We Make This Road as We Walk Together: Sharing Teacher Authority in a Social Action Curriculum Project

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates issues of teacher authority and student initiations in a classroom-based social action curriculum project. A teacher (the first author of this article) and his fifth-grade, African-American students conceptualized, designed, and carried out a seven-month–long integrated curriculum and campaign to lobby for a sorely needed new school building in their public-housing neighborhood. (A new school had been promised to the community six years earlier by the board of education.) In the current era of high-stakes testing, teachers are often forced to use prescriptive curricula and are certainly not advised to follow student interests or concerns, especially those teaching children living in poverty. The teacher in this study, however, opted for a curriculum designed to not only teach ideas of democracy, but to also practice direct democratic action. Throughout the article we study the particular instructional and pedagogical practices of the teacher. By analyzing the affordances of the curriculum in relation to democratic participation, we show how the curriculum engaged students in the practices of problem posing, problem solving, and decision making. Throughout the article we explore how authority for classroom process and knowledge were shared by teacher and students, and focus on opportunities the students had to direct the project and classroom curriculum.

This article presents a narrative analysis of a Chicago public school fifth-grade classroom where the teacher and his students engaged in a seven-month integrated curriculum built around a community-based social action project. In this study, we seek to document the pedagogical practices of the teacher (the first author of this paper) and to analyze the affordances

of the curriculum in relation to democratic participation. Specifically, we show how the curriculum engaged students in the practices of problem posing (Freire, 1970, 1995), problem solving, and decision making. We do this by examining the initiations and decisions that the teacher and students made because we are concerned about questions of teacher imposition in social action curricula.

DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION IN CLASSROOMS

We start with the premise that active democracies require sustained dialogue and debate. John Dewey recognized the essential role that public schools can play in teaching these habits of democratic process, stressing that a "democratic ideal must pervade the public schools" (Patterson, 1995, p. v). This is accomplished, in Dewey's view, by public schools that teach thinking processes rather than focus on memorization and acquisition of compartmentalized skills or facts. Ultimately, as Maxine Greene (1988) explains, schools can become representative of a "miniature community, an embryonic society" (p. 3), thus promoting a democratic ideal throughout the society.

In stark contrast to a rich curriculum promoting democratic decision making and authentic problem solving, the current movements for accountability and "high standards" have promoted scripted curricula and countless hours of test preparation. With the threat of school closures, teachers in poor communities are under the most pressure. The relentless focus on test scores in low-income schools often means that "minority children are more likely than their peers to spend time taking multiple choice standardized tests and to be taught a low-level curriculum designed around those tests—all in the name of 'raising standards,' of course" (Feinberg, 1997, p. 92). We are persuaded that for poor students of color "to affect change which will allow them to truly progress we must insist on 'skills' *within the context of* critical and creative thinking" (Delpit, 1995, p. 19; italics original). Furthermore, students "must be *taught* the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life, not by being forced to attend to hollow inane, decontextualized subskills, but rather within the contest of meaningful endeavors" (Delpit, 1995, p. 45; italics original).

The social action curriculum project reported here offered students the chance not to just participate in mainstream political life, but to also challenge that mainstream and engage in a concerted public campaign centered on lobbying the Chicago Board of Education to fulfill their promise to build a new school for the neighborhood. This social action curriculum project offered students a chance to make good on Dewey's (1916) definition of democracy as "a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p. 93). Although we understand teaching

democratic citizenship to be complex (and also contested), we argue that education for democracy requires citizens able to engage in data collection, data analysis, and contingently responsive action planning. Authentic social action projects provide such a venue, involving "ambiguity, contradiction, instability, and fluidity" that supports students' learning to "engender dialogue and action" (Varlotta, 1997, p. 475). By engaging in such projects in schools, teachers can scaffold the development of political and civic participation among young people (Wade & Saxe, 1996). Indeed, it has been posited that it is only within public schools that we are able to promote the type of democratic citizenry capable of working across differences toward a common good (Barber, 1984; Carlson, 1997).

Although it is accepted (and even mandated) that one of the primary missions of U.S. public schools is to prepare students to become productive citizens in a democracy, students rarely get to practice political participation as part of the normal school curriculum. Of course, students study local, state, and federal governments in various grades throughout school. They can often recite the three branches of government and may even go on a field trip to learn how to use a voting machine. Such knowledge, however, does not readily translate into civic participation (Torres, 1998).

To be an active participant in the civil and political life of a community, state, and nation requires induction into this process and knowledge of the discourses of civic participation. But what does it mean to teach good citizenship? What are the ideals sought and what are the means for attainment? Differing views on what "educating the 'good' citizen" encompasses and "the spectrum of what good citizenship is and what good citizens do" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004a, p. 1) complicate how teachers interpret (or avoid) the mandate of teaching citizenship in their classrooms. A small number of teachers are motivated to design classroom curriculum and instruction to activate their students toward such civic and political participation. They plan and execute long-term projects with their students that seek to address important social issues in local communities or in other parts of the world. Such issues may include homelessness, toxic waste and pollution, child labor, conditions for workers in garment and poultry factories, enslavement, malnutrition and hunger, health care, landmines, environmental racism, and access for people with disabilities.

Teachers fostering classroom opportunities for students to be critical readers of their world (Freire, 1970) inculcate citizenship in the school setting. This initiation into practicing citizenship is meant to provide students with the means necessary to transfer the skills in other situations and settings beyond their classroom experience. These teachers foster spaces "toward enlightened political engagement" so that students learn not only the skills necessary for democratic participation, but also engage in political action (Parker, 2001, p. 97). By promoting direct participation into civics and politics, teachers go beyond the notion of citizenship as being "personally responsible" or simply "participatory" and seek to teach students

that they are active players in curricula that is "justice oriented" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004b, p. 237). Teachers who work with students to identify and transform injustices through the curriculum promote students as agents of change. Furthermore, these educators challenge the neutrality of the typical and benign citizenship curricula commonplace in public schools in an effort to promote change as a fundamental and foundational aspect of classroom learning (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996).

