

## Responding to

Brian D. Schultz's *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way*:

*Lessons from an Urban Classroom*

-A Guide for Reflection and Action-

by Shira Eve Epstein

*Spectacular Things Happen Along The Way* promotes a vibrant vision of teaching for social change from the perspective of a fifth-grade teacher in Chicago's Cabrini Green neighborhood. Over the course of one school year, the students in Room 405 developed a sophisticated advocacy plan calling for a new school building, as theirs suffered from the structural inadequacies facing many urban schools. The classrooms were cold, windows cracked, and they had neither an auditorium nor lunchroom for use. Brian Schultz, their teacher and author of the book, enacted a social action project with the fifth graders to address to their obvious concerns. While a new school was never built, we learn how Schultz and the students gained much media attention, built a base of supporters (including Ralph Nader) and developed activist skills—all while successfully meeting subject-specific state standards. The fifth graders questioned the status quo and made a durable impact on their community. They stand as role models for elementary and middle school-aged students as well as adults. Students in universities, practicing teachers, and youth workers in community-based organizations can turn to *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* for a reminder of what is possible.

Such narratives are particularly notable in our era of accountability. The rigidity of testing calendars and scripted curricula limits the likelihood of the enactment of social action projects. Teachers may feel that the pressure to meet the standards and prepare students for high-stakes tests leaves no room for them to develop projects that address relevant issues or lead to social change. While Schultz acknowledges this pressure, *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* shows how students can simultaneously develop activist *and* standards-oriented academic skills. Standards-based teaching does not need to be pitted against social action. For example, the fifth graders exercised math skills when they collected and analyzed quantitative data on the school conditions. They

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developed their English language arts skills as they created documents (e.g., petitions and letters) to raise public awareness about the school's conditions, and they read books and articles to help them place their campaign within a broader context.

Multiple audiences can reflect on Schultz's vision and the teaching practices that sustained it. *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* would serve a generative role in an education foundations class during discussions about the purposes of public education; a teacher education program to portray student-centered instruction; and a professional development class for educators or community-based organizations to provide a model of a youth participation in the community. Much of this guide is geared to these audiences. At the end of the guide, there is a section on using this text as a means to generate conversations about broad trends in American schooling and research methods among master's and doctoral students, as well as others.

Given the narrative style of the text, I suggest that readers complete *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* and then view the story holistically as they reflect on it. Below, I propose activities, prompts, and projects that can be introduced in reference to five themes: understanding social action; enacting social action curriculum; placing student voices at the center of the curriculum; developing the habits of reflective practitioners; and studying classrooms in action. Each theme is accompanied by a focus question to direct the readers, and the language of the text is intended to speak directly to them. The uplifting nature of the story positions it as a catalyst of change. This guide is meant to be an aid in this effort.

### **Understanding Social Action**

*Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* can help us study the markers of social action curriculum and view it in reference to other educational debates, concepts in educational research, and our own stories. The activities below will aid you in such analytic and reflective work. This section may be particularly helpful to undergraduate students exploring the purposes of schooling and those unfamiliar to social action curriculum in general.

Focus Question: What are the possibilities for social action curriculum in K–12 schools?

1. List everything that was “striking” or notable about the social action curriculum in Room 405. Work in small groups to explain why you chose the elements that you did and how these elements might impact K–12 students.
2. Create a visual diagram, or a concept map, showing how different components of the curriculum are related. You may want to begin by writing down various issues that drove the project on post-it notes. These could include: substandard school building; student concerns; and Schultz's student-centered teaching philosophy. Then, arrange the post-it notes on a large sheet of paper showing their relationships with each other. To guide this activity, consider the following

