

Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way

LESSONS FROM AN URBAN CLASSROOM

Brian D. Schultz

foreword by
CARL A. GRANT



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*To the former students of Room 405 at Carr Community Academy,
without whose creativity, imagination, and fortitude these stories
would not have been possible.*

And, to Jenn and Addison, with love

Contents

Foreword by Carl A. Grant	ix
Preface and Acknowledgments	xi
1. Embracing Students' Interests for Schoolwork	I
What's Worth Knowing?	1
"Inverting" the Curriculum	11
Education as a Two-Way Street	16
2. Our School Is a Dump!	
Identifying a Problem That Needs Solving	24
This Ain't No Schoolwork, This Is Important!	24
Feelin' Like a Big and Powerful Grown-up	33
Needin' Them Pizza Things	40
3. Getting the Word Out:	
Sharing Authority in Room 405	53
You Wouldn't Let Your Kids Come to a School	
That Is Falling Apart	53
When Are We Going to Do Work?	60
Just Like a Record Deal	68
4. Seeking a Perfect Solution	76
The <i>Chicago Tribune</i>	76
Young Warriors	82
Carr's "Savage Inequalities"	86
Television, Radio, and Protecting the Kids	93

5. Process as Product	102
Practicing What I Preached	102
Do You Have Any Pets?	107
The Bestest Year Ever	113
Nader Comes to Carr	121
Bittersweet Final Days	124
6. Justice-Oriented Teaching	126
Negotiating Risks	126
Needing Support	128
Theorizing with Students	134
Education with Authenticity and Purpose	136
Developing Classrooms for Social Action	139
Progressive Education in Disadvantaged Neighborhoods	141
Complicating Good Intentions	144
7. Conclusion	149
How Ya Gonna Help Us?	149
Understanding Each Other	152
Let Those Voices Be Heard!	154
Enduring Achievement and Impact	156
References	159
Index	163
About the Author	173

Foreword

When I read Brian Schultz's *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way: Lessons from an Urban Classroom*, I approached it as both a professional and personal assignment. Brian and I are colleagues with similar concerns about how to educate all students and how to prepare teachers for urban schools. I am always on alert for ideas about how to work successfully with urban students.

I have, however, become a very cautious reader and scholar, because I am often disappointed with what I read about educating students who live in urban areas. Since the 1960s, there has been a regular stream of books about teaching urban, low-income students of color. Most of these stories are desperately wanting. Many have weak, formulaic storylines involving a White teacher-savior and street-smart but academically inept Black and Brown students. Yet, with the publication of his book, Brian Schultz challenges this, embodying an idea which I sincerely believe: A teacher's skin color does not have a negative effect on the ability to be successful teaching students of a different color. *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* renewed my belief that it is possible to write *authentic* narratives about urban schools.

In Brian's book, you meet a teacher who struggles with the circumstances of school life and who continually challenges himself by reflecting upon how to improve. In the students he writes about, you see a move from uncertainty of self and ability to a development of agency and academic confidence. You learn that the students in Room 405 are capable of rigorous learning. You are also reminded that education is not neutral, but very political: Race and socioeconomic status are significant factors that determine how and which children are sorted out and denied equality and social justice.

I plan to make Brian's book required reading for my teacher education students because it answers two prevailing questions in the mind of the mostly White students entering teacher education programs: "Can I

successfully teach students of color?" and "Will students of color reject the 'acting White mantra' and do what it takes to be successful in school?" These are significant questions for all teachers and they are questions that have challenged outstanding thinkers and writers, including Carter G. Woodson, James Baldwin, and Malcolm X.

In his 1933 book, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Carter G. Woodson questioned teachers' capacity, paying particular attention to the dispositions of White teachers teaching Negro children:

To be frank we must concede that there is no particular body of facts that Negro teachers can impart to children of their own race that may not be just as easily presented by persons of another race if they have the same attitude as Negro teachers; but in most cases tradition, race, hate, segregation, and terrorism make such a thing impossible. (p. 28)

Similarly, when James Baldwin spoke to teachers in 1963, he claimed, "[We] are living through a very dangerous time. . . . Teaching black children is revolutionary." In concluding, Baldwin declared, "It is your responsibility to change society if you think of yourself as an educated person." However, he cautioned, ". . . [Y]ou will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance" since "what societies really, ideally want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society."

