

TEACHING IN THE CRACKS

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGH SOCIAL ACTION CURRICULUM PROJECTS

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ABSTRACT

With an educational climate of hyper-standardization becoming more pronounced, it is no wonder that schooling neither captures the attention nor engages students through traditional classroom teaching. Amidst such high-stakes pressures associated with the current “reform” movement, critical educators concerned with providing meaningful curriculum and transferable skills for everyday life are forced to teach “under the radar.” Often, such teachers search for openings within official curricula to “teach in the cracks,” connecting students with issues relevant to their lives. This in-between pedagogy demonstrates the complexities of teaching—it does not disregard top-down expectations, but instead seeks to find opportunities within such mandates to engage immediate classroom participants in worthwhile curricula. Teaching in the cracks begins to answer the ongoing dilemma between an expected curricula and seeking organic student engagement with community problems beyond the classroom. Through narrative inquiry, this article examines one teacher’s willingness to exploit such openings through a curricular approach called a Social Action Curriculum Project (SACP). A SACP offers students opportunities to engage in both democratic processes and experiential learning while also meeting benchmarks and standards, albeit through a

Schultz, Brian D., McSurley, Jennifer, & Salguero, Mildred. 2013. Teaching in the Cracks: Student Engagement through Social Action Curriculum Projects, *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, vol. 4. no.2, pp. 53-68

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backward mapping curriculum. The SACP is a clear departure from decontextualized curricula since it focuses on the primary concerns and identified problems of those who have the most at stake—the students. In this way, a SACP centers student agency directly with solving problems important to the young people. Storytelling and analysis reveal applications and struggles in attempting to reach students through critical, meaningful teaching.

As hyper-standardization becomes more pronounced in our educational climate, schooling that neither captures the attention nor engages students through traditional classroom teaching is unsurprising. Amidst such high-stakes pressures associated with the current “reform” movement, critical educators concerned with providing meaningful curriculum and transferable skills for everyday life are forced to teach “under the radar.” Often such teachers search for openings within official curriculum to “teach in the cracks,” connecting students with issues relevant to their lives. This in-between pedagogy demonstrates the complexities of teaching: rather than ignore top-down expectations, the approach seeks opportunities within such mandates to engage immediate classroom participants in worthwhile curricula. Teaching in the cracks begins to address the ongoing dilemma between following an expected curricula and seeking organic student engagement with community problems beyond the classroom. Through narrative inquiry, this article examines one teacher’s willingness to exploit such openings through a curricular approach called a Social Action Curriculum Project (SACP).

A SACP offers students opportunities to engage in both democratic processes and experiential learning while also meeting benchmarks and standards, albeit through a backward mapping curriculum (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). As a clear departure from decontextualized curricula, the SACP focuses on the primary concerns and identified problems of those who have the most at stake—the students—and returns problem-solving agency directly to these young people.

This SACP framework provided the means for a teacher to engage her middle school students in relevant, critical curricula while working within a traditional setting. While fulfilling a desire to teach for social justice, this teacher (and second author of this article) was also able to meet the expectations of her district, local administrators, and colleagues. As a curricular process, SACP scaffolds a robust problem-posing, problem identification, and problem-solving strategy for engaging in teaching that concentrates on active democratic participation within and outside classrooms. SACP is a form of project and problem-based learning that are specifically action oriented, centering on concerns of the immediate classroom participants. With hands-on learning as a cornerstone, teachers and their younger counterparts return to a focus inherent to issues identified by the students. SACP therefore represent a clear departure from scripted curricula, disrupting normative approaches to schooling. As a result, a SACP reveals the potential of rel-

evant, reflective social issues in the lives of the students; the resulting curriculum is action-oriented and theme-based yet theoretically grounded in rich progressive educational practices and middle school philosophy (Beane, 1993; 2005).

We are most interested in analyzing the ways democratic skills practiced through a SACP framework can exploit openings found in “traditional” teaching commonplace in North American schools. We believe that when such “cracks” are discovered amidst high-pressured, high-stakes environments, the curriculum can extend beyond the classroom and into the public sphere. The process of finding ways to escape the constant bombardment of outside expectations in classroom teaching and in public spaces is a result of our personal experiences in which meaningful, integrated, emergent, organic, and robust learning becomes possible.

