
The “Community as Classroom Initiative:” The Case of Futures Academy in Buffalo, New York

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This paper will examine efforts of the U.B. Center for Urban Studies to build a *university-assisted community school* centered neighborhood development initiative in the Fruit Belt, a distressed community in Buffalo, New York. The goal is turn Futures Academy (School 37), a traditional Pre- K through 8th grade public school into a university-assisted community school that drives the neighborhood regeneration process in the Fruit Belt.

University-assisted community school-centered neighborhood development is a concept based on two inter-related ideas. First, a *university-assisted community school* is both a place and set of partnerships and activities that turn a traditional school into a “hub” for the community and an entity that helps to educate, engage, empower and serve all members of the community in which the school is located. In these schools, there is an integrated focus on academics, social services, community-based activities, and neighborhood development. An authentic community school, then, is a vital neighborhood anchor, which not only educates students, but that also provides services. Because of its community connection, residents view the school as a neighborhood institution that should be preserved and developed.¹

Second, within this context, an authentic *university-assisted community school* turns its “set of partnerships” into a *collaborative* that drives the comprehensive, integrated development of the distressed neighborhood in which the school is located. As the “central hub” around which neighborhood life evolves, community schools are strategically positioned to lead the regeneration process. This notion is based on the principle that a significant relationship exists between better schools and better neighborhoods. Therefore, school reform and neighborhood redevelopment must march in tandem. Put another way, underperforming public schools and distressed neighborhoods are interrelated problems that must be solved conjointly.² This strategy is based on the belief that public schools can function as *neighborhood change* agents and strategic centers of collaboration which engage residents and stakeholders in authentic struggles to transform their community. In this community school model, we emphasize “university-assisted” because universities possess the fiscal and human resources necessary to provide sustained and comprehensive support for community schools.³

In this essay, we situate the problem of underperforming schools and distressed neighborhoods in the broader context of building the *new urban metro*; a critical task for regions in the United States.⁴ For reasons discussed below, recreating the urban metropolis is key to developing a prosperous and sustainable nation, with

vibrant local communities that provide a high quality of life. Central cities should be the backbone of this *new urban metro*.⁵ For this to happen, distressed neighborhoods must be turned into places capable of functioning as building blocks for cities, which will then produce robust cities that are able to anchor the *new urban metro*.⁵

The paper is divided into three parts. The first part analyzes the interactive relationship among underperforming schools, distressed neighborhoods, and the building of the *new urban metro*. The second discusses the pedagogical model that provides the foundation for our *Community as Classroom* initiative at Futures Academy. Part three examines the community context in which Futures is located and discusses our quest to transform this institution into an authentic *university-assisted community school* capable of driving the neighborhood regeneration effort.

The Challenge

The most critical challenge facing urban regions in the 21st century is the building of a *new urban metro*, one based on participatory democracy and racial and social justice.⁶ The current growth model embraces economic and population decentralization: as metros expand, jobs decentralize, inner city neighborhoods become distressed, poverty suburbanizes, central cities and inner suburbs decline, and communities sprawl. This process of growth contributes to regional fragmentation, environmental degradation, global warming, residential exclusivity, race and class segregation, and ultimately increases significantly the cost of governing.⁷

The socioeconomic consequences associated with this dominate approach to developing urban regions necessitates the creation of a new type of urban settlement—the new urban metro. In this approach, urban development is driven back toward the central city and inner suburbs, and metros are built that are based on race and class diversity, dense settlement patterns, mixed land-use, and the creation of inter-modal transit systems that are efficient, environmentally friendly and capable of moving people and goods throughout the metropolitan region in an efficacious manner.

The Distressed Neighborhood Problem

This brings us to the problem of distressed neighborhoods. This is the most strategic problem facing central cities and it must be solved if cities are to become the foundations of the *new urban metro*. As long as the middle-class views the central city as the epicenter of crime, violence, poor schooling, and declining property values, the new urban metro cannot be built successfully.