Yet such teaching is not the norm. Projects that take the class outside the four walls of the school building require more time, extra planning, and resources, and also demand that teachers be willing to run the risk of being criticized. Many teachers in North America (and indeed throughout the world) strive to be neutral and objective in regard to their political commitments in the classroom. Although this is often motivated by good intentions—"In a democracy students should develop their own political beliefs"—this stance of neutrality often serves to make school curricula devoid of the very commitments that support the democratic spirit. By being afraid to be seen as acting politically, then, most teachers design school tasks lacking in civic participation.

Teachers who stimulate their students to become involved in issues of social action are supporting them to learn the skills and values of participatory democracy. These include: reaching group decisions that include minority and dissenting opinions; making action plans that take into account laws, social norms, and public relations; preparing materials to articulate the issue to fellow students and the general public; petitioning the appropriate governmental agencies; speaking with the media; making public testimony; and negotiating the conflicts that emerge at each of the preceding levels.

BYRD COMMUNITY ACADEMY

This inquiry from one urban fifth-grade class centered around a social action curriculum project focused on getting the school board to honor a promise made six years earlier to build a new school building. When prompted by the teacher to tackle an issue of importance to them, the students quickly agreed upon the need for a new school building. They had unwittingly selected a hot-button issue, as their neighborhood—known primarily for the high-rise public housing project that housed most of them—was being rapidly gentrified and the city was in the process of razing many of their homes. Would these African-American students living in public housing be the recipients of the promised new building? Or would the city wait until the neighborhood changed residents?

The shameful state of Chicago Public Schools' Byrd Community Academy truly was a pressing issue to the students, as well as to the teachers, school administrators, and community. The students were particularly

aware of its poor condition and readily identified its major shortfalls. Among the main issues the fifth-graders identified included the lack of heat in many classrooms, bathroom lavatories without working plumbing or partitions for privacy, drinking fountains that leaked water on the floor or simply did not function, and windows pocked with bullet holes and cracks. In addition to the dilapidated structure that inhibited their daily lives and safety in school, the students cited difficulty doing schoolwork because many classroom lights were broken and bulletproof plastic windows (once meant for protection from the gang crossfire in the neighborhood) had become opaque from age, allowing little natural light into the rooms. If these problems and conditions were not enough to compromise student learning, the school also lacked other essential resources: there was no lunchroom—students ate lunch in a makeshift cafeteria in the middle of a hallway; there was no gymnasium—the school borrowed a local park facility across the street; and there was no auditorium—school functions were held in yet another hallway (see Project Citizen, 2004).

Students documented these horrendous school building inadequacies via expository text and through photographs as part of a student-developed comprehensive action plan. Realizing they needed to share their findings with others to make the changes sought, they transformed their written drafts into a powerful letter (Appendix A) that was sent to school board and city officials, state and national legislators, newspaper reporters and media outfits, and other concerned citizens they felt could help them fight their cause and see the promised school building become a reality.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sparked by a curriculum workshop for *Project Citizen* (The Center for Civic Education and the Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago), the teacher invited students to join together to address the issue of their substandard school building. Neither teacher nor students had ever encountered a curriculum of such significance. In this article, we use the teacher's narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, 1990) to examine how teacher authority is shared (Oyler, 1996) within a social action curriculum project. We conceptualize teacher authority along two dimensions: process and content. As Peters (1966) notes, a teacher is *an* authority regarding some aspect of our culture and is *in* authority to accomplish the task of teaching. Essentially, the former side of authority is the content dimension—what counts as knowledge and who is a "knower"; whereas the latter is more of a process dimension—controlling the flow of traffic and talk in the classroom. These, of course, are interwoven and interdependent. According to Stubbs (1976), "There is no way in which maintaining social control and transmitting knowledge can be strictly separated. In the classroom, we have a quite specific case where 'knowledge is power'" (p. 95). Further, we

understand authority to be "enacted through dynamic negotiations between teachers and students" (Pace & Hemmings, 2006, p. 2).

We understand teacher authority as not only multidimensional (process and content) and dynamic (negotiated with students), but also that authority and power are not commodities that can be shared. Oyler (1996) has explained that "for a teacher to share authority is not like sharing a cookie, where if half is given away, only half is left. Rather, when a teacher shares authority, power is still being deployed and circulating, but perhaps in different—and potentially more covert—ways. . . . Sharing authority, then, is much more than just offering activity choices; rather, it requires that teacher and students develop and negotiate a common destination or agenda" (p. 23). By sharing classroom authority for what counts as knowledge and how classroom work will be accomplished, the teacher actually gains more authority through student participation. (This project in Brian's classroom offers ample illustrations of this idea.)

Our work here emerges from and is grounded in several other methodological and theoretical frameworks. First, we understand curriculum as lived experience (Schubert, 1986; van Manen, 1977) and as ongoing interactions among students, teacher, and contexts. Curriculum enactments (Zumwalt, 1988, 1989) are not detailed in lesson plans but are events with multiple purposes. Second, our orientation toward curriculum inquiry arises from our commitments to cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996), and studying one's own school through practitioner and teacher research (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Rather than seeking "objective" truth about these curriculum events, we seek to understand the multiple perspectives that students, the teacher, and a university-based researcher brought to the research project and to the classroom by thinking "of our own experience as a text" through narrative personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin 1988, p. 213).

Third, our understanding of community action projects is that they are inherently political, as are all curriculum events. Rather than viewing this social action curriculum project as a neutral teaching tool, our analysis of teacher authority (Oyler, 1996) seeks to understand how the outside political climate, school and district politics, and the politics inside the classroom interacted with student and teacher authority in the day-to-day curriculum decision making of the project.

This research project began with the classroom teacher's own inquiries into the social action curriculum project he was conducting with students in his classroom (Schultz, 2005). His inquiries were framed in large part by Schwab's notion of practical inquiry (1969) and arts of eclectic (1971). Particularly, the teacher was influenced by practical inquiry and eclectic arts to match and subsequently adapt a plurality of theoretical knowledge and perspectives to student needs and interests. By tailoring curricula to the needs, wants, and desires of his students, the teacher develops the

capacity to generate alternative courses of action in the classroom space, thus, being able to achieve teaching and learning in context and aspire to have moral goodness in daily activities and interaction with his students (Schubert, 1986). The university-based researcher (as part of a larger project, collecting seven other cases) contacted the teacher and received permission to spend a week in his fifth-grade classroom near the end of the school year as the project was coming to a close. Data collected by both researchers include classroom discourse collected during one week of the seven-month unit; semistructured interviews conducted with the teacher, community members, and the students; focus groups conducted separately with community members and administrators; student work samples spanning the length of the project; and a daily teacher reflective journal maintained throughout the project.