CHALLENGING DEMOCRATIC RHETORIC

American educational philosophy has long championed the importance of dialogue, deliberation, and debate as a way to encourage and maintain active democracies. Ideally, these skills are taught in schools so that education instills in its pupils the competencies necessary for developing democratic communities. This argument is especially demonstrated in the work of John Dewey, whose central theses focus on the need for schooling, particularly public schooling, as a way to nurture, teach, and allow for practicing democratic processes. In what many contemporary educational theorists consider to be Dewey’s (1916) most definitive treatise on the topic, *Democracy and Education*, Dewey argues that the “ideal may seem remote of execution, but the democratic ideal of education is a farcical yet tragic delusion except as the ideal more and more dominates our public system of education” (p. 98). Through public schooling, Dewey contends, schools must be places that push critical thinking and problem solving. Progressive educational theory is in direct contrast with the ways most public schools currently function: subject-matter-based learning, reliance on memorization, and learning linked to standardized test performances. Dewey (1915) and later Maxine Greene (1986) argued that schools ought to emphasize opportunities to function as miniature communities. If schools become reflective of the broader society, Dewey and Greene suggest, students learn skills of collaboration and decision-making through daily classroom practices. This fundamental approach is not lost amongst contemporary scholars although its practices are more seldom seen in classrooms. James Beane’s (1993) proposal for a middle school curriculum, for example, is built on Dewey’s beliefs. Echoing the Deweyan ideal, Beane’s (1993) contention that “[a] curriculum developed apart from the teachers and young people that must live it is grossly undemocratic” (p. 18). If we collectively value such democratic processes in life, Beane argues, then we must nurture such ideals in classrooms to develop students’ transferable skill-sets.

Clearly this approach to schooling is not the norm. Authentic problem solving and assessment embracing such democratic qualities are exceptions in the current climate of standardization. Misguided notions of accountability are antithetical of relevant, responsive approaches to teaching and learning. As a result of current practices, little to no local control exists and there are seldom any connections to the local context. External expectations from federal policies, state boards of education, or district mandates typically dictate what occurs in classrooms. Teachers are pressured to conform to prescriptive curricula focused on standardized tests; these pressures are underscored by ominous threats of school closings, school turnaround, and teacher firings (Au, 2009; Lipman, 2003). Added to this already bleak situation, the push for value-added metrics or “uneducated guesses” (Wainer, 2011, p. xvii) to measure teacher performance by referencing a teacher’s students’ test scores highlights such misuse of data to satisfy society’s accountability fixation.

The fear tactics coupled with a complacent public in the name of high achievement only furthers an agenda from the right to privatize public schooling (Lipman, 2011; Watkins, 2012). This only perpetuates apartheid and class-based schooling (Anyon, 2005; Kozol, 2005). This agenda occurs while vivid schooling examples from entire countries, such as Finland, can be hopeful, imaginative, and low-stakes (Sahlberg, 2011). While we offer an alternative that seeks ways to exploit cracks in this rigid system, we consciously challenge the forces undermining the potential of public education. Through SACPs we are seeking schooling that honors children’s full humanity, and teaches them to be active, politically-engaged citizens (Llewellyn & Westheimer, 2009).

TO TEACH INTO CURRICULAR CRACKS

A SACP is an approach to theorizing curriculum with students. Keenly local in nature, the method provides students and teachers in a specific classroom with the autonomy and authority to develop curricula that is most important, relevant, and responsive to their interests. A SACP is therefore a representation of problem-based learning and at its very heart is a means of a Freirean (2000) problem-posing curriculum. Students identify an issue, problem, or theme that centers on a local or societal point of contention. Neither teachers nor outside agencies preconceive the issue. Instead, through classroom deliberation, students decide the problem. Students are forced to relate to the world around them in working towards identifying and working to solve issues that concern them. Students contemplate possible alternative solutions by studying multiple sides to the issue. As the project progresses, the SACP scaffolds contingent action planning and techniques of participation as a means to work through and solve the problem. Through this process and the various modes of action planning, the SACP allows for learning critical skills related to democratic processes and encouraging politi-

cal engagement. The SACP framework allows both the teacher and students to challenge so-called educational reforms that focus on punitive or deficient orientations. And the SACP centers the consciousness of the students and their own questions as what will be learned, why it will be learned, and how it will be learned. Students enact cooperative learning in order to enhance their immediate environments as they better their communities. In this model students thus become readers of their world(s), working to solve issues relevant and meaningful to them (Freire, 2000).

