

Contents

Foreword to the Second Edition: A Lesson for Teachers on Making Choices and Making a Difference PEDRO A. NOGUERA	vii
Foreword to the First Edition CARL A. GRANT	xi
Preface and Acknowledgments	xiii
Prologue to the Second Edition	1
Touchstones and Pushing Back	1
Curriculum Definitions and Pushing Back	4
Storytelling and Pushing Back	7
1. Embracing Students' Interests for Schoolwork	13
What's Worth Knowing?	13
"Inverting" the Curriculum	23
Education as a Two-Way Street	29
2. Our School Is a Dump!: Identifying a Problem That Needs Solving	36
This Ain't No Schoolwork, This Is Important!	36
Feelin' Like a Big and Powerful Grown-Up	45
Needin' Them Pizza Things	52
3. Getting the Word Out: Sharing Authority in Room 405	65
You Wouldn't Let Your Kids Come to a School That Is Falling Apart	65
When Are We Going to Do Work?	72
Just Like a Record Deal	80
4. Seeking a Perfect Solution	89
The <i>Chicago Tribune</i>	89
Young Warriors	95
Carr's "Savage Inequalities"	99
Television, Radio, and Protecting the Kids	107

5. Process as Product	115
Practicing What I Preached	115
Do You Have Any Pets?	120
The Bestest Year Ever	126
Nader Comes to Carr	134
Bittersweet Final Days	137
6. Justice-Oriented Teaching	139
Negotiating Risks	139
Needing Support	141
Theorizing with Students	147
Education with Authenticity and Purpose	150
Developing Classrooms for Social Action	152
Progressive Education in Disadvantaged Neighborhoods	155
Complicating Good Intentions	158
7. Conclusion	162
How Ya Gonna Help Us?	162
Understanding Each Other	166
Let Those Voices Be Heard!	167
Enduring Achievement and Impact	169
Epilogue to the Second Edition	171
A New School for Other People's Kids	171
The Context of School Reform in Chicago and Beyond	173
Learning from Students	177
Complicating Updates	178
Some Current Situations	180
Activist Teachers, Activist Students	183
Empowering Teachers, Empowering Students	185
Afterword to the Second Edition	
On Teaching with Hope and Humility SONIA NIETO	187
References	190
Index	195
About the Author	206

Prologue to the Second Edition

I know for a fact, if people want to make change, they have to stand up.

—Demetrius, 2013, in *In These Times*

TOUCHSTONES AND PUSHING BACK

A decade after I taught 5th grade in Room 405 at Carr Community Academy, I received a voicemail from my former student Demetrius. That Demetrius would reach out to me was not a surprise; our relationship had transcended the classroom and I had maintained regular contact with him and several of his classmates from that school year. But the fact that Demetrius had left a voicemail was unusual. Voicemails, especially for millennials like Demetrius, were reserved for more urgent matters.

Upon calling back, I was relieved to hear good news. Demetrius explained that a story had appeared in the progressive news magazine *In These Times*. The article details his involvement with the Fight for \$15 and the Workers Organizing Committee of Chicago, a group pushing for a minimum wage increase in a larger effort to curtail gun violence (Schuhrke, 2013). Demetrius not only needed a raise, the article reported, but he was also demanding a safer work environment. As a Walgreens stock clerk at the time, Demetrius was struggling to make ends meet. In addition to the low pay at this job, the Walgreens location also lacked security guards. This expense was apparently eliminated due to costs, even though a worker had recently been shot and killed while on the clock. Although Demetrius was grateful for a job, he wanted and needed more. Rightfully so.

As his former teacher, I would have been uplifted if the story simply conveyed Demetrius's involvement in fighting for what he believed in to help himself or his community. What caught my attention in the article, though, was how Demetrius cites his experiences in 5th

grade when he saw the potential of grassroots organizing as a reason to get involved in these causes related to workers' rights. Demetrius had carried these skills with him for all those years. He knew from firsthand experience the power of identifying a problem, coming up with a solution, and taking action accordingly. A competency learned in 5th grade when as an 11-year-old Demetrius helped fight for a new community school building had a profound and lasting effect. Retaining the skill into adulthood, Demetrius was more woke to issues around him: He was willing to stand up to make change for himself and the community of other workers like him.