- questions: Which issues were at the center of the curriculum and which were at the periphery? Which issues contributed to each other?
3. Compare this social action project with other efforts to teach about and for social justice reviewed in educational scholarship. For example, some justice-oriented projects are based around the needs of others (i.e., students learn about and take action around people's life experiences unlike their own). Other projects, such as the one in Room 405, ask students to address issues in their own lives. Walter Parker's *Teaching Democracy* (2003) and Rahima Wade's *Social studies for social justice* (2007), might be helpful here as these texts describe teachers and students working towards democracy and social justice in K–12 schools. After you have identified a series of comparisons, discuss their implications. What are the possibilities and limitations of different projects?
  4. Discuss the role of race and class in the book. Some questions to guide your conversation may include: How might the project have evolved if Schultz asked a class of white students to evaluate the problems in their community? More broadly, how does race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or learning ability affect students as they enact social action projects? Jaris (a student in Room 405) thought that the students' not getting a new school had something to do with "blackness" (p. 38). Consider using this insight to prompt discussion.
  5. Read a book on urban poverty or urban schooling as a co-text so to create a sociohistorical backdrop for *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way*. You may consider Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (1991), as this is what the students in Room 405 read when building an understanding of their own experience. Also, Pauline Lipman's *High stakes education* (2007) analyzes several schools in Chicago, and therefore offers a place-specific framing of the story of Schultz and the fifth graders. Write about or discuss the role of social action projects given the realities presented in these texts.
  6. Discuss the work of the fifth graders in light of an analytic framework that illustrates the possibilities of civic education. For example, Westheimer and Kahne's *What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy* (2004) outlines different kinds of citizens:
    - i. a "personally responsible citizen acts responsibly in his or her community" by engaging in service work such as recycling
    - ii. a "participatory citizen" engages in collaborative community efforts and could be seen organizing food drives
    - iii. a "justice-oriented citizen" works collaboratively and also critically analyzes and questions the reasons why injustices persist (p. 241).
  7. Given this framework, what forms of citizenship were taught in Room 405 and how was this done? How could the project have been revised so that it would have forwarded a different form of citizenship? Would such changes have made the project more or less transformative?
  8. Debate the value of different aspects of the project in Room 405. For example:

- i. Recognizing that a new school was never built, how important is a “concrete win” in social action projects?
  - ii. Given Schultz’s sensitivity about bringing in outside speakers, how can such “experts” impact a social action project?
9. Create a chart showing how Room 405’s social action project addressed state standards. In one column, list the standards that the project addressed. In a parallel column, describe the activities that enabled the students to meet each standard. To start with, align the following activities from Chapter 3 with standards: writing a persuasive essay (pgs. 57 – 60); analyzing quantitative data (pgs. 62 – 63); conducting research on the Internet (p. 68). Use this chart to discuss how teachers can address state standards through a social action curriculum.
10. Visualize a moment in Room 405 that you think is particularly intriguing. Then, visualize what you think might have come before that moment and what came after. What new details emerge in this process? How do you see Schultz and the students’ acting?
11. Envision meeting one of Schultz’s students in 20 years. Write or act out a dialogue that you might have with him/her about this project.
12. Tell a story of a time when you were a part of a community service or social action experience.
13. Create a Venn diagram comparing/contrasting your experience with social action with that of the students in Room 405.
14. Research organizations and curricular programs that offer social action experiences. Start with the Center for Civic Education (<http://www.civiced.org>) to learn about Project Citizen, the program that instigated Room 405’s social action project. Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of these programs.
15. Observe a social action project unfold. While this work can be rare within schools today, your colleagues may know of teachers who design their instruction around social problems and scaffold opportunities for students to address them. Alternatively, contact a community-based organization that enacts social action projects for youth and ask to observe their work. Journal on the key markers of the project including the problem(s) addressed by the students, the students’ actions steps, and the impact of their work. Compare it to the project in Room 405.
16. Interview K–12 students and teachers about their experiences in social action projects and analyze how students can respond to such projects.