In the classroom experiences of a SACP the innate curiosities and challenges that young people face in their lives fuel continuous learning. The students' wants and desires become foci of their decision-making and problem solving. The emergent curriculum becomes a guiding structure as the students pursue knowledge, information, and skills to complete tasks. When provided with a different sort of learning that actually revolves around them, students—especially children who have been taught in/through a top-down and non-inquiry approach—are exposed to a framework of teaching and learning apart from the mainstream. In such spaces, competencies associated with democratic processes are learned, practiced, and experienced.

A SACP approach requires that students in classrooms immerse themselves in the practice of democratic engagement. Through full immersion, the teacher may connect content that emerges to state standards if there are expectations from a school administrator, for example. Grappling with content-specific and transferable skills, students learn by doing as they navigate the effort to solve the problem. The SACP can be seen as a subversive way to teach controversial issues in the classroom (Hess, 2009). Simultaneously, the students learn firsthand and experientially how to participate in the direct action and mainstream practices related to participatory democracy. Students also learn when to challenge normative approaches and engage in public pedagogy to achieve results and garner support. This pedagogical method allows for political engagement and efficacy; students can become learners through participation rather than being taught through traditional ways. This is critical because most public schools purport to teach students citizenship, but do not actually provide students with participatory or change-oriented experiences. If schools are to really expect citizenship as a result of schooling experiences, they must find a way to inculcate students through such practices. Unfortunately, the approach carries a connotation that the teachers have an (political) agenda beyond simply giving their students the opportunity to engage politically, democratically, and collaboratively.

While schools tout productive citizenship in a democratic society as a key outcome of teaching and learning, current models produce citizen definitions that presume obedience, compliance, and rule-following. The SACP instead provides for engagement as seen in the possibilities of Westheimer and Kahne's (2004)

pathbreaking work. Their research shows how the “good citizen” may take three different forms in classrooms: personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented. They observe that many teachers, unfortunately, focus on developing citizens that are only personally responsible (i.e. the promotion of charity, service, and character). Instead, they purport, teachers may nurture more nuanced participatory or even justice-oriented conceptualizations that center around instilling actions that challenge the status quo and are agency focused. Following Westheimer and Kahne, we contend that there is little doubt as to why children, especially those in middle schools, adopt a disinterested attitude regarding citizenship. As the current culture of public schools focuses more and more on rigor and testing, how can we expect curricula to focus on such justice-related incarnations that revolve around social issues? With the restrictions on what to teach, challenges about meeting standards, and artificial timelines of learning that require teachers to keep pace with their colleagues, we contend that teachers must exploit cracks in the traditional curriculum, so that what occurs in the classroom is engaging, relevant, and meaningful.

At a time when the pressure placed on educators for student achievement is great, the SACP offers an opportunity for teachers to truly engage their students and provide them with opportunities to learn skills that will be meaningful in both academic matriculation and life. The learning by its very nature is robust but not rigid, has high expectations not based on testing, and emerges from questions that provoke and motivate students, especially since the nexus for its questions come from the young people. Students can accumulate a wealth of experiences that provide them with an ongoing and developing sense of political and civic engagement and teaches them skills of negotiation, organizing, and navigating complex systems—abilities that will undoubtedly help them succeed in and out of school. Further, a SACP often pushes students into highly contested public spaces. In the public sphere, students are forced to seek knowledge in authentic environments where obstacles must be overcome in order to solve problems and make decisions. No longer acting as depositors of knowledge, teachers are emboldened to take on the roles of facilitators in order to help guide the inquiries of their students.