The students of Room 405 demonstrate a no-nonsense understanding of the purpose of education, and their actions symbolize the words of Malcolm X. In a 1964 speech he stated: "Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today" (quoted in Riley, 1993, p. 320). The intense commitment to the curriculum shows Room 405's understanding that the passport was not the new school, but rather the education received in pursuit. The students learned the necessary foundations to achieve personal and professional agency and a flourishing life, and prepared to become civic servants and leaders.

When I finished Brian's book, I was troubled because a fantastic teacher has left a school system that, like most urban school systems, desperately needs outstanding teachers. Nonetheless I am also encouraged that Brian has, in moving on, written this account and dedicated himself to teaching those interested in learning how to be successful teachers in urban spaces, thus addressing another area of great concern and need.

Carl A. Grant

Embracing Students' Interest for Schoolwork



WHAT'S WORTH KNOWING?

The noise level amplified in Room 405. The fifth-grade students shouted out ideas as I tried to keep up with their growing list. The intensity was beyond measurement as students called out problems affecting them: “teenage pregnancy,” “litter in the park,” even “stopping Michael Jackson!” A lot of the problems had to do with their school, Carr Community Academy: “foggy windows pocked with bullet holes,” “no lunchroom, gym, or auditorium,” “clogged toilets,” and “broken heaters in the classroom.” Before long, the fifth graders identified 89 different problems affecting them and their community, a challenge posed just an hour earlier.

As the list grew and I hurriedly marked up the chalkboard with their ideas, some students began arguing with one another that a problem they proposed had already been mentioned. Insightfully, Dyneisha cut through the ensuing debate and stated, “Most of the problems on that list have to do with our school building bein’ messed up. Our school is a dump! That’s

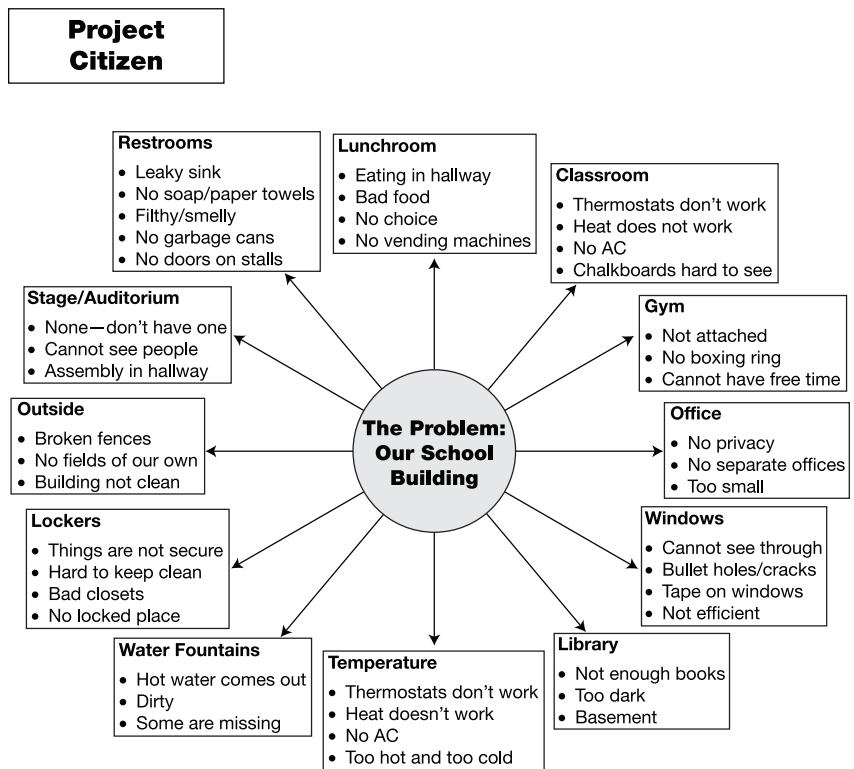


the problem.” With this profound analysis there was a sense of affirmation in the room, and the students unanimously agreed the most pressing issue was the poor condition and inadequacy of their school building. As I looked out at the students gathered together on that cold December morning, I was confronted by just how true that realization was. Most were wearing hats, gloves, and coats in the classroom, exemplifying the real