Fear will catalyze opposition to policies that encourage recentralization and promote housing affordability and residential inclusivity.⁹ Therefore, transforming distressed neighborhoods into great places to live, work, and raise a family will not be easy. Neighborhood distress is a *wicked problem* characterized by a host of interrelated issues, including underperforming schools, poverty, crime, violence, bad housing and a decaying infrastructure, as well as a growing underclass that lacks the education and training required for successful participation in our increasingly sophisticated, high technology, and computer-based society.¹⁰ Within this context, underperforming schools have become the symbol of distressed neighborhoods. Characterized by poor academic achievement and high dropout rates, these schools are blamed for many of the socioeconomic problems faced by troubled communities.¹¹

The problem of neighborhood distress, however, is a more complex one. We believe that underperforming schools are only one symptom of problems whose roots do not lie in the classroom and corridors of educational institutions, but in the broader fabric of the neighborhood, the city and the region in which the school is situated.¹² Thus, an interactive relationship exists between underperforming schools and neighborhood distress. Consistent with the 'neighborhoods matter' and 'resilience' literature, this viewpoint posits that vibrant neighborhoods produce positive socioeconomic outcomes for residents, while troubled communities have the opposite effect. Neighborhoods that function in a healthy, productive manner provide protective factors for the residents, while dilapidated and violent communities place residents at risk.¹³ To acquire a level of security, human and economic, all children need to feel safe and secure at home, in their neighborhood and in school. This sense of safety is necessary to grow, learn and develop, to become a conscious participant in the world and to have not only the desire but also the ability to be a social and political actor in life.¹⁴ Students who learn in safe, positive environments are more successful than those subjected to risk.

Given the complex, interactive nature of this *wicked problem*, the only way to solve the problem of underperforming schools is to transform simultaneously both the underperforming schools and the distressed neighborhoods in which they are located.¹⁵ Geoffrey Canada, who founded the Harlem's Children's Zone, put it this way: "Fix the schools without fixing the families and the community, and children will fail; but they also will fail if you improve the surrounding community without fixing the schools."¹⁶ Canada's provocative thesis suggests that the 'neighborhood-place' is the basic unit and focal point for

urban regeneration and the revival of community spirit and culture.

Given this reality, we believe the *university-assisted community school* centered neighborhood development strategy is the best approach to solving the problem of underperforming schools and distressed neighborhoods.¹⁷ The goal of turning neighborhoods into the building blocks of strong, solid cities will be realized in practice only by turning public schools into the engines that drive the transformation process.

Building a University-Assisted Community School Centered Neighborhood Development Initiative

Turning a "traditional public school" into a "university assisted community school,"¹⁸ which is capable of functioning as a catalytic agent within the neighborhood, is an extremely complex process that involves the realization of three interactive enterprises:

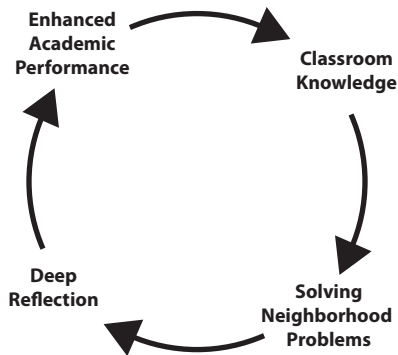
1. Developing an action-oriented, problem-based pedagogical model that enables students to apply the knowledge learned inside the academic classroom to solve real-world neighborhood problems outside the school building, along with popularizing the academic based community service learning courses within the university;
2. Transforming the school into a "hub" of neighborhood life and culture and a "laboratory of democracy" where parents, teachers, students, and residents and stakeholders work collaboratively to build the neighborhood and enhance the school;
3. Turning the community into an environment where residents and stakeholders are engaged in lifelong learning, are highly supportive of academic achievement, and are engaged in the quest to improve the school; *a learning community*.¹⁸

The Community as Classroom Pedagogical Model

Developing an authentic, fully developed university-assisted community school centered neighborhood development initiative is not an event, but a process that occurs over an extended time period. Therefore, the first step in this protracted effort is the establishment of a student-centered academic program that connects learning to neighborhood development and place-making activities.¹⁹ The neighborhood is also a classroom where students work with residents and stakeholders to use knowledge and skills gained in school to make the neighborhood a better place to live and work. In this approach, there is a sequential, looping feedback system among classroom knowledge, its application to the resolution of neighborhood problems, deep reflection and enhanced

academic performance by the students (Figure 1).