NARRATIVE POINTS-OF-ENTRY

Through experiences from a college middle school curriculum and philosophy course (in which Brian was the professor), Jennifer learned how to use SACP. The college course was designed to provide students a direct experience engaging in a SACP for themselves. Within the course context, college students engaged in SACP that were of interest and relevant to them. Through her immersion experiences in the college course, Jennifer applied these experiences and transferred her learning to that of her own middle school classroom.

The use of narrative inquiry as methodological approach helps to make meaning about how the SACP framework allows for Jennifer to teach within the cracks in order to provide students critical pedagogical opportunities in her middle school classroom. In the following section, we present narrative vignettes from Jennifer’s middle school teaching experiences written after she engaged in SACPs with her students. As evidenced in Jennifer’s vignettes, the narrative emerges through storytelling of her teaching experiences in a Midwestern, urban, diverse, medium-sized district school (43% White, 33% Black, 11% Latino, 9% Asian, 3% multiracial; 52% designated low-income). Analysis of a teacher’s “personal practical knowledge” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 3) and elements of teacher lore as praxis—what Schubert (1991) argues is the knowledge creation teachers engage in as they practice curriculum, theorize, and learn from their own experiences—provide opportunities to seek meaning and generate thick descriptions. Further, this form of narrative inquiry is reflective of and consistent with the critical, democratic pedagogy afforded to students in a SACP.

A multiplicity of data informs the vignettes: classroom dialogue, informal interviews, student artifacts, and Jennifer’s reflective journaling. The narrative is analyzed within classroom context and through subsequent reflection. The storytelling includes specific points-of-entry to Jennifer’s interactions with students, colleagues, and administrators to portray her experience of feeling shackled to a mandated curriculum while finding opportunities to teach in critical ways. These points-of-entry were not predetermined. Rather, Jennifer chose to tell stories of her experience in her own way. Jennifer reveals parts of her experience and leaves out others—a hallmark of interpretive, critical inquiry. Importantly, if one of Jennifer’s students, colleagues, or administrators were to tell such stories, they may be very different.

Mandates, Expectations, and Teaching in the Cracks

During the first week of school in my first year of teaching I met with the English Language Arts curriculum coordinator. The meeting was brief but to the point: he provided me with *the* curriculum that I was mandated to follow for the school year. As I contemplated the confinement, my new colleague reminded me how important following the guidelines would be, especially because of the district’s quarterly testing.

The rigid, fast-paced, and traditional curriculum booklet made me wonder how I was going to find space to work in a social action curriculum project. I wanted to jump in right away to justice-oriented teaching, but I wanted to make a good impression and was fearful of rocking the boat.

Initially, I simply found it impossible to teach for social justice. I knew I was always held accountable for what my students learn, but the top-down expectations added intense pressure. Beyond the curriculum, I had to contend with quarterly

testing, preparation for state achievement tests, and regular classroom observations from my principal, district administrators, and my first year teaching mentor—all “looking out for me” but clearly keeping a careful eye towards implementing *the* curriculum. Added to this were daily meetings with my colleagues, weekly meetings with my principal, and monthly meetings with other faculty. These all seemingly took away my hopes of finding ways to develop curriculum that would provide for political engagement with the young people in front of me.

Although I felt initially defeated with all the pressure and meetings, I searched for cracks within the curriculum’s framework so that I could fly under the radar with administrators. I needed to honor why I got into teaching in the first place and had to realize my goals of teaching in relevant and responsive ways. The opportunity I planned for was during creative writing, outlined in the 4th quarter. Surprisingly, creative writing was designed as process- and skill-based and was to “be taught” *after* the Quarterly Assessment. Would this be my chance to use methods, texts, and pedagogies I believed would work best with students?