Although all of the data we collected will eventually be used for the larger study, this article draws upon the teacher's own narrative inquiry (Schultz, 2005). We present our data and analysis in the form of a narrative split text (Blumenfeld-Jones & Barone, 1997; Lather & Smithies, 1997; Oyler, 2001): arranging Brian's teacher narrative of highlights from the social action curriculum project at top of the text box and our joint analysis/reflections on the bottom. The story of this seven-month integrated curriculum is complex and to be understood must be told in a linear fashion. Yet, the dilemmas of teacher and student authority are situated in very specific pedagogical moments, so they must be analyzed in situ. Thus, our analysis did not begin when we sat down to craft this article but began for Brian in the act of teaching. Temporality is challenged here: some analysis took place late at night before the instructional event even occurred, as Brian tossed restlessly in bed, agonizing over matters of teacher authority.

Since Brian is studying his own teaching practice, there are obvious limitations to the inquiry. Understanding that narrative storytelling inherently will be subjective, both the teacher and the university researcher draw on their differing perspectives to provide insight, discussion, and analysis that are rigorous and trustworthy. In telling the narrative vignettes in the following split text, Brian drew from multiple data sources: student classroom artifacts, student talk and writing, public documentation, and reflective journaling by both the teacher and students. This plurality of data was triangulated by Brian to corroborate the narrative storytelling in his account. Consciously, Brian makes an effort to have the student participants' voices prominent in the split-text narratives where appropriate, but acknowledges that if one of his students were to tell the story, it may be very different than the following account.

We aim, therefore, in this work to draw upon the experiences, memories, and reflections of the teacher (using the data sources available to him through the experience) to wrestle with questions of power and imposition that circulate within all classrooms at all times, but that become particularly

charged when students take social action outside the walls of the classroom. How do teachers who want to engage in such work decide when to step in and when to step back? What do they do when they want students to figure out things for themselves, but suspect that certain paths would not be productive? What dilemmas may arise that the teacher did not even foresee? And finally, when the stakes are so real and so important to the community, which pedagogical decisions affect the final outcome for the very lives of the students? These are some of the questions that continue to propel our collaborative inquiries about social action curriculum and shared authority.

"This Ain't No Schoolwork": Project Citizen Begins

(December) The noise level amplified in Room 405. The fifth-grade students shouted out ideas as I quickly tried to keep up with their growing list. The intensity was beyond measurement as students called out problems that affected them: "teenage pregnancy," "litter in the park," even "stopping Michael Jackson!" A lot of the problems had to do with the school: "foggy windows pocked with bullet holes," "no lunchroom, gym, or auditorium," "clogged toilets," and "broken heaters in the classroom." Before it was all said and done, these fifth-graders had identified 89 different problems that affected them and their community, a challenge I had posed to them just an hour prior. 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[1] 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."

I put the school building as the main problem in the middle of the white board. I asked the kids to name the main problems they felt were associated with the building. Based on the previous session of coming up with problems, they were pretty eager to brainstorm their ideas. There was a sense of urgency in their voices as they called out the various subtopics or reasons their school was a dump. Each student participated and provided their insight as their ideas were belted out. Most of them knew these problems well. Some of them even knew them more personally than others, having spent time at nicer, newer, more comfortable schools. It was great to be at the board; by the end of the web generations there were 12 main subtopics. A teacher passing by the room commented to the students, "I have never seen you guys so excited about schoolwork." And a quick reply was snapped back at him, "This ain't no schoolwork, this is important."

Project Citizen began with identifying a problem the students wanted to solve. This fit perfectly with Brian's notion that the role of the teacher is to provide opportunity and space for students to ask important questions and engage in knowledge pursuits that have meaning for their lives. The start-up of the project involved much room for students to initiate for

both process (who talks and to whom) and content (what the problem-focus would be). This sharing of authority resulted in rich cross-talk (Lemke, 1990) among peers as they worked to achieve consensus on which problem to tackle.

The intensity to develop this conceptual map, a graphic organizer, of the problems in the school would have most likely been considered out of hand by many other teachers in the building. Although it looked chaotic and out of control, the students were exhibiting passion and fervor that Brian had never before witnessed. The kids were very excited. They were intent on making their complaints loud and clear, and the teacher was forced to wrestle with what was acceptable and what was crossing the line in the classroom. He wanted to hear them and for them to have authority, but at the same time, wanted to remain in charge and in control. He was scared to give them too much freedom because he didn't know what might happen.

Yet underlying all this work it is essential to also see that the teacher's knowledge of graphic organizers is a process dimension that he shared with the class as a more expert member of the community. Although the students had content knowledge that made them experts on their community and the problem they wanted to target, the teacher brought his expertise to the group's knowledge and thus helped them focus their thinking and also learn a new technique.

"Figuring Out Who's Runnin' the Show"

(January) Several class periods were spent trying to better understand local government. Together, we did some preliminary research to find out who was "running the show." We made a mock organizational chart depicting who we thought were "the decision makers to getting a new school." Several of the students also realized that we needed the support of both the local administration and the Local School Council (LSC). One student was eager to bring up that his uncle was an LSC member and he could interview him. Another student offered to talk to the alderman. A third student said that he knew Jesse White, the Secretary of State, from his local tumbling team. They all had great ideas and seemed eager enough to get the ball rolling, but nothing happened—nothing. Due to this initial student interest, I had built in time for Project Citizen during the school day. As the students offered ideas but were not acting on them, we sat in the room during this time and faced each other, doing nothing to further the project.