Figure 1:
Community as Classroom Learning Paradigm



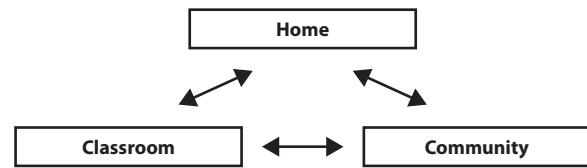
This type of academic program must be grounded in an action-based pedagogical model, which is capable of contextualizing the learning experiences of children in neighborhood problem-solving and place-making activities.²⁰ Developing and implementing such a teaching method in a public school setting, therefore, is the first stage in the process of building an authentic *university assisted community school centered* model of neighborhood development.ⁱⁱ

The pedagogic model used in our approach is based on a fusion of the work of John Dewey, Paulo Freire and other theories of active learning. We view learning as a continual activity, taking place at home, in the school, and in the community (Figure 2). Learning experiences in one place trigger questions and build upon knowledge accumulated in the other places and spaces, thus forming continual feedback and feed-forward loops that reinforce one another and that form the basis of the *community as classroom* initiative.²¹ The goal is to develop critically conscious students who love to learn, recognize that their entire environment is their “classroom” and who are thus more apt to become civically engaged citizens who are aware, productive and care for and about their neighbors.²²

This model is based on the hypothesis that students from distressed neighborhoods are not motivated to learn because they do not see a relationship between the lessons learned in the academic classroom and their ability to make their own lives better or to improve the conditions inside their community. Education is typically advertised as a ticket out of the neighborhood, a way to achieve the good life; it is a form of individual advancement that eschews group loyalty. Education is meant to be individually and personally rewarding, not communally transformative.²³ Thus, if you embark on the

education express train, it will take to a world of happiness, success, and material rewards, far away from the neighborhood where you began your journey.²⁴

Figure 2:
A Child’s Three Interactive Learning Environments



However, even in this context, many young people do not believe the advertisement. “Students make judgments about what goals are important to them and also they make judgments about their ability to accomplish these goals.”²⁵ They see many educated people who continue to struggle, who do not live the good life; and they are further conflicted by the idea that education, when used as a vehicle to escape, often causes one to leave family, friends and community behind.²⁶ In the inner city, then, education, which is informed by individualism and consumerism, and which is not linked to the development of *critical consciousness*, will not inspire most students to prioritize schooling.²⁷

The renowned African American scholar, Carter G. Woodson, referred to this type of education, which is devoid of *critical consciousness*, as “miseducation.” By this Woodson meant that *authentic* education must be used as an instrument for freedom and liberation, and not as a mechanism to reinforce subordination, passivity, and the acceptance of injustice.²⁸ With little faith in the transformative power of education, many students from depressed neighborhoods do not even bother completing high school—they just dropout. This is extremely problematic due to the fact that in today’s society, “a high school diploma is the minimum qualification for full participation in the U.S. economy,”²⁹ and those without one are doomed to a life of struggle on the economic margin.

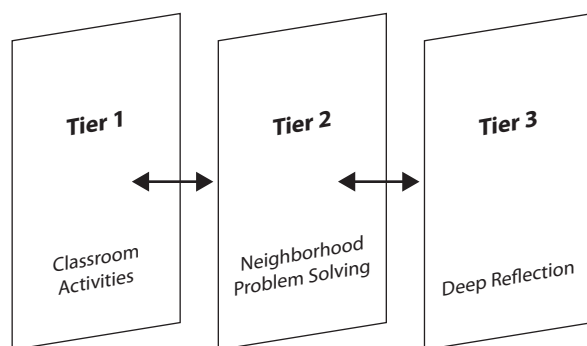
To change this “anti-education” mindset among students in distressed neighborhoods, we need a pedagogical model that enables students to apply the knowledge gained in the “academic classroom” to improve conditions their neighborhoods and in their own lives; a model that asserts the power of knowledge, not only to equip one to earn a living, but to also create a world worth living in. Toward this end, we root our model in an active learning modality in which students are continu-

ously engaged in the process of neighborhood development and place-making, as part of a collective process of building a democratic community, which is anchored by the principles of solidarity, collaboration, reciprocity, racial and social justice and cosmopolitanism.³⁰

The idea is to develop an academic program that is child-centered, action-based and that fosters problem-solving skills by engaging students in place-making activities and by working on real world neighborhood development issues. It is critically important for students to see the relationship between the knowledge gained in the classroom (math, science, reading, writing, history, literature, etc.) and their ability to use that knowledge to improve neighborhood conditions, as well as to make their own lives better. In this sense, we want to construct a learning environment where students (and teachers) learn how to value and use "community" knowledge to expand and enrich "academic" knowledge, which they, in turn, use to problem solve, place make and build the neighborhood.