To Be or Not to Be: Social Justice Teaching

In anticipation of the upcoming quarter in which I was going to take the leap, I met with a 10-year veteran teacher to discuss my ideas to engage students via SACPs. In relaying my plans that I had been (im)patiently waiting to implement, my seemingly progressive colleague immediately squashed my ideas. “Jen, it’s a wonderful idea,” she exclaimed, “but I really don’t think our kids will do much with these projects—we can barely get them to read a sentence without them complaining that it’s too much work! How do you think they are going act when you put this on their plates? Further, how are you going to make sure you follow the curriculum?” I saw my students’ full potential and knew that part of their apathy centered around how the curriculum was organized; it lacked student input. Although frustrated with her point of view since I knew my students might get motivated by this alternative approach, her comments also made me feel unsure of the entire idea, and I worried whether my students would be mature enough to take on serious issues beyond the classroom.

Despite what appeared to be obstructionist feedback from my colleague, I couldn’t help but recall a professor’s advice: “If you don’t jump into teaching for social justice in your first year, you probably never will.” Unfortunately, with the end of the year approaching, I really saw his point—I had been confined to the curriculum and to testing. I needed to shift the power dynamic from outside mandates to my local classroom.

We Cannot Change Anything!” or “Getting to the Bottom of It”

Day 1 of SACPs, I nervously asked my class: “Do you think you have the power to make changes in the world today?” Darion responded, “You mean now or like

when we're older?" Jeremy turned to Darion and kjlflatly stated, "We're just kids, we're never taken seriously, and we cannot change anything!"

In an instant the class was in an uproar! Darion, a charismatic boy who consistently exercised leadership skills, looked at Jeremy and loudly responded: "You just don't know what powers you have or how to use them!"

I asked everyone to relax as I continued: "Why is it important for you to be active in your learning? To know how to problem solve?"

My guiding questions prompted participation from virtually every student. As we discussed what we wanted to change, large lists developed. I wondered how classes would limit activities to a few core issues, but as topics were discussed students began debating the issues and narrowing down the topics. Surprisingly, my worry about tailoring lists subsided as the students self-selected topics based on personal interests.

While delving deep into a discussion of community problems during 3rd hour, my department chair walked into the classroom unannounced to observe me. She had no idea what was going on. I thought to myself: "This is it! You are going to be fired because she won't know what the heck you are doing. How will I explain this? Back yourself up, Jen! You knew this was coming!" When I snapped back into reality, I went with my lesson plan; what else could I do?

The class was already in self-chosen groups, deliberating about the issues they had identified. Both my chair and I were drawn to one particular group. The students were in a heated discussion, deliberating about whether the issue should be "world hunger" or "hunger in the city." As I challenged the group with questions that would narrow down their topic, the group decided to focus on making local changes in the city to, as they articulated, "put a dent in the problem."

The department chair appeared interested, but remained silent while taking notes. When the bell rang, she asked, "How is what they are doing aligned to the curriculum?" I was prepared for such questions, but answering them wasn't easy. I knew I was going against the grain. Cautiously, I explained how I had interpreted the creative writing curriculum for 4th quarter. I expressed how these projects had the potential to cover so much more through writing: problem solving, critical thinking, and interactive learning—let alone the political engagement and real world problem solving that I sought. As the next class entered the room, she left without comment. Later, she and I exchanged emails; she was definitely concerned and as she put it, "determined to get to the bottom of it."

Struggles and Opportunities

Students began to work in their groups, identifying their problem/issue and writing about it, creating a solution, and researching. While many groups were working extremely hard—harder than I had seen them engage all year—there were some groups that appeared to be putting forth minimal effort. I began to wonder

if my colleague's apprehension and my department chair's skepticism were warranted. In my journal, all I could do was ask questions: Do the students not have the right group chemistry? Do they not care about their issue enough? Did I misstep along the way?

In retrospect, and although I cannot be certain, what seemed problematic for these groups centered on the fact that they were not as passionate about the specific problem their group had chosen as other groups. My reflective journal highlighted my pondering about some students' difficult home lives and the trickiness of pushing them to think about problems they faced outside of school as the projects threatened the defense mechanisms they had built around the turmoil in their home lives. I hoped that if I was able to coach them with persistence, the SACP could be an opening for them to change their attitudes about this project in particular, but school more generally.