I prodded several students (to no avail) to contact people they knew and conduct interviews to learn more information. After several days Tyrone—one of the quietest boys in the room—approached another teacher at lunch. His sister had this teacher the previous year and he knew that the teacher was a representative on the LSC. It had taken Tyrone several weeks to get up the courage and the drive to

begin the interview process. He arranged a time to interview him and then approached me about being excused from class. At last somebody was taking action! I was excited! Tyrone met with the teacher and returned with a page and a half of notes based on an interview template he had pulled from his Project Citizen workbook.

Later in the same day, as we were coming back from gym class, I saw the LSC president. I told a couple of the students that he was there and immediately four or five of them ran up to him requesting an interview. They turned to me for guidance but I pushed back on them to figure out when, where, how, etc. They decided on a time the next day to have him come for an interview. Jaris also decided to show the LSC president our work, and he became interested immediately. He requested copies of the papers. The kids arranged it so that they would be given to him the next day.

After the initial brainstorming session, Brian was unsure how to proceed. The project did not seem to be gaining any momentum. How hard should he push? At what point would it not be a student-led project? How could he share authority when they showed so little initiative?

He had several different ideas regarding the direction of the project, but wanted the students to be more decisive. If he got too involved in the decisions, he was going to taint the student-directed project. Holding back on his part was something that was hard to do. He felt conflicted as a teacher who wanted the students to practice democratic decision making, but he also had expertise that could be helpful. This conflict presents an issue of tension between process and content authority: Should he allow for student-led decision making (process) or share his content knowledge and carefully guide the students about what their next steps should be?

"Tellin' Our Teacher What to Do"

(February) After a month of informal discussion, I finally asked the students how they felt about working with Project Citizen in a more formal manner. We were sitting in the freezing-cold classroom, and it was a bit noisy. Earlier in the morning we had read the thermometer and had plotted the temperature on a graph in the front of the room. The nine a.m. temperature was 59°. This was a significant change from the previous day's reading of almost 80°. According to this running chart in the room, the temperature had been fluctuating between the high 50s and low 80s for the past month. Despite not having everyone's full attention, several students started a formal discussion on the issues related to the project. I decided to take the discussion to the computer lab where we could have an online journal session. I thought that by changing the venue, I could alter the dynamic in the classroom so that everyone would participate. I was hoping that I could still capture the essence of the discussion in their writing, so we could react

and respond to each other without losing the students who were driven to partici-
pate in the original discussion.

Excerpts from their journals (as they appeared in their original form):

Jaris: I think this is the best project becasue I do not have to do what the techer want
to do. I feel that this project is great because the kids get to say we they feel and what
they think. And that is great because most techer get to tell what the kids got to do
and how to do it.

Tyrone: We can tell the teachers what they messed up and telling them what they
do wronge. I like the fact we can tell the teachers what we want. Usually in school
we have to do a lot of work but in the morning it is all about us. Kids are making
it because we get to tell the teacher what to do. It is fun beacuse of that reason too.

Tavon: We get to show people the problem with things that we think that is
important. I am exited about this part because I think that I can make my school
a better place by writing letters.

Shaniqua: I am excited about doing the writing house and post it. And our
mentors read them and give us feedback and we write them back. Then we keep on
writing stories and they keep checking them for us so that when other people read
them they will have the corrections on them. There are problems with the commu-
nity that kids can fix.

Dyneisha: It's a good thing that my teacher has us doing this, but gusse what? He
is not even telling us to do this. We took this big chance on are own and now we
have to finsh it on are own. And we are doing a good job so far and I think we
could do it and we are.

I think this is a good thing because if we make a mistack and are teacher do not
tell use we have a mentor and they will give us feed back on it and tell use how we
did and if it don't sound write and will tell use if we need to make changes.

Kamala: The kids in my classroom get to pick want to do.

Here the teacher can be seen claiming his pedagogical authority for
democratic goals. Having expert knowledge in participation structures
and knowing that is was important for everyone to participate (rather
than just the most vocal students), Brian decided to move to the com-
puter lab. Thus, the teacher is more expert in classroom dynamics
and responsible for getting everyone involved (process dimension). To
create truly democratic decision making required the teacher to exert
influence and expertise and tell students what to do.

Upon reading the students' journal entries, it is quite clear that being
able to direct the classroom process ("tell the teacher what to do") is
quite important to the students. Thus, although the teacher is obviously
exerting pedagogical authority, the students feel direct ownership of the
content and the process as well. Dyneisha even appreciates the teacher
not telling them their mistakes, but having the online mentor as a
support for editing. Here, we can also see the invisible pedagogical
authority of the teacher: It is Brian who has set up the mentors as a way
to get extra help for the students. His overt authority is decentered here,

but his expertise as a pedagogue is what is responsible for this student-preferred participation structure.

"Can We Talk 'Bout Blackness?"

(February) The class thought they could gather more information about getting a new school in Chicago by interviewing folks who had been around the community for a while. Jaris and Dyneisha arranged for Reverend Tinter—an African-American community member and president of Byrd Community Academy's LSC—to come to our class for our first interview. We were able to role-play and mock the entire interview. Everyone paid attention as I modeled with two boys how to set up a real interview and guide the responses. They were all very attentive and interested in the process. Together, the class thought the best way to approach the interview would be to have the two students sit in the center of the room with the person being interviewed and the rest of the class assembled around the triad. One student appropriately commented it would be easier to catch everything the person says if one person asked questions and the other took notes. Another student mentioned this would be good because if one kid got scared the other could help out. Instead of having Dyneisha interview, she decided that she wanted Demetrius to have the opportunity to be the interviewer along with Jaris. As we continued on with the practice session, Jaris even took notes during our mock interviews so that he could ask some more probing or pertinent questions of Reverend Tinter. He asked if he could talk about blackness and that being a reason why they were not getting the school.

The fact that Jaris wanted to bring up race as the reason for the school inequities showed how aware he was of the current disparity of schools in poor communities. And that this student asked permission from the teacher to address the topic demonstrated Jaris's understanding of two different but interrelated aspects of power. First, he understood that the teacher served as the ultimate gatekeeper of classroom discourse (and therefore knowledge permitted). Second, he understood that the politics of race and racism in this country positioned his White teacher differently than the African-American guest interviewee and fifth-grade students. A White teacher—even one deeply committed to anti-racist work—is still positioned as "less expert." It was important that Brian followed this student initiation, assuring the class that this project was being directed by their ideas. Thus, the teacher sent a strong message that student content authority had a legitimate role in the classroom.