problem they were living. They were very perceptive in citing the numerous problems with the school. These students knew them well; they had lived this injustice their entire school-aged lives.

In short order, the fifth graders listed major problems in need of fixing. In asking the question, I had anticipated the students might decide on simpler tasks like wanting fruit punch at lunch or trying to get recess every day. Instead they went for a more challenging issue, one that had existed in the community for years: A new school had been promised but was never built. I wondered to myself whether these students were really willing to tackle this problem head-on. Before I could even ask, they were already suggesting ways they might remedy problems with the school structure and constructing plans to get a new school built. Given the opportunity and challenge to prioritize a problem in their community, the children were not only willing to itemize the issues but were already strategizing ways to make change. And so this emergent curriculum began.



Framing the Situation: The Context of Cabrini Green

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

Just up the street from Chicago's downtown "Loop" business district, according to most media accounts, is one of the most notorious and infamous housing projects in the United States. The reputation of Cabrini Green often precedes it—best known for drugs and gangs, and synonymous with the failing social programs and initiatives meant to help low-income people.

As with most of the public housing in Chicago, the Cabrini Green Homes are in the midst of massive redevelopment and gentrification. Located immediately north of the Chicago River on what was one declared slum land, the high-rise apartment tenements and their accompanying row houses were originally built over a 20-year period from the early 1940s through the 1960s. Named to honor America's first saint, the Cabrini Green development was originally conceived as temporary housing. Veterans returning from World War II were Cabrini's first inhabitants, and initially the area was populated by a racially and ethnically diverse group of residents.

Soon after completion of the housing project, the city of Chicago faced a significant economic hardship. The routine upkeep and critical maintenance of the Cabrini Green Homes ceased almost as soon as the last brick was laid. The high-density buildings quickly deteriorated. In efforts to save additional funds, the city stopped most police patrols, and gang activity took over the 70-acre area that butted up against some of Chicago's most affluent neighborhoods. City services, such as trash pickup and public transportation, refused to stop in the area citing safety concerns. Rat and roach infestations plagued the area. Underground economies took over, while the negligence gained national attention. Burned-out facades and boarded-up windows from multiple fires as well as decaying apartment buildings were an eyesore, and their mismanagement became symbolic of urban blight and everything wrong with public housing. The residents who were able to get out of the area did, but the people with the least resources who called Cabrini Green home found this impossible. Cabrini Green be-

came this group's permanent residence as its original temporary status was superseded. The approximate 18,000 units, originally integrated with notable diversity, became almost exclusively occupied by African Americans (Peterson, 1997).

Cabrini Green differs from many other housing projects. Instead of being relegated to an industrial corridor or an undesirable area, Cabrini was built in what currently is the popular Old Town neighborhood, sits adjacent to the prestigious Lincoln Park, and lies in shadows of the exclusive skyscrapers of the Magnificent Mile and Gold Coast. Because of this proximity to high-priced real estate and its desirable locale, the property has become extremely valuable. In recent years, the city and the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) have developed a public relations and Madison-Avenue-style advertising campaign to support the plan to redevelop the area. Allegedly making it available for mixed-income families, the CHA's "Plan for Transformation" has created a hotbed of controversy. Hyped as an example for other urban areas to emulate, the reality of the plan involves displacing and uprooting the African American residents. The CHA and city let the properties deteriorate so much that the Authority itself declared the apartments unlivable, clearing the way to receive federal permission to demolish and redesign the community.