Deep reflection on their learning experiences is an essential part of the knowledge acquisition process in this approach.³¹ Real knowledge acquisition, we argue, comes from the integration of classroom learning with action-based problem solving and deep reflection.³² These three dimensions of knowledge acquisition are interconnected. Classroom activities provide students with the first tier of knowledge and skills, while the application of this knowledge to neighborhood problem-solving provides the second tier of knowledge acquisition and skill development. Deep reflection, the third tier, involves critically thinking through all of the learning experiences, mistakes and successes, and then drawing lessons for the future (Figure 3).³³ Knowledge that is obtained at each tier reinforces knowledge that is obtained at the other tiers, thereby, producing a powerful *learning synergism*. Thus, in this model, knowledge acquisition is both sequential and multi-directional.

Figure 3:
Three Dimensions of Knowledge Acquisition



This reflective activity will enable students to forge a *critical consciousness*, as they learn how to situate their experiences in historical, cultural, and social contexts and how to recognize their ability to improve the conditions in the world outside of their traditional classroom--their own neighborhood.³⁴ In this way students will come to value knowledge as a tool that enables them to bring about changes in the real world. This approach reinforces John Dewey's notion that the intelligence and maturity of children develop best when they are involved in the quest to solve the puzzling real-world problems confronting them and their families and when they are given the opportunity to reflect deeply on these problems.³⁵

Teachers, in this approach, serve as guides that move the students through each of the learning tiers and then show them how to apply the knowledge learned to new "problem" situations. The fundamental principle is that "real life" issues provide opportunities for teachers and students to collaborate, problem-solve, and reflect and this process models an authentic participatory democracy.³⁶ This type of pedagogical method is critical in an inner city setting, where so many students underperform academically, drop out of school, and make poor choices that sometimes lead to premature death or incarceration. This happens, we argue, because inner city students do not see a relationship between education and the ability to improve their lives and make their neighborhoods better places to live. Without understanding this vital connection between education and community building, we do not believe students will be motivated to learn and develop fully their talents and skills.³⁷ Thus, our pedagogic model is not only a method of teaching, but it is also a community building activity that contributes to the holistic development of young people—good students, engaged neighborhood residents, and community change agents.

The Neighborhood and School Context

The Neighborhood: The Fruit Belt

Futures Academy is located in the Fruit Belt, one of Buffalo's "official" downtown neighborhoods (Figure 4). Situated on the eastern side of Main Street, it contains the Buffalo-Niagara Medical Center and is within a stone's throw of the artsy *Allen Town* and *Downtown* neighborhoods.ⁱⁱⁱ The Buffalo-Niagara Medical Center is the center of Western New York's health and life science industries and is the foundation of the region's knowledge intensive economy. The concentration of health related industries within the Medical Center itself, along with the concentration of businesses, retail establishments, community-based agencies, and public schools in

Figure 4:
Fruit Belt Neighborhood



and near the Fruit Belt, make the area a major regional employment center. For example, within a half-mile radius of the community, there are close to 30,000 jobs, and with the continued investment of the University of Buffalo in the medical campus, the area will become even more prosperous.³⁸

The Fruit Belt, unfortunately, has not benefited from this economic prosperity and the community possesses all the characteristic features of a highly distressed neighborhood. According to the City of Buffalo's Neighborhood Condition Index, which ranks neighborhoods on the basis of quality of life, the Fruit Belt is #52 out of a total of 54 neighborhoods. This residential neighborhood, which is predominantly African American, has fewer than 2,000 people. The neighborhood population base is very unstable and dropped from 3,837 in 1990 to about 2000, in 2008, a population loss of approximately 48% in about 18 years. About 58% of the households are headed by women, and the average household income in 2000 was approximately \$23,000, less than half of the Buffalo area median income of \$46,900 per household. The 2000 unemployment rate was 25% with only 47% of the eligible workers participating in the labor force. As of the year 2000, only 13% of the adult population had an associate's degree or higher, and a staggering 47% of the population lived below the poverty line.³⁹

The School: Futures Academy (School 37)

Futures Academy is a pre-K–8th grade neighborhood magnet school, which draws its students from inside the neighborhood and across the city. Although originally designed to offer students a curriculum that prepared them for futuristic careers, Futures Academy now uses its magnet school status only for recruiting students citywide. About a third of the 694 students re-

side in the Fruit Belt, with the remainder being drawn from other low-income neighborhoods in Buffalo. The school is predominantly African American, with a handful of whites, Latinos, and Native Americans. Nearly all students attending Futures meet eligibility standards for free or reduced price lunches and the school performs well below New York's learning standards in English Language Arts and Math classes at all grade levels. Most of the teachers at Futures have more than three years of experiences and about 19% have a Master's degree or higher. The school is led by a progressive, M.D. educated, African American principal, who often reminds students that she, herself, grew up in the Fruit Belt neighborhood.⁴⁰ This is extremely helpful in reinforcing our learning *credo* that education is not about *escaping* the neighborhood, but using one's knowledge to regenerate it.