In contrast to a couple of low-energy groups, an all-male group self-titled "Teen Talk" was already digging deep into provocative issues. Led by Darion, the group was discussing questions that are not usually entertained in a classroom pertaining to sex, drugs, violence, relationships, and peer pressure. Getting ahead of themselves, they were already thinking through a solution to the fact that important topics about their lives were never discussed in school. Their idea was to run an 8th grade teen summit in which they would select a diverse group of students to have discussions with the school community. Immediately, Darion wanted to take the plan to the principal. I told him that they needed to research the topics, and formulate a proposal first. I was worried that my pushback would deter Darion's fervor, but I was heartened to observe Darion going back to his group to discuss the planning and logistics of a summit. After further detail-gathering, Darion and I met with the principal after school; Darion did all the talking. The principal agreed to the summit, with some ground rules of course, but expressed how she was impressed with the group and his work!

The principal may have been impressed, and although groups such as Teen Talk were in full gear and their projects were taking on lives of their own, I still had the 4th quarter creative writing expectations hovering over me. I needed to tie creative writing with the SACP. It was highly important to articulate this well or else I knew that I would, at the very least, lose all credibility regarding SACPs. I was feeling the pressure. My goal was to leverage similar processes I had taught previously for some new writing that would be nonfiction and related to the SACP.

Sex, Drugs, and Teen Talk

The Teen Talk group members were so eager to take advantage of the spaces to develop their own curriculum. Several members approached me, asking me if they could cover topics like drugs and sex in their summit. Whereas I was secretly

apprehensive because of potential administrative and parental fallout about teaching taboo topics, I tried not to show it to the students. “What do you think you need to do if you plan on discussing these topics and having answers for them?” I queried, and without hesitation, Darion retorted, “Research!” Guided by the freedom to inquire and write about topics that fascinated them, the group researched subtopics while collaborating to create a full discussion and presentation for the summit.

Although they were excited about the prospects of the school-wide attention, the group struggled to conceptualize something that would be as meaningful to others as it was for them. They constantly wanted to check in with me to make sure their progress was on the right track. They questioned whether they “were doing it right,” but at the same time their questions and concerns facilitated their learning and our collective motivation for taking it to the next level for the summit. Moreover, the learning processes that I had tried to communicate to the chair and other colleagues was exactly how I saw students engaging. What was fascinating was that I did not have all the answers, and in many check-ins with students they were pushing me to learn topics in ways that I had not imagined prior to working with them.

This sort of zeal stayed consistent throughout their efforts and was apparent after the students worked hard at making their school summit a reality. While engaging in topics selected by students school-wide, the panel was well attended. The group even wanted to continue after the end-day-bell rang to go home! It was clear to all in attendance that Darion was proud of himself and his group.

Because this group did not want the SACP efforts to end with the school day, they decided to take the discussion out of school. The group formed a youth engagement venue at the local YMCA to host similar events and dialogues. Darion confided in me: “Mrs. McSurley, being a former ‘troubled teen,’ I know what it’s like to have questions about all of these crazy issues that we kids deal with. I know that when I didn’t get the right answers, it led me down some bad paths. This is why I’ve decided to continue these summits at the ‘Y.’” Darion and his peers stressed that they were interested in educating others in order to help teens make better life choices.

Hunger and Community Activism

The hopefulness associated with Teen Talk is also evident in another SACP. This group, “For a Change,” focused on hunger and feeding people in our city. After researching the topic, they centered their action planning on issues that, at first glance, seemed more focused on superficial charity than justice orientations. They wanted to make sure the community was aware of the hungry’s plight and wanted to find ways to provide for people. But, as their project went deeper, not only did students hold a food drive and connect with a food bank, they also pushed

for awareness through a poster and video campaign that went beyond notions of “giving” and charity.

When I questioned them about what appeared to be the often-simplistic idea of charity, the group dug deep in discussions about how they could affect lasting community change. Their discussions were nuanced because they found the issue to be more complex than they initially thought. Fighting hunger for some members was a social responsibility, but for others bigger questions about why people went hungry and society’s role were imperative to why they wanted to be involved.

Several group members’ comments struck a chord with me. Adeeva queried, “We only have food drives during Christmas? Why not any other times? What is wrong in our society that people can be needing food?” Keisha agreed and perhaps saw an even bigger issue that her classmate was raising when she retorted, “But, people really need food during those times and people are more likely to give during the holidays. How can we get people to give when it’s not that time of year and get them to understand the bigger issue?”