Almost every account I have read or seen about Chicago's poverty-stricken Cabrini Green describes the area as a haven for drugs and murder, gang-banging, misery, and mayhem. Even in an article praising my students' work, the author reported, "Cabrini Green Homes has all the stuff of which failure is made, and it often delivers door-to-door" (Brady, 2004, p. A19). Much of this portrayal may be accurate, but the story of the residents, especially the children, is rarely told. Within this community there are young kids with many needs. They require the same or better instruction, dedication, and nurturing as any other student in any other area. In addition, the students are capable citizens and good thinkers with untapped creativity who need the opportunity to demonstrate and practice their intelligences. My student Tavon stated it best: "Even though our neighborhood has problems, we are proud of our neighborhood. This is why we are fighting for a better school. We think everyone should have a good home and a good school."

Because of the challenging conditions associated with Cabrini Green, coupled with societal issues and constraints, the perennial question of *what is worth knowing* is constantly raised by my students. An understanding of how students from this neighborhood learn is imperative, as they continu-

ally adapt in a practical sense. Prior to our time together, they told me, there was little nurturing of the strengths or abilities learned outside of school, but rather a devaluing of their adaptive and street intelligences. Many could not endure, as one student put it, "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." At the same time, they are seldom recognized in school for their achievements outside the classroom. If education was measured by the students' successes in their neighborhood via their own lived experiences, many would outperform their more affluent peers, not to mention their teachers. As I pondered this situation, I wondered how we could best draw on the students' adaptability and street savvy in school. Could an authentic and integrated curriculum focusing on students' interests and concerns emerge and be successful in the "traditional" classroom?

Documenting and Reaching Out

None of us knew where attempting to solve the problems of the school building would take us, but with the momentum from our initial class discussion and consensus about focusing on the school building, the students and I went forward.

With the students' interest in the school's condition as the starting point, the classroom evolved into one in which authority was shared between students and teacher; students decided how and what they would do to enact their daily curriculum and ultimately became agents of social change based on what mattered most to them. The students' analyses and descriptions would set the stage for ways the class could try to resolve the issue. This investigation would lead students to examine alternative solutions for solving the predicament in which they found themselves and subsequently let the students focus on a specific idea, namely, the need to secure a new school building for the community and force the decision makers to fulfill their erstwhile promise. Strategizing and enacting ways of solving the problem would become the curriculum.

Although there was a clear problem to solve, and we knew there was the need for some sort of plan to accomplish our goals, none of us really knew where to begin. The students' verve drove us to begin documenting problems in the school with photographs and writing expository text about its shortcomings. The students produced astonishing, sophisticated compositions. When asked how they were able to construct such work in a rough draft, Demetrius responded, "This stuff is really important, and I

need to get the word out if I want something done." These rough drafts became the starting point, and getting the word out is exactly what they did. Quickly realizing the drafts needed to be transformed into persuasive statements, the students and I compiled their individual work to create a powerful letter they sent to the school board, city officials, newspaper reporters, and concerned citizens. In the letter, the students provocatively documented the big problems about their school that were not fixable and wrote, "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."

Responses came pouring in immediately. Phone inquiries, letters, e-mails, and visits from legislators, as well as newspaper and TV reporters, kept the students' project flowing with questions, suggestions, and encouragement. In going beyond the classroom walls, the students quickly became engaged in real-life curricula. As the class made its concerns known, many people offered insight, assistance, donations, and publicity. Taking into account advice from these outsiders, the students put together a comprehensive action plan they believed would help get their perfect solution—a whole new school.

The students' action plan became the epicenter of the entire curriculum for the remainder of the school year. Every subject lost its compartmentalization, becoming integrated and integral in solving the problem. Reading, writing, arithmetic, and social studies were all blended together. Rather than using basal textbooks, the students researched pertinent information about how to solve their problem. Their search took them to texts beyond their reading level and aptitude, but they were willing to put forth the effort because it had value to their situation. While reading from Jonathan Kozol's (1992) *Savage Inequalities*, one boy appropriately remarked, "I think this book was written 'bout us. The author must of come to Carr school." And his statement was not far from the truth, as Chester documented in his expository writing,

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 . . . water leaks everywhere. And we do not even have soap or paper towels. Kids don't use the bathrooms no more since they are so gross!