The Intervention Strategy: Building an Authentic University-Assisted Community School

In the fall of 2001, the UB Center for Urban Studies (CENTER) started working with Futures Academy with the intent of transforming the school into a *university-assisted community school*, capable of driving the regeneration of the Fruit Belt neighborhood. The CENTER, in partnership with neighborhood residents, also launched a neighborhood revitalization effort at the same time. Our long term strategy, then, is to connect school reform at Futures Academy to the neighborhood regeneration process, and to ultimately turn the school into the engine that drives that regeneration process.

Two factors make this quest especially challenging. The first is that students at Futures are recruited from both inside the neighborhood and across the city and only a third of these students actually live in the Fruit Belt. This means that for many of the children, the changes they help bring about in the community will not have a direct impact on their lives because they live elsewhere. Even so, the literature on traditional, K-12 service learning programs shows that these initiatives have a positive effect on students, even when the service does not take place in their own community. Moreover, studies show that learning activities focused on solving real-world problems are superior to traditional teaching methodologies that often focus on didactic information delivery and memorization. The brain fatigues quickly if only factual information is delivered. The best learning occurs when a student is aroused and stimulated. When both the emotional and cognitive parts of the brain are activated in a positive way, the brain releases chemicals that actually enhance learning and recall.⁴²

The *community as classroom* is an engaged learning approach and will have a positive impact on student academic development. This will not only lead to improvement in the local community but provide students who live elsewhere, with tools to use in the development of their own neighborhoods. When students attend schools that focus on engaged, achievement oriented teaching, that is relationally tied to *community*, an environment is established that promotes academic and social competence, and that in turn promotes self-esteem, autonomy, problem-solving and connectedness.⁴³

The second constraint is that Futures, along with all Buffalo Public Schools, has a very rigid curriculum, which is geared toward students meeting the New York State Academic Standards.^{iv} In this setting, it is challenging for teachers to immediately integrate our *Community as Classroom* pedagogical activities into their regular classroom activities. Most teachers at Futures often feel overwhelmed and are not likely take on new activities that are perceived to add to their workload. For this reason, we developed a program that *compliments* the existing school curriculum, although it is not an "official" component of the school curriculum. Nonetheless, we do involve teachers, in varying degrees, in both the development and implementation of the *Community as Classroom* initiative. For example, an eighth grade science teacher assists in the development of programs and coordinate our activities within the school. The art teacher works with us on various projects, and a number of teachers participate in the annual Clean-A-Thon, which will be discussed later.

Given the complexity of this challenge, we understood from the beginning that the transformation of Futures into an authentic university-assisted community school was going to be a long-term process. The strategy, then, was to introduce an action-oriented, problem-based learning program into the school environment that *complemented* the existing curriculum. Then, gradually, over time, the objective was to infuse activities and projects based on this pedagogy throughout the school curriculum. It was anticipated that the successes of the program would trigger interest among other teachers and students. Toward this end, we would use a variety of methods to arouse teacher and student interest and involvement in the program. Moreover, as teachers became convinced of the positive impacts of this approach, we posited that they would find ways to integrate real-world problem-solving activities into their own classroom activities.

The Program: The Community as Classroom Initiative

The *community as classroom* uses the Fruit Belt neighborhood as a classroom where students use the knowledge and skills learned in the traditional classroom to work with neighborhood residents and stakeholders to solve problems in the 'neighborhood' classroom. There are four components that comprise the initiative: *Neighborhood Building*, *Community Heritage*, *Community Parks and Gardens*, *Community Art*. The varied components are highly interactive and relate to different aspects of the community development process. The *community as classroom*, as previously mentioned, compliments the school's curriculum, but it is not integrated into regular classroom activities. All of our activities occur during the school day, with students participating in the program being given release time from their science/social studies blocks. Referrals to the program come from the school guidance counselor, principal, and teachers, with some students referring themselves, after hearing about the program from participating students.

1.0 Neighborhood Building

The *Neighborhood Building* component introduces students to the dynamics of building and developing their community and consists of two interactive programs – the *Future City* and *Clean-A-Thon* projects. The goal of the *Future City* program is to show students that a connection exists between public policy and the city and neighborhood development process. The idea is to debunk the notion that conditions in distressed neighborhoods or elsewhere are the products of a natural developmental process, rather than the outcome of a human decision-making and resource allocation process. Through their participation in these community-focused experiences, the students will come to understand the role that public policy plays, along with human agency, in the building and maintaining of their neighborhoods. In this way, they can truly appreciate how collaboration with residents, stakeholders, and government agents can lead to policy and program change and ultimately improve neighborhood conditions.