### **Enacting Social Action Curriculum**

*Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* promotes both thought and action. The activities below can aid you as you integrate ideas prompted by the book into your practice and plan for a social action project. This section, along with the following two, particularly addresses the interests of teacher education students, practicing teachers, and youth workers in community-based organizations. The prompts situate social action

projects within the broader world of curriculum design, leading you to identify the curriculum visions, learning objectives, and sources of knowledge that could be addressed in a social action project. You will also consider some of the possible student responses.

Focus Question: How can I enact a social action curriculum?

1. Create a timeline reviewing main events of Room 405's social action project. Star the events during which Schultz modeled a teaching move that you would like to integrate into a social action curriculum in your classroom.
2. Utilize a KWL chart to record your learning about social action curriculum. KWL charts contain three columns which record WHAT YOU KNOW, WHAT YOU WANT TO KNOW, and WHAT YOU LEARNED about a certain topic. Begin by filling the first section of the chart with examples of what you know about social action as a result of reading *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way*. Then, draft a list of questions about what you still want to know about social action curriculum in the second column. As you design and enact your own curriculum and/or pursue additional research on this topic, document what you learn in the third column.
3. Write a poem, narrative, or expository essay reviewing the values, assumptions, and theories that you would like to address in a social action curriculum. To guide your work, consider the following questions: What do I believe about the role of student voice in the curriculum? What do I believe about political participation for K–12 students? You may want to consider the values and ideals that Schultz shares on pages 11–16 to start.
4. Brainstorm the community-based issues that the K–12 students in your classroom might choose to address in a social action project. Study the local newspaper to explore how different social problems are being reported and how they may impact your students.
5. Draw a neighborhood map that identifies different sources of geographic concern or interest in the community.
6. Brainstorm various sources of knowledge (i.e., interviews with members of the community, books, the Internet, print and visual media sources) that you could introduce to the students to help them learn about their chosen issues from multiple perspectives.
7. Brainstorm the audiences that a social action project might seek to reach.
8. Review your state standards and identify those you would want to address within a social action curriculum.
9. Draft a list of 2 to 3 skills that you wish for students to develop in the context of the social action curriculum. These skills should reflect practices that adults regularly use in real-life contexts. For example, you may want your students to read the newspaper and understand the author's point of view about a social problem. Then, draft a list of 2 to 3 products that your students could create through the curriculum that are also seen in real-life contexts. You might want

- students to write their own editorials for newspapers. Design lessons and activities that could provide opportunities for students to develop these skills and create these products. In this process, you are allowing for what is called authentic assessment, in which students are being evaluated around their abilities to engage in real-life tasks.
10. Design a scoring rubric that you could use to evaluate a product that students could create within the context of the social action curriculum. To start, brainstorm what an outstanding product would look like, what a good product would look like, what an average product would look like, and what a poor product would look like. Descriptive rubrics help students identify the qualities of their work and engage in self-assessment.
  11. Drawing on many of the previous prompts, create a unit plan that incorporates a social action project. If this task is being done outside of a field-based experience, or without the cooperation of K–12 students, recognize that your plans may, or should, shift when enacted with students. Ensure that the unit plan contains the markers of a well-crafted curricular vision. Some questions that can guide you include:
    - i. What essential questions and learning objectives does this unit address? (Here is where state standards can come into play).
    - ii. What outcomes do I envision emerging from the unit?
    - iii. How will I know when the students have met these outcomes?
    - iv. What series of learning activities will lead up to these outcomes?
    - v. How are students' perspectives incorporated into the unit?
    - vi. How are students' differentiated needs met?
    - vii. How will the students' work be assessed?
    - viii. How will I ensure that the students' reflect on their experience?
  12. Collaborate with another teacher when creating this unit plan. If you are a subject-oriented teacher, partnering with a teacher from another core-content area might be particularly fruitful.
  13. If you are not able to design or enact a social action unit as a whole, consider integrating aspects of the pedagogy at work in Room 405 in your own practice. For example, create a plan to raise a discussion about a current events issue or elicit the students' opinions when envisioning the curriculum. Begin by examining a lesson plan or unit plan that you have already created, exploring ways that you could embed markers of social action curricula or student-centered teaching within it.
  14. Keep a journal recording your learning as you enact a social action unit or craft your teaching practices in reference to these ideas. Note your questions, successes, and struggles.