Their questions furthered discussion. Another member raised the following notion: “We need facts about hunger and how many people are starving in our own neighborhoods. This will convince people because it has emotional appeal.” Adeeva replied, “The challenge we really have is changing people’s minds about giving anything. People need food all year long.” Keisha stated, “Yeah, it’s like understanding that if you have food for yourself and maybe some extra you can make a change. Imagine if we all felt like that!” As I listened, I observed their plan shifting from food-drive mode to changing people’s minds about the idea of hunger.

Despite the dilemma the group confronted in private amongst themselves, their multiple avenues of action had food pouring into the classroom. Further, their documentary video about hunger was being played in all of my classes. After a month, “For a Change” asked me to help them deliver the food to the food bank. We showed up unannounced—perhaps a result of middle schoolers not thinking through all the parts of the process. Impressed by the students’ enthusiasm and the amount food in tow, the head of the food bank stopped his work to provide a tour and solicit students for volunteer opportunities, especially in areas beyond simply collecting food.

On the car ride back to school, Adeeva confided to me: “This experience has changed me in a way I cannot really describe. It feels good to work for my community.” I challenged her with questions, since her statement sounded focused on charity again. Her classmate interjected, “It’s been life-changing, and I want to keep doing more. I never used to think about issues like this in the world.” Adeeva agreed, adding, “It’s like I am thinking about things I didn’t know mattered. Now, I can’t stop thinking about these things.”

Similar to the other group that wanted to continue, this group also approached me after the formal SACP ended. Alongside her groupmates, Keisha asked, “Did you hear about the food bank we donated to? It was on the news.” Unaware of the grave issue, I let her continue. “We just heard that they are completely out of food, losing money, and in danger of shutting down!” In a follow-up meeting with me after school, the girls decided that they needed to go back to the research and organizing skills they had learned in class through the SACP.

Before I knew it, the school was involved in a comprehensive attempt to strengthen the food bank through efforts from the girls and others. The group produced posters that highlighted their newfound justice-orientation. They told me they wanted my help in having a donation drive for the food bank. Both of the girls were going to set up moneyboxes in each teacher’s classroom as well as make posters and announcements. The food bank’s dire situation had shocked them into action and urgency, and now they had tools to get the job done.

DEVELOPING SPACES TO ENGAGE

Introducing middle school students to the SACP process is fundamental to inspiring and motivating them within a traditional schooling framework. In Jennifer’s classroom, the students engaged in SACP’s through discussion and debate; the classroom became a space where students had liberty to deliberate on issues of importance to their lives. Through deliberation students felt compelled to engage in group work with others who shared similar interests. In these examples—talking about issues that mattered to the students and feeding people in the city—helped the groups to share and envision what they were ultimately trying to accomplish. While adhering to the SACP framework, Jennifer and her students were able to develop a kind of classroom curriculum that was most responsive to their needs and interests.

Jennifer’s narrative details the efforts of two groups as they used the challenge of the SACP to identify their issue, create a solution, research, and engage in action¹. This is what “teaching in the cracks” is all about. The SACP was a gateway to raise an issue at hand in order to arrive at a shared goal. Jennifer was able to fully immerse her students into a SACP by exploiting openings in the state-outlined curriculum that she was nonetheless following.

A traditional school classroom may be confined to a strict curriculum, which ultimately limits opportunities for genuine engagement. Contrary to traditional classroom structures, the core of a SACP effort offers a space to challenge social issues within school, thus promoting motivation and commitment. This space becomes vital for a SACP because active problem solving cannot be conducted in the theoretical. Jennifer’s narrative offers insight into a traditional classroom working in a non-traditional manner. An issue relevant to the students’ lives is

discussed followed by direct, problem-solving activity with that issue within the community and expectations of high achievement. The students' experiences represent the unexploited potential of what teaching and learning can accomplish outside the confines of prescriptive instruction.

