Chapter 5
Teaching to Transform
Baltimore

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author highlights a case study from Baltimore, Maryland where one parent’s classroom collaboration helped to educate over 100 fourth graders about how state government works. Specifically, the chapter details how the parent became inspired by her son’s teacher’s back-to-school night presentation, and how that led to their future collaboration on a social studies service learning unit. Social movement theory motivated the parent, while the students gained a deep, authentic understanding of the content as well as democratic advocacy skills as a result of this more meaningful teacher/parent collaboration.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Name 3-5 ways that teachers can demonstrate authenticity and trust with parents.
- In what ways can teachers involve parents in the classroom beyond the traditional classroom organization jobs they typical perform? Be specific.
- What community organizations are local to your area that might serve as potential future curricular resources?

The challenge of social justice is to evoke a sense of community that we need to make our nation a better place, just as we make it a safer place. -Marian Wright Edelman

INTRODUCTION

As parents become integrally involved in a political social movement, their children also learn about the need to advocate and become engaged democratically in their community and broader in a democratic society. A parent at one urban elementary school was so inspired by her own political community in-
volvement that she decided to approach her son’s teachers to see if they might be interested in making a case study example relevant for the teachers’ 4th grade Maryland state social studies curriculum by bringing outside activism to the classroom.

Having parents help to turn activism into a social studies unit for 4th graders in one urban elementary school is a clear model for providing a re-imagined parent engagement in schools and schooling. What follows is a re-telling of the motivation of this parent, the teachers, and the broader community to collaborate and the outcome detailing exactly what they taught their students about a pressing school issue. On the surface, it seemed that the collaboration was motivated by the adults’ desires to get the students more actively engaged in the required advocacy, but it turned out that, in fact, most of the teachers claimed they taught the unit for its richness, with the activism as a by-product, which they saw as enabling the students with a personal sense of agency. Therefore, in actuality, the teachers’ intention of the social studies unit was not to teach the students social movement theory precisely, but instead, the enhanced unit offered students a rich example in complex service learning, which they found valuable. Nevertheless, just like the motivation of the parent who brought the project to life, the students ultimately gained a clear lesson in social movement theory through their involvement.

CONTEXT

As with other urban school districts, Baltimore’s schools are plagued by a variety of hurdles from a community with high concentrations of poverty to low test scores, racial isolation, frequent changes in school leadership, poor school facilities, funding challenges, and much more. At the same time, as with other urban school districts, there are also many students with promise waiting for their opportunity to break out and shine. In Baltimore City, Neil Armstrong Elementary/Middle School1 is unique in this larger urban school district. A kindergarten to grade 8 school with approximately 1,350 students, it stands out given the school’s demographic diversity with its significant middle class, white population. The three White teachers and White parent interviewed for this project all speak about the dedicated staff, administration, and parent community in this highly diverse school. The school has a variety of families from a range of socio-economic and racial backgrounds with varying levels of social capital from typical Baltimore City residents at the poverty line: some families being homeless to some families having parents who work in medicine, law, and/or academia. The two tables below contrast the differences between Neil Armstrong Elementary/Middle School’s student demographics and the rest of the school district.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Enrollment</th>
<th>82,354</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>80.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>7.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>9.40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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