Students can be seen strongly directing the process dimension of this interview: self-selecting roles they would play; deciding how the room would be set up and giving each other feedback. The teacher stepped back and allowed students to figure out how best to interview. Because the teacher had expertise in this area, he suggested the mock interview

to allow the students to sort out how it could work best for them. He followed their initiation about how to set up the classroom.

With Much Trepidation and Humility: Finding Ways to Put on Pressure

(February–March) One day, the students pointedly asked me, "How's we 'posed to get this new school?" In reality, just like the students, I was also questioning how to get the job accomplished and I wanted to learn from their insights. 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, "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."

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?" I had some ideas, but my conceptualization remained as vague as that of my students. 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. Here, however, they saw that the problem was too large and needed to have several prongs for their efforts to be worthwhile.

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, the Board of Education, and corporate friends of the school. The initial list included the alderman, the Illinois secretary of state, activist Jesse Jackson, the president of the Chicago school board, the head of the Chicago school building commission, and local legislators. 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. There was also discussion about getting on the various Chicago television stations with their story.

The list of "Ways to put on pressure" was specific, targeted, and comprehensive. It included ideas such as survey kids, survey teachers and staff, get a petition, interview people with power in the community, write letters to the legislature, hold a press conference, and do a documentary video with the help of school staff.

At this juncture in the project, Brian entered uncharted terrain for himself as a classroom leader. He did not know what strategies would be

most effective and had never done an organizing project before. However, he did have more expert knowledge in one area: he knew the action plan needed multiple prongs. He also had specific classroom process knowledge working for him: he knew 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. Brian also realized that some students may have ideas he didn't have of ways to influence change in their community. He was willing to listen and follow their lead.

Without My Knowledge: Inviting Outsiders Into the Classroom

(March) Tavon was set on putting together a video documentary and had rallied several classmates to want one as well. As he stated in his journal, "I think making a documentary video because it is a great thing to do. I think this is important because I can show somebody important and they can tell somebody else and I can get a whole thing started." There was a problem with his ambitious idea: I really could not offer him guidance in creating a video. I encouraged him to reach out to the teacher who headed up the video club at school, as I had no video background. After making several attempts at getting this other teacher involved to no avail, Tavon gave up on him. Without my knowledge, he e-mailed someone he thought could help with the idea. He had met Karen Percak previously from several visits with the Collaboratory Project[2] and promptly told her, "We want to make a video documentary. Will you come to our school to help us? We know you are good at them." Without hesitation, Karen visited the class within the week and worked with several students to teach the process of developing their own video documentary.

In the video project students had more knowledge and skills than the teacher did. The group taught the teacher about the process of making a video. It was because of Tavon's initiation that the video project was conceptualized, and when he later hit a roadblock, the student figured out how to get the outside expertise he needed. In this pedagogical interaction, the teacher became a student—a student of his student. Brian scaffolded the opportunity for students seeking assistance from others beyond the immediate school community at the beginning of the project when he waited for students to find people to interview and then insisted that the students set up the details themselves. Thus, through careful teacher decision making, classroom authority expanded to include the wider community. With students making individual and collective initiations to invite outsiders into the classroom, we see an unusual degree of student ownership of the curriculum and of classroom process.

"Them Pizza Things" and Space for Falling Forward

(March) *"We need to have them pizza things, Mr. Schultz," called out LeAlan. I tried to clarify what he meant but with no success. As I looked quizzically at LeAlan, Reggie blurted out, "You mean pie charts?" As it turned out, Reggie understood what LeAlan wanted. But I was curious if LeAlan or any of his classmates knew why they would be important. "Why would we want to have pie charts?" I asked. LeAlan explained we needed to have them " 'cause they important." "The newspapers use them for proving things, we know they important and they can help us get a new school so we's got to have 'em." "We can make those when we do the surveys," Reggie commented.*

A survey group quickly got to work with the student teacher while I went to the computer lab with another group. When I got back to the classroom, Reggie was already printing it out. I looked at it and immediately realized its flaw: it was open-ended questions, which would be impossible to graph. However, before I could even talk about the survey with the class, Dyneisha and Shaniqua had already collected a stack of surveys from the printer and asked permission to take them to the fourth graders. I hesitated and then assented.

Not too much later, the girls returned triumphantly with the results. Tavon pointedly questioned how they were going "to show all them answers?" Stumped by the question, the girls looked to the creator of the questions, Reggie, but he, too, had no answers. This was a perfect learning experience: they were going to discover how to develop a survey so that they could make "them pizza things" in the form of charts and graphs with the answers. The room sat silently for what seemed like several minutes and then, Reggie realized "If we had multiple-choice answers to each question we would be able make pie charts from the results." This was great problem solving: The class had collided with an obstacle but was willing to try and overcome it. Collectively, they found the problem, put their heads together, and solved it!

In much classroom work, it is relatively easy to let students learn from trial and error. However, in the context of an authentic project—especially a project with high stakes and high visibility—the teacher took quite a risk when he allowed the survey to go out without revision. Brian calls this "falling forward" which refers to both student and teacher moving into unknown territory. So many times in classroom knowledge development the teacher is certain about how things will turn out. Yet in this situation, the teacher abandoned all expertise for both process and content and went out on a limb, trusting that the need to make the "pizza things" would be strong. Having a real need to figure out how to design survey questions so they could be tallied and graphed, and having the classroom process space to work collectively on a solution resulted in a breakthrough learning experience for the students.