Future City

The *Future City*TM competition engages the students in a simulated problem-solving activity with real world implications. Each year, as part of a broader national competition, we develop one or two teams of no more than 10 seventh and eighth grade students, who use *SimCity*TM software to build a futuristic city based on a specific theme such as nanotechnology, transportation, or alternative energy sources. In this process, they

explore various policy choices and decide which ones to apply in the building of their city. In addition to developing a computerized city, they must also construct a scale model of a smaller portion of the city. The students take field trips, using the broader community as their ‘classroom’, to deepen their understanding of the theme and to gain insight into ways that the policy and decision making process shapes neighborhoods and cities. Local engineers and urban planners volunteer to work with the students in the development of their projects. This further facilitates neighborhood connections and deepens the ties between students and role models in the larger community. Literature on risk and resilience for children concludes that fostering bonding experiences and connections with prosocial people helps to mitigate risk, increasing chances for student success.⁴⁴

In addition to hands-on project work, the students actively reflect on each day’s activity in a semi-guided hand-written journal. Between September and January, the students are involved in the construction of their computer city and a scaled model of a smaller section of the city. After the January competition, the students are required to reflect on their experiences. Not only do they engage in group discussions about lessons learned, but they must also write a short essay on their experiences. After the reflection exercise, they spend the remainder of the school year working on select neighborhood projects. The idea is for them to use the knowledge and skills learned in the Future City competition to work on “real life” problems in the Fruit Belt.

The Clean-A-Thon

The Community Clean-A-Thon is a community building project, which seeks to create linkages between Futures Academy and residents and stakeholders by using a neighborhood clean-up to improve the health and visual image of the community. A major objective is show students that even with limited resources a community can improve its living environment. The guiding principle is that *citizen participation* and *building partnerships* are the keys to building a strong community. Thus, the Clean-A-Thon is an empowering strategy and an organizing vehicle that connects Futures Academy to residents and stakeholders.

The Clean-A-Thon is organized around the theme, “Collective Work and Responsibility,” which stresses the importance of the entire community taking control of the neighborhood’s destiny. The Clean-A-Thon evolves through two stages. The first stage occurs from September through March. During this time, the students study neighborhood blighting patterns and develop plans on

how to deploy “cleaning brigades” on the actual day of the Clean-A-Thon. What sets the Clean-A-Thon apart from other programs is that teachers at Futures Academy drive the event. The CENTER funds the program, but the school, under the leadership of one the teachers, is responsible for most of the event’s organization. The Clean-A-Thon day is divided into two segments. The morning segment is devoted to cleaning up the neighborhood, while the afternoon is set aside for a community celebration. The goal of the festival is not only to celebrate the successful clean-up, but also to deepen the bonds betwixt and between teachers, students, residents and stakeholders.

2.0 Community Heritage

Neighborhood pride and identity are critical community building components because they create attachment to place and give students, along with residents, a stake in the neighborhood development process. The purpose of the *Community Heritage* component is to provide students with an opportunity to gain insight into the Fruit Belt’s history, its process of development, and forces that have driven its development over time. The ultimate goal is for students to learn how to reflect on the past in order to gain insight into the present and formulate perspectives for the future. The *Community Heritage* project represents an effort to begin the systematic analysis of the neighborhood’s history.

This year, the students initiated a study of the social history of houses in the Fruit Belt. This is the first stage of a long-term project that will end with the implementation of a neighborhood housing preservation plan. The current focus is on an investigation of the ways that successive generations of residents have grappled with the adaptive reuse of neighborhood houses within the con-

Figure 5:
Clean-A-Thon 2008



text of the social, cultural and technological changes taking place in society. By locating the housing units at different points in time, the students are able to understand how residents continually remake dwelling units, and the neighborhood, to meet their changing needs. The project covers the period from 1850 to 1940 and identifies all the neighborhood homes built during that epoch. A profile was developed on each house which includes a history of the occupants and key neighborhood, city and national events that took place at different moments in the life-cycle of each home.

3.0 Community Parks and Gardens

The development of community parks and gardens is one the most important neighborhood place making activities in the *Community as Classroom* initiative. It is a community building activity that brings residents, stakeholders, and students together to turn unkempt vacant lots into parks, vegetable gardens, playgrounds, and recreational areas. This initiative consists of three ongoing and highly related activities.