### **Placing Student Voices at the Center of the Curriculum**

Schultz's intent to enact an emergent curriculum—reflecting his students' interests and needs—is continuously emphasized in *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way*. He

made great efforts to place his students' voices at the center of the classroom, as opposed to his own interests, state standards, or a top-down curriculum mandates. The activities listed here promote a critical awareness of teaching moves that may be observed in a student-centered curriculum.

Focus Question: How can I allow for an emergent curriculum that reflects the interests and needs of the students?

1. List the ways that the students in Room 405 directed their social action project.
2. In dialogic teaching, ideas are drawn from the students, rather than pushed in by the teachers. Through this teaching, students and teachers share in the inquiry process and students are often seen talking directly to each other, not through the teacher. Discuss the role of dialogic teaching strategies in curriculum enactments in general, and social action projects in particular. Why and when are they important? How can such dialogic encounters emerge?
3. Write a lesson plan that incorporates a dialogic discussion, such as the one that the students had at the very start of the project (pp. 26–29). How would you scaffold this experience?
4. Debate the implications of Schultz's interest in following his students' lead. For example, he acknowledged that if the students had chosen "fruit punch for lunch" as the focus of their social action project, he would have supported it in the name of student voice (p. 3). What are the strengths and limitations of this approach? Are there certain student concerns that you might not place at the center of the project? Why?
5. Teachers who are attuned to individual student needs and interests often differentiate their instruction providing opportunities for students to work with different materials and on different tasks at the same time. Schultz modeled this approach. For example, near the start of the project, the students broke into small groups focused on different parts of the action plan including a video documentary and a petition (p. 48). Importantly, the students joined the cluster that met their interests. Discuss the implications of such differentiated instruction. Consider the following critique: If students are doing different things, how can we ensure that they are all getting a good education?
6. The social action unit evolved as a collaborative endeavor—all of the students worked together towards one goal. On a poster, envision and visually present how the project would have compared if the students worked independently or in small groups around multiple social problems. How would this teaching decision have impacted the airing and incorporation of student voice?
7. As the project began, Schultz commented on this new experience: "For the first time as a teacher, I was on a more equal level to my students: Neither of us knew the potential outcome of our forays into politics" (p. 40). Discuss

- this quote with a partner. Have you ever been in such a position as a teacher? What risks and possibilities does this position allow?
8. In a journal entry, respond to the following questions on teacher voice:  
Should teachers share their own opinions on current or controversial issues?  
To what extent do you plan to share your own opinions in the classroom?  
How might your willingness to share your own views impact the emergence of dialogic discussions in your classroom?
  9. Schultz is a strong advocate for the integration of student voice. He notes: “If there are few barriers to true democratic participation, students often choose to make their curriculum one of social action. They intuitively seek out ways to help the greater good and reach for higher moral ground instead of focusing on simpler tasks, as skeptics claim” (p. 139). Discuss this claim. Do you agree? How do your experiences with students compare or support this view?
  10. Compose a story that reviews how a different decision about student empowerment on Schultz’s part may have impacted the project. For example, what would have happened if he had not involved the students in about whether Jeffrey Ruiz should visit Room 405 (pp. 71—75)?
  11. Document your intentions and goals for integrating student voice into the curriculum.

### **Developing the Habits of Reflective Practitioners**

Whether a curriculum is based around a social action project or another unifying feature and vision, the value of teacher reflection during curriculum enactment is paramount. Teaching is a dynamic experience, filled with ongoing questions and decisions. Schultz’s reflective voice penetrates the text as he models for us how we may analyze our work and makes us unafraid to admit to doubt. Use the following activities to explore the potential of your own reflective stance as a teacher.

