allows students to draw on their expertise, the academic content is learned in the context of solving a problem. A literacy lesson involves researching on the Internet or reading email and news articles and deconstructing various, sophisticated texts. A writing lesson involves writing expository essays about the shortcomings of Carr Academy, letters of inquiry, or thank-you notes. Use of a petition ignites a civics lesson, and math becomes entwined in survey development, data collection, and analysis. History is integrated in understanding local government to see who makes funding and educational decisions. As Room 405 students begin to get the word out about their goal, much attention is drawn to the Carr students. Letters of support and encouragement flow, radio and news broadcasts air, and articles are published that detail and validate the quest of these determined fifth-graders. But, although this media attention clearly furthers the mission, it also serves to authenticate the learning as well as to provide an anchor for further learning. For instance, after a program featured on National Public Radio’s *This American Life*, the students discuss the power of imagery as well as media literacy. Because the methods of this class are so different from typical American schools, one student eventually asks, “When are we going to start doing work?”

With this mentality that Room 405 students are not doing work, but rather are doing “cool things,” one should not be surprised that the students boasted a 98% attendance rate. The result of this authentic, co-constructed curriculum is that these fifth-grade students develop skills that will facilitate them to participate in a democratic and increasingly competitive global economy and to work for a more just world. Instead of assuring them of their future, Schulz helps the students by insuring that they learn knowledge, skills and dispositions required of citizens working for change. And, although Schultz is cautious of reporting students’ achievement on standardized tests for fear of reducing their intelligence and the outcomes of the class to a mere test score, he happily reports that students made significant gains.

In addition to discussing the many challenges and benefits of teaching in justice-oriented classrooms, Schultz reflects on and provides logistical information for teachers who want to enable democratic ideals in their classrooms. He discusses the importance of developing trusting relationships with administrators, showing administrators the connections to standards, and partnering with the administration. To break down barriers with skeptical colleagues, Schultz documents how he spends time in others’ classes as well as invites others to his class. Communication with parents and an extensive examination of literature also act as methods of support. Further, Schultz honestly shares his concerns about helping the students reach their objectives, providing guidance, and enforcing behavior without exerting control. As well, he openly communicates his fears about a project where the outcomes are not known and failure is possible.

Throughout the year and throughout *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way*, Schultz openly discusses his struggle of understanding the complexities of race, class, and privilege as a White teacher in a schooling serving low-income, African-American students. His examination of the cultural differences between himself and the students serves as a model and a challenge for teachers to examine racial and class issues as they unfold in the classroom. While Schultz continually expresses fear about writing *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* from his cultural perspective, Schultz remains true to his mission of educating for a democratic society and shares authority by allowing the students' voices to be heard through the use of multiple quotes throughout the text.

When the skeptic asks how much teachers matter, after reading *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way*, the answer should be clear: a lot. If research that indicates that upon controlling for socioeconomic status, disparities between black and white students were almost entirely accounted for by teacher qualifications (Ferguson, 1991) is not convincing enough that teachers matter, consider the perspectives of Room 405 students in a follow-up article three years later, "Teachers who cherish their students and demand the best from them can create scholars in the most unlikely schools" (Dell' Angela, 2007, p. B1). While Schultz continually points toward his students when awarded for success, without his leadership, these students would have spent another year thinking that school would not help them in life and that without Project Citizen, "I wouldn't be in high school. I'd be out on the block, I know I would" (Dell' Angela, 2007, B1). Schultz, too, deserves acknowledgement for empowering his students and for enacting an ethic of care.

While the content of *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* is laden with implications for education, Schultz also interjects many comical situations. For instance, the students developed a list of questions in order to screen potential classroom visitors. Most of the questions appeared quite logical, such as, "Have you ever been to Chicago?" The questions, "Do you have any pets? If so, what kind?" make the reader chuckle and enjoy the sincerity with which these fifth-graders wrote the question.

Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way ignites a flame that motivates the reader to visit the Room 405 website, watch the student-created documentary, read the news articles from the *Chicago Times*, and listen to the program *Desperate Measures* on NPR, seek the many other publications that feature Room 405 students. *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* is a must-read for current and future teachers who wish to engage their students in democratic practice. *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* is also an excellent anchor for learning about and discussing methods of preparing students to become active citizens who engage in political, civic, and economic realms of society. But to limit the audience of this text solely to teachers would be an injustice. *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* is an inspiring text that serves to dispel many of the offensive notions about the capabilities of inner city students. Thanks to Carr's Room 405 students and Schultz, much can be learned about the value of a community of learners serving as experts in open dialogue, co-developing knowledge, and working for change.

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