The People Downtown Have Listened

> *(April–May) Each day after spring break, there were major renovations happening at the school, "Sidewalks outside the building were repaired. Water fountains inside began to work. New light bulbs suddenly brightened classrooms" (Gewertz, 2004, p. 9). Although the class had not been contacted by any of the decision makers from the School Board or the City of Chicago, they were seeing changes in the school. The third graders were running down the hall with their hands all lathered up, shouting "we've got soap, we've got soap" and there were workers fixing the lighting, the telephone lines, and the doors. There was work being done to Byrd.*
>
> *The engineer had come to Room 405 to tell the students about one of the most significant changes that was about to occur: "The windows at Byrd Academy are all going to be replaced! I have been asking the Board to fix these horrible foggy windows for many years. Nobody has listened. Now because of you kids getting involved and demanding the changes, the people downtown have listened. The changes are because of all your hard work. I am, and you should be, very proud of yourselves."*

> It is difficult to write the real ending of Room 405's attempts to get a new school built for themselves. Our Hollywood ending includes the billboard proclaiming, "Future Home of the New Byrd Academy" being taken down as the bulldozers break ground on the foundation for the new school. In real life, however, Byrd was closed by the Chicago Board of Education (and had been secretly slated to be closed since the previous school year).
>
> What does it mean that these children worked so hard and saw so many adults from inside and outside their community respond to their pleas for social justice? What does it mean that they met all sorts of activists and politicians and elected officials? What does it mean that students learned to do research, write and circulate petitions, make speeches, lobby the government, speak to the press, wage a campaign, and start a community struggle?

SHARING AUTHORITY FOR SOCIAL ACTION

Throughout the life of this project, Brian's pedagogical decisions related to teacher authority must be understood within a constellation of factors. The ones that are most salient in this case include the racial and class positionings of teacher and students in the context of gentrification, high-stakes testing and prescriptive curricula, and the hypervisibility this project generated in terms of local, national, and international media attention.

Certainly, this study offers a story of democracy in action: Students researched a problem important to them, investigated alternatives and developed a comprehensive and multifaceted plan to solve the problem they deeply cared about (Schubert, 1995). Structuring the classroom in this manner honored Freire's call for participatory research between students and their teacher (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994). Students were active participants in their project, engaging skills necessary in a participatory democracy. And in so doing, the fifth-graders learned to persuasively express their ideas in letters and e-mails, make petitions, survey and analyze data, present, and even testify to governing bodies and civic organizations in order that their push for justice be heard. The students spoke to and influenced elected officials; they also garnered support from the community. They visually represented the issues and orally articulated the problem to gain support from citizens about their cause. These young citizens learned how to frame questions about the legitimacy of the identified problem as they figured out how to set up press releases, influence community organizations and local news agencies in an effort to bring attention to their identified issue so that substantive change could result from their efforts (Pace & Hemmings, 2006). Furthermore, democratic ideals and participation were visible when they sought help from the community and outsiders with more expertise in order to help in areas where students lacked skills or were not experienced. As this classroom community of learners sought out the knowledge, assistance, and collaboration from others to reach their goal, authority was shared at multiple levels from apprenticeship to guided participation and discovery to participatory appropriation where students sought outsider expertise while at the same time becoming expert themselves (Brown & Campione, 1996; Rogoff, 1993, 1995). The full story will be told in a book-length format, but for the purposes of this article, we are eager to delineate how authority was shared in this project and then explore specific issues of teacher authority within this social action curriculum.

SHARING AUTHORITY IN THE SOCIAL ACTION CURRICULUM PROJECT

Using the narrative inquiry and subsequent split-text reflections, it is easy to see multiple occasions where classroom authority was shared to positive outcomes for both students and teacher. Central to understanding this sharing of authority is the creation of a joint project that had meaning for both students and teacher. The initiation was the teacher's (prompted by his orientations toward curriculum and facilitated by the Project Citizen workshop), and the offer to address a local problem resonated with the students. Students were provided an opportunity to have school work rise beyond conventional classroom assignments (or test preparation) and

address an issue of great concern. Although initially motivated to focus on the problems of the school building, these young students needed the prompting and the scaffolding of the teacher to get started.

In turn, the teacher initially relied upon the process outlined in the Project Citizen curriculum, including having students interview people with knowledge of the problem and then eventually developing an action plan. After some initial hesitation in getting started, the students embraced the challenge of conducting interviews with key decision makers and even negotiated the process of how to conduct the interviews with the teacher (Boomer, Lester, Onore, & Cook, 1992). Here, then, we can see the intricate dance of shared authority that Oyler (1996) describes where sometimes the teacher leads and the students follow and sometimes the students lead and the teacher follows. Using the curriculum from Project Citizen inserts an extra dance partner into the mix; the teacher deftly chooses the parts of the outside curriculum he deemed most relevant, but at the same time realizes its limitations and uses his knowledge to include teaching students the other skills (e.g., various graphic organizers). The teacher moves back and forth from classroom to computer lab and to the integration of online writing mentors and use of the technology tool of the Collaboratory Project to scaffold this classroom venture, "falling forward" into the unknown.

It is significant for questions of teacher authority that this was unknown territory for the teacher as well as the students. In authentic projects where the curriculum is negotiated between its participants—such as community-based social action curriculum projects—the teacher does not know the outcome of the inquiry, but allows for unforeseen and incidental learning to occur (Boomer et al., 1992). In so many other curriculum areas, the teacher is almost always positioned as most-expert knower. Even in curriculum that is designed to be inquiry based, the key concepts and skills to be learned by students are most often already fully known to the teacher. Here, however, we have an example of inquiry-based curriculum where the final outcome and even steps along the way are not only unknown to the students, but are also unknown to the teacher. It is precisely here that the teacher's authority as a pedagogue becomes most salient and "the character of the interactions between the teachers and students in the classroom" is paramount (Wills, 2006, p. 60).

Although not knowing the outcome of the process and project, Brian skillfully led his young charges through various classroom interactions that were structured to provide opportunities for democratic deliberation, problem posing, and problem solving. We see this repeatedly in the narrative presented in the split text. Students had opportunities to engage in cross-talk (Lemke, 1990) and consensus decision making and multiple opportunities were created to ensure that every student had a vehicle for entering into the decision making. Yet when students went off in directions the teacher had not predicted, he deliberately followed their lead. This was

easy to do when the students came up with ideas that Brian deemed worthy, such as suggestions for people to interview that he had no knowledge from prior experiences. In these situations, classroom authority came to be the "property of interaction, constituted by the active work of all involved regardless of the position" either the teacher or the students held (Mulloly & Varenne, 2006, p. 63).