Futures Garden

The goal of this project is to maintain the Futures Garden and to transform it into a community ArtPark, which reflects the culture of young people. The garden stretches along Carlton, from Orange to Peach Street, directly in front of Futures Academy. In 2003, the site occupied by Futures Garden was nothing more than a series of unkempt vacant lots, which symbolized the powerlessness of students, teachers, and residents. These lots were a vivid daily reminder to the school community that this was a worthless and uncared for part of the city. Futures Academy students, in partnership with neighborhood residents and the Center for Urban Studies, decided to change this message. UB graduate students assisted the students in planning a passive garden, acquiring control over the land, and overseeing the construction of a park. The Futures students learned that even with limited resources, they had the power to alter the visual image of the community through a vacant lot management strategy. Students continue to maintain the garden and also work with other students in the CommunityArt component to transform Futures Garden into an ArtPark, which reflects youth culture.

The Vegetable Garden

The CENTER, in partnership with neighborhood residents, and Futures students, is also developing a model vegetable garden. For a number of years, a vegetable garden was managed by the Friendly Fruit Belt

Block Club. However, current club members, who are growing more elderly, can no longer manage the garden alone, and a collaborative of stakeholders and residents have evolved to develop a model garden to hopefully encourage other community members to join in the development of gardens across the Fruit Belt. Within this framework, we use the garden, again as a part of the 'community classroom', to teach Futures students about gardening, nutrition, and environmental issues, and to popularize gardening among community residents, especially young people. For example, this past spring, the children participated in a bioremediation project conducted by the Buffalo Museum of Science in which they learned how to use mustard plants to cleanse the soil of specific contaminants.

Creative Playspace

The creative playspace initiative is a new project aimed at developing a play area for young children that is designed to spark their creativity, resourcefulness and imagination, as well as stimulate sustained physical play. There is both a health and education dimension attached to this project. Children who participate in active play are healthier; they are less likely to be obese or to develop obesity-related health problems. However, in the Fruit Belt, playgrounds are scarce and the playgrounds that do exist are conventional in design and contain standardized play equipment that fails to sustain long-term interest among the children. The playspace initiative seeks to solve this problem by constructing a recreational area that presents the types of physical and intellectual challenges that will sustain interest and encourage physical play. As Albert Einstein said, "imagination is more important than knowledge" because it leads to the type of innovative, *out-of-the-box* thinking that is so crucial to the development of complex problem solving skills. Creativity, then, is the generator of novel ideas, concepts and approaches to solving complicated problems. We hypothesize that *creative playspace* can contribute to the development of imagination and creativity in young children, thereby facilitating their interest in learning and enhancing academic growth.

This project is informed by the methodology that we used in the design and construction of *Futures Garden*. We organized a team of students to design the *creative playspace*, which will be located on the campus of the CAO-UB Center for Community Wellness and Neighborhood Development. The idea is to build a play space that will become a focal point of activity for children between the ages of 8-11, who live in the Fruit Belt. In the fall of 2008, six students, two from each fifth grade

classroom, were assigned to the *Creative Playspace* Design Team and are responsible for designing the creative playspace, under the guidance of a Center for Urban Studies fellow in landscape design.

Work sessions last for one-hour and begin with students spending time reflecting and writing down thoughts and ideas in their journals. The remainder of the sessions focuses on various design activities. The first part of the year, between September and December, the students completed a site analysis of the playspace area. During the second part of the year, they have been developing and testing various design scenarios. They will complete the design of the creative playspace before the school year ends. Next year, the students will develop a budget for the playspace and begin to fund raise.

4.0 Community Art Project

The community art project involves students in the struggle to change the visual image of their community by adorning it with a range of art projects. The principle is to show students how they can change the way their neighborhood looks and feels. Dilapidation and a forlorn environment do not have to be the characteristic features of distressed communities. Within this framework, we want students to think aggressively about ways to re-image their community and to imbue it with the energy of youth culture. Over the past five years, the students have produced some rather dramatic projects. For example, working in partnership with the Locust Street Art Class, they produced a mural, which consists of about four hundred small panels, to cover the fence surrounding a small neighborhood park. They also designed and built two benches for the park.