* * *

Fifteen years have passed since I spent time in the classroom—Room 405—that I shared with the inquisitive and courageous 5th-grade students at Carr Community Academy in Chicago. I fondly recall our time together as we challenged not only a city and school board to make good on their promise for a better school building for the neighborhood, but also pushed back on the all-too-common deficit-oriented stories about schooling and urban kids growing up in housing project communities. Such narratives are built into how many people think about historically marginalized neighborhoods, the schools in such communities, and, in turn, the students who are expected to learn within them.

The assumptions—often stated as facts—about city kids are that they don't care about their education. Or that kids raised in housing projects are not capable of doing sophisticated work. Youth from urban areas need a back-to-the-basics, rote approach to their education because they lack necessary foundational skills. Such young people require remediation before they can take on inquiry-based projects. Urban children don't have what it takes to succeed in an increasingly global society. And on and on. The assumptions proliferate.

Such perspectives do not happen by chance. Popular media perpetuate them. Newspaper headlines about urban areas regularly focus on pathology and despair. Hollywood productions frame children and families from urban communities of color within a deficit narrative. Federal education guidelines narrow curricula. Publishing companies commodify student learning. For-profit companies seek to privatize public education. School districts and their principals regulate teachers with expectations gleaned from state and national standards.

Teachers wrestle with tensions of either connecting with their students or meeting outside mandates.

But my time spent teaching and learning from, with, and alongside the 5th-graders in Room 405 a decade and a half ago, and subsequent engagement with my former students over the years since, disproves these assumptions. My experience was exceedingly different from such usual rhetoric about urban kids. The students from my classroom contradicted most of these very ideas. This particular group of young people demonstrated resilience and hopefulness. They brought community assets and funds of knowledge to our classroom and beyond it. They developed a sophisticated curriculum centered on broad notions of what they believed was worthwhile. They were resourceful and successful with limited and often substandard resources. The students wanted not only to improve their educational opportunities and the place in which they were to learn, but they also pushed for something better for their community and for the family members who would follow them. Room 405 collectively satisfied standards and expectations for student performance, not for their own sake but because they helped them to solve problems that they themselves identified. As teacher and students collaborating, we created a culturally relevant and responsive curriculum. The students not only had a lot to say about their learning and their ideas, but they also had the persistence, presence, and ability to reframe debates, which forced others to reconsider their assumptions about urban education.

Our experiment in teaching and learning, where we co-created curriculum based on the curiosities, needs, and questions the students raised, continues to serve as a counternarrative about city kids and education. Instead of succumbing to the common trope that focuses on deficit thinking and low expectations for schools in city centers, Room 405 showed the intelligence and capabilities, the creativity and imagination that this group of young people possessed. It became a touchstone for my ongoing thinking about what it means to be a teacher, the power of students, and the role of school in society. Since chronicling our school year together as we journeyed to fight for a new community school building, I have considered a lot about teaching, learning, and curriculum. Arguing that we must listen to and learn from students (Schultz, 2011), I contend that we need to rethink relationships in the classroom and how we determine the value of knowledge. Who gets to decide what is taught in schools? Who does not? We must find ways to go beyond the walls of the schoolhouse and into

the public sphere in order to allow for authenticity in curriculum. Engaging in public pedagogy, students and teachers jointly can negotiate obstacles and be pushed to the brink of their collective comfort zones (Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010). Emphasizing the role of social justice in curriculum-making, teachers and whole schools can find openings and opportunities within rigid educational systems in order to become student-centered and action-focused in their classrooms (Schultz, 2017). I have also worked with colleagues to create a pipeline of teachers of color from historically marginalized communities to return to their home communities as models of and anchors for justice-oriented, culturally responsive education (Skinner, Garreton, & Schultz, 2011). Collectively, these ideas guide my thinking about how we can look to kids to create better schooling experiences. It should be no wonder that every kid wants to make, build, create, and do for themselves and their communities if they are afforded the chance. In this way, kids can be teacher educators if we center curriculum itself around them rather than having it be driven by specific content knowledge or outside prescription. The perspectives and intuition that young people and community insiders alike bring to a classroom has tremendous power in how teachers can approach their classrooms and the curriculum within it.