Letting students follow their own initiations became much more complicated, however, when the children pursued data collection that could go nowhere. When the students decided to make "them pizza things"—pie charts—they did not yet understand how to collect data with forced-choice answers. This is a critical decision moment for any teacher; in the context of a real-life/high-stakes project, should the teacher knowingly allow learners to waste time pursuing a route that he knows will be doomed to failure? As we can see from this example, the students quickly realized their mistake and were able—on their own—to solve the problem.

We want to argue here that in all curricula there are multiple opportunities for teachers to share authority with students, but that in a social action curriculum, the decisions around both process and content dimensions of authority become sharply foregrounded. We can see this quite clearly in all the examples from the split text, but most poignantly in the interchange when Jaris asks permission from the teacher to "talk about blackness." Here, the student is negotiating entry of content authority into the classroom floor (Cazden, 1988). Jaris displays sophisticated knowledge about different dimensions of politics: the politics of racism and school funding (Kozol, 1992, 2005); the politics of White teachers and African-American students interacting in public school classrooms (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Noblit, 1993); and the micro-politics of constraints and who decides what content is admissible into classroom discussion (Boomer, 1992).

The ensuing classrooms discussion about the racial politics of Chicago's school system, housing segregation, and gentrification of the neighborhood positioned Brian as an outsider with African-American students and adult classroom guests (Howard, 1999). At this point in the curriculum, then, the teacher's willingness to share authority by following the students' lead positions him as an active ally of the African-American community's struggle. It is significant to note that this actually increases the teacher's authority (he gains expertise and he also gains increasing trust and respect as a White person able to frankly address matters of racism and oppression). This follows Oyler's (1996) assertion that by sharing authority, teachers quite often actually gain authority, thus illustrating Foucault's (1980) notion that power is not a commodity, not held as possessions, and is not a zero-sum gain.

Tracking student initiations provides easy access to analyze instances where students and teacher shared authority for classroom process and knowledge. In addition to the content focus on racial politics, another

powerful example is provided when Tavon decided the class needed a documentary and contacted a videographer to assist them. It is instructive that Tavon, unlike Jaris, did not seek teacher permission before initiating the help of the expert. By this point in the project, it was clear to students that outside experts and help was not only needed, but was celebrated and seizing process authority was a common occurrence.

We understand this opportunity for students to actually participate as full decision makers alongside the teacher as very significant to provide a rich preparation for poor children to become full members of a democratic society. For us as researchers, the power of the students to truly and fully participate in running this project was illustrated when they discussed whether to grant this article's second author access to the classroom for research purposes. Celia, upon hearing of the class project on the National Public Radio show "This American Life" (Glass, 2004), contacted Brian, explained her research project collecting cases of social action curriculum projects, and asked to come spend a week in his classroom. He explained to her that the students would have to vote on it. Celia wrote an e-mail directly to the students requesting permission to come. After a class discussion, they decided that if she had pets, they could trust her. Celia received this e-mail (excerpted here):

We have some questions for you. Where are you going to stay when you are here? What do you want us to call you? What is the name of the camera person? Are you still teaching? Do you like New York City? Do you have any pets?

We are excited about your ideas. And thank you for the compliments.

Sincerely,

Demetrius and Artell
On behalf of the other students in Room 405
Richard E. Byrd Community Academy

Celia passed the scrutiny of these fifth-graders and was granted permission to visit in late May. Various other adults, however, including one running for statewide office, were denied permission by the students.

This incident can be read as a cute story of a group of 10- and 11-year-olds using pet caretaking as a litmus test for determining which adults should be trusted. We, however, think of this story as more than that. By sharing authority for critical decision making—in this case gatekeeping—the teacher sent a powerful message to his class: "This project is ours and we must decide together how to proceed. I have not worked out the details, but we are making this road as we walk together" (Horton & Freire, 1991; Machado, 1912/1998).

This opportunity to truly be a learner alongside (or even behind) one's students requires a great deal of trust and vulnerability on the part of the teacher. This is true for all teaching, but is heightened in social action

curriculum projects when the teacher is not an experienced community organizer or political activist. One of the key features of social action curricula is that skills of activism and organizing are explicitly taught (Epstein & Oyler, 2006). This is highly visible in Brian's class when students develop an action plan, conduct surveys, identify decision makers in the community, interview community members in positions of influence, write letters to elected and nonelected officials, develop and circulate petitions, write and deliver public speeches, contact the media, and create campaign materials (to see the student-developed Web site with these artifacts, go to http://www.projectcitizen405.com).

Although it is evident that Brian is a teacher who values and implements democratic practices in his classroom, he readily stated in a research interview with Celia that he had never been an activist. Even though this campaign to get a new school built was a massive community-organizing project, the teacher had no direct experiences upon which he could draw. Such a stance of co-learner offers distinct pedagogical advantages (as we outlined above) but in the context of a social action project, presents a set of ethical and practical dilemmas about how far to encourage or permit the project to go. Turning again to Oyler's earlier work on teacher authority (Oyler & Becker, 1997), we can see that sharing authority here does not mean abdicating authority. In some versions of progressive education, sharing authority with students is understood as the teacher should step aside and allow students to make the decisions. We do not consider this a wise stance, and are keen to notice how Brian remained a member of the classroom as decisions were being made. At many times he exerted a great deal of pedagogical authority; at other times his authoritative knowledge that he was a White teacher who needed to learn from the community allowed him to step aside and follow his students' lead.

STUDENTS AS CURRICULARISTS

When a teacher allows for the students to be active participants in the research and creation of the curriculum, worthwhile outcomes and processes occur (Schubert, 1995). Students often do not have much say or decision-making authority in their classroom space in the current age of high-stakes testing and development of outside standards. If and when a classroom invites students to work with their teacher to focus on meaningful work that relates to their daily lives and struggles, both teacher and students alike may find schooling to be enriching, motivating, and enlightening.

Students are capable thinkers and know their needs best; they can be curricularists. With a facilitating educator, the students can realize their hopes and dreams and figure out what is most important to them through the development of "curriculum of ME" (Ayers, 2001, p. 73). They can

learn how to get their needs met by actively participating in the process of figuring out how to solve authentic problems. Unfortunately, classrooms, especially in schools serving marginalized neighborhoods, often do not allow for students to be creative in this way. Students need to have the opportunity to figure out the world around them, and curriculum can be a vehicle for student explorations, truly allowing it to be more genuine for them since it is created of and by them (Schubert & Lopez Schubert, 1981).