Focus Question: How can I reflect on my own teaching practices?

1. Use *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* as a model of a teaching journey and develop a narrative around a teaching journey of your own. You may want to create a visual representation of your journey. Be sure to start with a review of your own schooling experience, as Schultz does on pages 16–18.
2. Compare Schultz’s reflective stance with your own. What questions does Schultz ask himself that you ask yourself? What questions seem at odds with your teaching perspectives?
3. Review an instance in which Schultz questions himself and describe his reflective stance. For example, re-read pages 56–58 that document Schultz’s views of the press release on their project. Then, journal on the following questions: What does he do as he reflects on his practice? What prompts his reflection? When do

- you question your practice in this way? How does your reflective practice compare to his? What new reflective habits might you adopt?
4. Pick a theorist that offered Schultz direction (e.g., John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Joseph Schwab, or Lisa Delpit), study his/her work, and write on how his/her theories may impact your classroom practice.
  5. Develop a teacher reflection group in which you work to articulate your teaching goals and values. Compare them to those that emerge for the other members of your group and those that guided Schultz's practice.
  6. When a colleague critiqued Schultz's work, he asked her to help him address her concern (p. 132). Consider how you respond to conflict in reference to your teaching. Write a dialog between yourself and one of your teaching colleagues in reference to an issue on which you have differing views.
  7. Create a teacher research project to help you understand the way your practices shape the experiences of your students. You can base this research project around a social action project. Use the following steps to guide your work:
    - i. Create two to three research questions that represent what you want to find out about your classroom.
    - ii. Determine what sources of data you will collect to answer your questions.
    - iii. Collect this data.
    - iv. Analyze the data by finding common themes that address the research questions.
    - v. Propose how your analysis will impact your future teaching.

### **Studying Classrooms in Action**

An intriguing documentation of an urban classroom, *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* offers students and researchers a study to consider when designing their own research agenda or analyzing broad educational trends. This section presents activities that can help readers explore how the social action curriculum reflects themes in American educational history and the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of research design. Also, these exercises prompt discussions about the presentation of the study itself.

Focus Question: How does this case relate to broader trends in American schooling and what research and writing practices informed its emergence?

1. Create a concept map or diagram showing how the social action project in Room 405 compares to other events in American educational history. What patterns does it perpetuate? What patterns does it question? For example, Schultz is dedicated to questioning norms of cultural reproduction, "where the norms and values of a particular group's previous generations are repeated," explained on p.

13. How and when have American schools supported cultural reproduction? How does Schultz work against this expectation?
2. Schultz is a questioner. He regularly shares his questions and concerns with the reader. Compose three to four research questions to which the text ultimately responds. You may want to start on page 9 by reviewing the questions he realized at the start of the project.
3. Outline the elements of Schultz’s theoretical framework and consider which theories you may want to integrate into your own work. Pages 134–148 offer many ideas to explore.
4. List the data collection strategies that were at work in this study. Ask yourself: What forms of data were gathered in order to write this book?
5. Discuss Schultz’s positional as a teacher-researcher in his own classroom. What biases might impact his rendering of the story? How does he account for his biases?
6. *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* is written exclusively from Schultz’s perspective. Discuss this decision in small groups. Use the following focus questions:
  - i. What does Schultz make of his decision to position himself as storyteller?
  - ii. What are the possibilities and limitations of narrating from a teacher voice?
  - iii. How would the telling have been different if Room 405’s project was described from a student’s point of view?
  - iv. How would the telling have been different if the project was described from the perspective of an outside observer?
7. Evaluate the rendering of the case. What aspects of Schultz’s writing style interest you? For example, he reviews much of his theoretical frame at the end of the book, broadening his lens before concluding. What do you make of this? In what ways do you want to apprentice yourself to Schultz as a researcher and writer? In what ways do you want to set yourself apart?
8. Write three questions that you have for Schultz.
9. Write a review of the book for your classmates.

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