Throughout this scholarship, I continuously reflect on my time with the young people from Room 405. What the 10- to 12-year-olds taught me has reinforced my belief in the potential of and necessity for focusing on what students deem worthwhile with regard to what is studied in classrooms. My subsequent engagement with other children and their teachers in kindergarten through high school classrooms, as well as in my own courses at the university level with undergraduate and graduate students, demands that we continue to look to ways we can rethink how we approach teaching and learning. One thing that I understand more fully now than I did when I was teaching in the 5th-grade classroom is that we must continuously strive to find ways to connect with the young people in the classroom in order to inhibit bad educational policies that create barriers at every turn.

CURRICULUM DEFINITIONS AND PUSHING BACK

How did you throw the curriculum out the window?

After *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* was published in 2008, I went on a scattershot speaking tour, sharing the hopeful story of our classroom with teachers and teacher educators. Inevitably during Q&A sessions after a book talk or lecture, there would be a question from the audience asking how I was able to “get away with” not doing the prescriptive, mandated curriculum with my students.

My intention then, as it is today, was to challenge the audience to rethink what curriculum is and what curriculum ought to be. Perhaps an answer to these questions is best characterized by a response I recently was asked to write for a popular education blog to the prompt: How can teachers use questions effectively in the classroom? Whereas this was something that I have grown accustomed to writing about, the act of formally responding reinforced my idea that the questions that young people raise can be the essence of curriculum. This idea challenges so many of those familiar definitions of curriculum that are perpetuated in teacher preparation programs; in classrooms, schools, and school districts; and even in how policymakers at the state and national level think about what needs to be covered in classrooms. Just as the students in Room 405 pushed back on the assumptions regarding education and urban youth of color, the way we think about curriculum can be a form of resistance in times when curriculum is continuously being reduced, weakened, limited, or commodified.

When working with aspiring teachers, I like to challenge them to share their definitions of curriculum. Undoubtedly, the teacher candidates discuss ideas inherent to what they have become conditioned to think about in terms of teaching and learning: standards, lesson plans, scope and sequence, and all the things that go into making the technical aspects of classrooms happen. While affirming most of what they suggest as they construct complementary meanings of curriculum, I offer a variation that often disrupts their collective, more commonplace descriptions. This variation centers on perennial questions about worth and the power and potential in having young people ask questions about what they see as pressing in their lives and their communities.

Leaning heavily on the celebrated work of William Schubert (1986/1997), I propose to my students that a definition of curriculum may be best situated as an act of trying to answer the “what’s worthwhile” questions: What is worth knowing, doing, being, thinking about, wondering, and pondering? What would happen if teachers brought this kind of alternative definition—albeit a philosophical stance—of

curriculum to their students in their classrooms? Acknowledging that this could be an abstract argument, I go beyond simply telling them about this alternative idea, and suggest ways that they may begin to contemplate such an approach in their own classrooms.

By asking young people to name issues in the community or problems central to their lives that they want to solve, my challenge is to push educators to shift their thinking. For many of them, this can feel uncomfortable at first. The practice is neither what they are used to nor what most experienced in school themselves. Nor can this approach be practically located in many teacher preparation programs' methods courses or in the basal reader. Rather, this way of engaging in curriculum encourages a rethinking of common practices. While this alternative curriculum definition pushes back against conventional approaches to schooling, it also reshapes how students are viewed. The method values their sensibilities, and by its form alone it shows that they have ideas worth studying. It demonstrates a caring approach. It creates in them a sense of worth. It honors their humanity.

But it would not be fair for me to merely challenge future teachers in the abstract. Providing soon-to-be educators with multiple avenues to see, explore, and even experience for themselves what the practice looks like is important. Some of the examples are culled from my own classroom teaching experiences, while others are from educators whose books inspired me to try an alternative approach for myself. And still others are from former students or teachers in whose classrooms I have spent time observing problem-posing, student-centered, and action-focused curriculum in practice. Beyond seeing how others made sense of this approach to curriculum, I have endeavored to create a college classroom environment where my students can have direct, firsthand experience engaging in this form of curricular practice. Leveraging *social action curriculum projects*, my university students name a problem in their community that they want to solve and then work to solve it. The problem identification and subsequent action planning provides university students a chance to engage in the practice for themselves. They see how they may find openings in their classrooms. They can align the work to standards or other mandates. They negotiate obstacles and overcome barriers. They feel motivated by something about which they are passionate. They infer how the engagement could transfer to their own classrooms.