If authority in the classroom can be shared so that students are able to participate in the curriculum development, democratic principles can be fostered and realized in the classroom community. As teachers, we need to nurture our students to become thoughtful citizens, capable of participating in the classroom as well as becoming active agents in making change in our democracy (Butin 2003; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004a). Students who are given this type of responsibility have a stake in their learning, subsequently dedicating themselves to not only the products of the classroom, but also to the inherent processes of what it takes to get things done. Students can then take this attitude and approach beyond the classroom and understand that they are capable decision makers who are able to make sense of their world. In addition, if the classroom curriculum follows the needs, wants, and desires of its students, teachers are afforded the opportunity to learn from and with their student counterparts. Together, the learning community of educators and students can learn and discover from one another.

Teachers who open their classrooms to social action projects always run the risk of imposing their own values, politics, and desires on the students. (This is, of course, true for all curriculum, but becomes publicly visible when the curriculum extends beyond the four walls of the classroom.) The idea of imposition can be negotiated with attention to making sure there is dialogue and deliberation in the classroom. Teachers can best understand the needs of their students by asking them questions, listening to their responses, and allowing the children, in turn, to pose questions back. This classroom constantly adapted based on the problems that were posed and raised by the students. Much of what was accomplished during the year was not based on any past experiences that Brian ever had, but was a direct result of the students engaging with the ideas that seemed most relevant and interesting to them. Examples from this study show that the teacher had never done the activities that they engaged in together, but was willing to be alongside his students as they learned together. There was a great deal of humility that Brian needed to accept in order to grow in his role as a teacher, for he had to become open to build the relationships with his students and allow them to bring ideas in from the outside.

To fully understand each other, educators also need to realize that there is a constant interplay between themselves and their students as well as all the materials of the curriculum and all of the contextual factors of the environment and the community (Boomer et al., 1992). By negotiating

among each of these, the educators and the students can find the curriculum and classroom space a place that can be stimulating and worthy of their time and energy. Instead of the teacher presenting a situation of "received knowledge," the teacher and students can discover the knowledge and experiences together.

NEGOTIATING CONSEQUENCES: RISKS FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

In social action curriculum, risks for teachers and risks for students potentially multiply. Teachers who teach against the norms and allow their classrooms to become integrated and based on the students' priority concerns may wittingly or unwittingly put themselves into the line of fire. Teachers who permit their classrooms to be driven by the students must understand that they may be challenged by other teachers and by the administration of their school or district. In Brian's case, he felt a moral obligation to allow students to have a stake in the curricular decisions of the classroom. He was willing to face critique as it presented itself during the course of the school year and beyond. Other teachers interested in engaging in this sort of classroom should be aware of the potential risks and finger-pointing that may exist as a result.

Further, there are certainly risks for students when the curriculum is driven by them in an effort to solve authentic curriculum problems. The students lose the protection of contrived lesson plans and the interaction with the real world can be problematic. Not only is there the doubt presented by some who do not think young students (especially those of color) are capable, there are real threats of exploitation when the curriculum goes beyond the four walls of a classroom. Other people may want to use the students for their own personal gains, and the learning experience can be at the students' expense.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR A COUNTER-NARRATIVE

The construction of a classroom based on democratic participation and community action allows for a counter-narrative to be produced. The curriculum that was enacted by these particular fifth-graders allowed the students to use their voices in a purposeful way that forced them to be heard. Their message beyond the classroom was clear and went against what was typically thought about for students growing up an infamous, central city housing project. The curriculum that centered on the students' needs engaged them in civic and social action and showed that they were truly concerned about where and how they learned. It went against many of

the stereotypes common to urban Black children growing up in public housing. In many ways, the project opened the eyes of the broader community and offered them an invitation into the world of the students at Byrd Community Academy. The social action curriculum showed intelligent young citizens who care for themselves, their families, and their community.

Curriculum based on students' priority concerns can have a lasting effect on the students involved, and can also shape our world. Students interested in making their world a better place motivate themselves as well as increase the awareness of the inequity in schooling via their actions. Politicians and the media become aware of these needs, and ordinary citizens rise to the occasion. These students were successfully able to show their fortitude and their promise. They were able to prove to the outside world, the world beyond the square mile of the housing project, that they are worth everyone's sincerest attention. Most important, though, the counter-narrative the project afforded allowed them to see for themselves their multitude of abilities, intelligences, imaginations, and worth. Our hope is that this counter-narrative has a lasting effect on the students, and their sense that they too can have access to the promises of democracy.

It remains impossible to know how this seven-month social action curriculum project will be understood by the students in Room 405 as they reach the age of full citizenship. We like to imagine, however, that as the buildings of Cabrini Green are torn down, as the Starbucks proliferate, and gourmet food shops abound, that the former Room 405 students will walk proudly as Chicago residents past the site of their old school building and recount for their families and friends a year when they spoke back to the world in wise and wondrous ways.

APPENDIX A

February 20, 2004

To Whom It May Concern:

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 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 there is 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 are 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 (of the Chicago Board of Education and City of Chicago) 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 your time and interest.

Respectfully yours,

The Fifth-graders in Room 405 of
Richard E. Byrd Community Academy

NOTES

1. We use pseudonyms for all children.

2. The Collaboratory Project is an initiative of Northwestern University that provides training, technological services, and resources to assist teachers and students in developing Web-based projects and activities. The free-of-charge and easy-to-use Web-based technology helps to further educational achievement in a collaborative and secure Internet environment. Brian worked extensively with his students in this Web-based environment. He developed a mentor model linking university graduate students to elementary students in an effort to provide individualized feedback to all of his fifth-graders on a daily basis. Each of Brian's students was matched with a writing mentor (a doctoral student studying literacy at a university over 700 miles away) who would provide feedback to the student. The mentors assisted their elementary counterparts with writing and provided input and insight to the student efforts, particularly regarding the fifth-graders' fight for a new school building. More information about the Collaboratory Project can be found at http://collboratory.nunet.net.

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