Reading flowed into current events as students reacted to newspaper articles written about them. In addition, they read about techniques for par-



ticipation, which showed them how to do things like survey and petition. The students learned how to prepare documentation, including questionnaire 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.” To get more folks involved and aware, students developed a Web site to organize all the materials and artifacts they had accumulated. This was no small task as they had pictures and writing from visits of politicians and researchers, hundreds of letters written on their behalf, journal entries, petitions, charts, graphs, surveys, and analyses.

Room 405 became a headquarters to “make important decisions about who we should bring in to help,” according to one student’s journal entry. It was a think tank for investigating ways “we can better get others involved,” documented another. Transforming the classroom into a campaign office, students assumed roles of leadership in their quest, and as Jaris commented in his journal, “Being an interviewer . . . makes me feel like a business manager. It makes me feel real important and other kids look up to me. This has never happened to me in school before.” The students were so involved in the development of their curriculum they came early, left late, and even showed up on days off to get the job done.

Looking Back

Frustrated by a hidden curriculum based on social class, I was looking for a compromise that would keep my students motivated and engaged in their

learning while teaching them the necessary skills base to progress in school. Challenging the notion of teaching students differently according to their socioeconomic class, I sought the equity in teaching and learning that I so strongly felt the students deserved. My initial wondering led me to revisit essential questions with students regarding what knowledge is most worthwhile:

- Ultimately, what would happen if Room 405 at Carr Community Academy in Cabrini Green took on an experiment of our own?
- What if the teacher and students decided in an educational setting to problem-pose, challenge, and deliberate like their counterparts in affluent schools?
- Could the curriculum be driven by student interest to meet situational needs?
- Would others listen to our voices and concerns?
- What would be the consequences of our actions?
- Would we be able to go beyond following the rules and assert creative ideals?
- Could we challenge the status quo to make the curriculum of, by, and for us?
- Or, as one of the girls in the class asked, "Who's gonna listen to a bunch of Black kids from Cabrini Green?"

There was only one way to find out.

Using these questions as a framework for a democratic curriculum, and inspired by a Project Citizen workshop that promoted a curricular framework encouraging teachers and students to engage in citizen action and public policy change, I created a space for the students to embark on an experience in learning how the government works and ways in which they might become actively involved in bringing about social change. As I look back, I remember a conversation with several students in which Dyneisha summarized our work in the classroom as a "way to learn how the government works and ways to work the government." By embracing a meaningful problem, the curriculum became a catalyst for authentic, integrated learning to occur.

Through the project, the students were given the opportunity and responsibility to be active participants in the development and design of their own learning. The comments of Crown, 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 and newfound dedication to schoolwork and attendance demonstrated the power of a democratic classroom, where students were critical members encouraged to embrace their own ideas of what is worthwhile.

As their teacher, I learned that content can come from the students rather than be driven into them by artificial objectives. Just as students in the more affluent schools are encouraged and rewarded for insight and creativity, these urban, African American students could make their voices heard through purposeful action and determination.

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

We would love to get our perfect solution of getting a new school built, but we have figured out that great things can happen when you fight for what is right. . . . Even though we are not getting a new school we have done great things . . . like it said in one of the letters supporting us, "Spectacular things happen along the way!"

As I write this account several years later, I remain in contact with many former students. The curriculum we developed together has had a lasting impact on all of us. Opportunities to tell our story continue to emerge, and I often share my writing with the former students from Room 405. Going over some text with Crown, I asked, "Who am I as a White, middle-class teacher to write about you guys?" He looked me directly in the eye and said, "To me you ain't speaking outta turn because you not talkin' bad or nothin' about Black people . . . you taking they side and feelin' what they feelin'." I only hope that I can, perhaps, live up to his words.