In such spaces, the students' questions create a focal point so that the issues, concerns, problems, and ideas most important to them serve

as the nexus for a curriculum-in-the-making. There is no preconceived problem to tackle. No prescriptive action plan to follow. Rather, there is the space, opportunity, and an inherent challenge to name something important or troubling that they will have the opportunity to pursue as the curriculum. What is magical about this approach is that the motivation—the hook—is built in. Not because of some kind of extrinsic reward, or fear, or classroom token economy, but as a result of the topics and issues having merit and value for those involved. After all, it is the students who have identified these very ideas in the first place.

From a plurality of examples and firsthand experiences, it becomes more and more evident that when children ask *questions as curricula* it provides them with the impetus to discover and explore, to document and think critically, to deliberate and debate, to respond and take action, and ultimately to ask more questions. Parallel to what Paulo Freire (1970/2000) called a problem-posing education, teachers have a chance to honor their students and their stake in the classroom, to create culturally and contextually relevant and responsive curriculum, and to motivate and engage their students because the young people see purpose, value, and intrigue in studying questions that they find important.

As this book revises what many consider to be common definitions of curriculum, my hope is to have the reader reconcile the events that occurred in Room 405 with any preconceived notions of curriculum. The ideas in this book can challenge the reader to put aside assumptions.

Read this book as a prompt. Look at it as an invitation. Push back on how it may work in your own classroom. Contemplate how you will convince your principal, your colleagues, and your students and their parents to attempt working in this manner. Imagine how you can create curriculum with students that is more culturally relevant, more contextually responsive, and inevitably more focused on the concerns of the young people in your classroom. Like Demetrius, they may very well grow up to remember it.

STORYTELLING AND PUSHING BACK

In 2004 NPR's *This American Life* visited Room 405. Host Ira Glass shared what he had seen in our classroom with a national audience:

students working against all odds to get the city to deliver on a new school building. In the episode Glass describes me as idealistic. I admit I was disappointed, at least initially: As a teacher in my second year, the characterization struck me as condescending and dismissive of my fervor for the students' project, and my strong belief that change was within grasp through their agency. But in the years since the story aired, I have come to celebrate the episode's insights and advocacy for our classroom. The episode, titled "Desperate Measures," opens with the Room 405 students to frame the hour-long show as "Stories of people stuck in unfixable situations who try desperate measures. Sometimes these are inventive, sometimes they're ingenious, sometimes they even work." The episode captures the students' fight in this vein, but it also calls me out as a bit of a romantic. I wanted my students to push to get a new school. I was willing to share my authority with young people. I thought we could challenge the dominant narrative and the sorting machine (Spring, 1989) that schools, particularly ones serving urban housing project communities, have become. Perhaps at the time I chafed under a fear that "idealism" would mark our project as impossible. Perhaps I interpreted the characterization as unhelpful criticism that would stand in the way of change. But given all of the damning educational policies that truncate the potential of schools, I have since come to understand that idealism in teachers is a good thing, maybe even necessary. And to that end, Ira Glass's perceptions were prescient.

Less than enthusiastic about the episode when it aired, now re-reading the book (10 years after its publication and 15 years after its events took place), I see that romanticism and idealism crop up in my storytelling. While many of the stories and their attendant ideas in the volume you have in your hands have only strengthened my stances on curriculum, teaching, and learning, some elements do strike me as *too* romantic. For instance, when Ira Glass asked me repeatedly while recording for the episode what would happen if the students failed, I was steadfast in my responses that the endeavor itself was worthwhile. While this may be true, my naïveté about Chicago's machine politics likely clouded my judgment related to the potential fallout of such pursuits. At other times, complicated matters were not treated as complicated. At some points my writing conveys sentiments that "I just figured it out," when in fact I often found and continue to find myself pondering and reflecting on our interactions in Room 405. At other moments my storytelling is too neatly packaged. For example,