EMBRACING, NEGOTIATING, AND REVISITING CHALLENGES

Part of the process for students of a SACP is to grapple with the notion that they can make a difference in their lives and outside their classroom. Challenges and barriers will result. Although traditional school settings adhere to strict curricula in order to avoid divergence, a SACP develops opportunities to prove that rich learning experiences can occur outside of a conventional framework. Importantly, outcomes are neither preconceived nor predetermined by the teacher or students. Instead, the varied processes of working to solve identified issues allows for learning to flourish organically. In Jennifer's narrative we see how the novelty of developing curricula with students is complex, thorough, and participatory. We also see how the processes of inquiry fueled discovery and learning. Importantly this was not known at the onset but instead was discovered in the moments of critical engagement. Further, the vignettes show how the groups equally valued the process and worked towards an end goal, albeit to varying degrees.

Building understanding within the groups were sticking points, although for reasons that differed depending on the students. This was most clear when a group member was clearly disengaged from the group, not caring about the topic or taking action. This disinterest was a cause for reflection on Jennifer's part; it inevitably made her question her teaching methods and whether this approach to designing and developing curricula was able to reach all of her students. When students reach a point of disinterest it can slow down the progress and formation of a well-defined action plan. This is important as it highlights the complex nature of engaging students in SACPs. This also takes place in groups that are heavily involved in their projects. Consider the critical moment when Jennifer prompts students to make sure they are thinking through issues related to awareness and justice, not simply focused on charity work.

The evolving process of SACPs requires that students refine the action plan as needed. This refining process was continuous throughout the entire projects and is key to the culmination of transferable skills that students take away from the experience. The students often face obstacles while action planning and this leads them to explore new directions to achieve their goals. Students are encouraged to continuously evaluate and reconsider the efficacy of their efforts. Such experiences echo the realities of our lives outside the schoolhouse. Neither the teacher nor stu-

dents are able to foresee how their actions will be received or the challenges they may face as they take on these issues.

A SACP is meant to push the totality of the curriculum, especially in middle school, though large questions remain. Can teaching curriculum “through the cracks” embrace the depths of all the knowledge that students should acquire? How will students learn all they are “supposed to know” according to state boards of education or textbook companies while still gaining useful life skills? Perhaps the thought from a member of “For A Change” demonstrates the potential to transform how we think about classrooms:

This experience has changed me in a way I cannot really describe, but it feels good to work for my community. It’s been life changing, and I want to keep doing more. I never used to think about issues like this in the world.

As current and future teachers ponder possible curricular linkages involved in a SACP, vast opportunities for pedagogical exploration occur. Traditional subject area competencies including effective persuasive writing, mathematical computations, oral presentations, or scientific reasoning have the possibility of transforming into integrated teaching areas fully capable of encompassing politically-engaged social action. Motivating students to focus on relevant issues associated with a SACP becomes less challenging than making sure those same students adhere to the strict confines of a traditional classroom. Power lies herein: young people choose topics important to them and then are provided with spaces, opportunities, and ultimately challenged with responsibilities to solve the problem they selected, while meeting the expectations set within the mandated curriculum.

What are outcomes of a SACP within an era of high-stakes and hyper-accountability? This is an essential question to reflect on amidst the current climate of outcomes-oriented standardization. The initial purpose is clearly to address problems identified by students in classrooms while honoring their full humanity. SACPs provide opportunities to practice democratic dialogue usually absent from classrooms today. Beyond the surface however, SACPs are not necessarily restricted to such objectives. SACPs are also tools for educators who want to teach in subversive ways while still adhering to the outside mandates. Further, outcomes related to the SACP may not be known prior to engagement but instead emerge through participation. Teacher and students’ action-planning processes have the deep potential to push against the status quo. In so doing, the SACP provides teachers an ability to teach under the radar of curricular expectations, and develops young people’s competencies for participating and navigating within a democracy.

Worthy outcomes indeed.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For a related model that focuses on public policy change, see the Center for Civic Education's Project Citizen.
- 2 African American male teachers: Working subversively through hip-hop with African American youth in urban classrooms
- 3 Robert Simmons, Robert Carpenter, Johnetta Ricks, Dara Walker, Marcellus Davis, & Marquin Parks

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