They students produced a unique sign, which consisted of a bench and a decorative archway, for a block-long garden/park designed by Futures students and built by the UB Center for Urban Studies. Moreover, while Futures was being rehabilitated, the students were permitted to develop a mural, along the wall fronting the entrance to the school. The mural consisted of several hundred small tiles, with a different design painted on each one. Now, the first thing they see when entering the school is the mural, which symbolically proclaims, "This school belongs to you." And the first thing they see when they leave school is the sign and garden that symbolically says, "This neighborhood belongs to you."

They students have also developed art projects designed to get young people to "stop the violence" and to turn derelict old houses into works of art. The public spaces, on which the community art projects have been erected, have become "sacred" places, which are never

vandalized. Thus, the actual work of the students is becoming a real part of their community, not only increasing the aesthetic value of the environment but sending positive, uplifting messages to all who live and work there. This is a real sign of active citizenship.

The Diffusion Strategy: Popularizing the Community as Classroom Initiative

A fundamental goal of the *Community as Classroom* initiative is for our active learning and problem-solving pedagogy to become integrated into the regular classroom activities of teachers at Futures Academy. For this to happen, teachers must be convinced that this approach to teaching and learning will bolster the academic performance of their students. Building awareness and support for the initiative is the first step in the process. Here, the goal is to popularize the *Community as Classroom* concept and demonstrate that participation in it can enhance student success.

Toward this end, we have adopted several strategies to popularize this initiative and demonstrate its effectiveness. First, students in the *Community as Classroom* initiative participate in the weekly grade-level teacher meetings, which are attended by the principal and from 3-6 teachers from a particular grade level. Also, included in these meetings are a number of support teachers for the grade level. The students prepare their own presentations and then respond to questions. This activity not only informs the teachers of the various activities being carried out in the *Community as Classroom* initiative, but also it allows them to assess students' abilities to coordinate a presentation, express their ideas, and think on their feet. This is a very transparent way for teachers and administrators to evaluate student performance in a variety of areas.

To encourage further teacher participation in program development, occasional surveys are distributed. For example, in the fall 2008, we surveyed teachers in grades 1-3 to get their ideas about how to involve the younger students in the annual Clean-A-Thon. They suggested that these students could help create a sense of "community" in the school by cleaning up the school grounds and participating in some activity within the school to improve conditions. The teachers volunteered to coordinate this activity and it was included in this year's Clean-A-Thon. In the fall 2009, a survey will be conducted among 6-8th graders to determine if a relationship exists between student's views about neighborhood life and their academic performance.

We are hypothesizing that students who feel a sense of attachment to their neighborhoods and who be-

lieve they should be engaged in making their neighborhoods a better place to live will perform better than those students who are more disengaged. By discussing these surveys with the teachers and then sharing the results, we are creating another opportunity to talk about the program and its value. In this sense, even if the hypothesis does not produce robust results, we have still created a venue where program implementation and improvement can be discussed.

In terms of popularizing the program and demonstrating its value, two activities stand out. The first is the CommunityArt program. This program produces tangible products that bolster the visual appearance of the neighborhood and the school. For example, the Futures Garden not only dramatically improves the visual appearance of the school's campus, but both the mayor and Superintendent of Schools attended the dedication of the garden. Moreover, the mural on the wall fronting the school's entrance, produced by the CommunityArt program, reinforces student attachment to the school and symbolizes their human potential. Second, the Clean-A-Thon is extremely important because it *involves* the entire school. The Center for Urban Studies funds the initiative, but the school is responsible for planning and carrying out the event in partnership with residents and stakeholders. Thus, in this way, the school as a neighborhood anchor institution is deeply involved in improving life in the Fruit Belt.

The Evaluation Challenge

This initiative is based on three interrelated hypotheses. The first is that students from inner city neighborhoods are not motivated to study because they do not see a relationship between what is learned in the classroom and their ability to improve either their neighborhoods or their own lives. The second is that an action-based pedagogy that grounds student learning in problem-solving activities designed to improve neighborhood conditions will enhance student academic performance. The final hypothesis is that this approach to learning will not only improve student academic performance, but also lead to tangible improvements in the neighborhood.

The big issue is how to design an evaluative framework capable of testing these hypotheses. To answer this question, we sought to resolve the question: *does the evaluation tool shape the teaching and learning paradigm or does the teaching and learning paradigm shape the evaluation tool?* We believe that it is the latter; therefore, our task is to develop an evaluative tool that is capable of testing our assumptions about the teaching and learning paradigm. Developing such an evaluative tool, we believe, is a pro-

cess rather than an event. The first step toward the development of such an evaluative tool is to obtain insight into the relationship between a student's attachment to place and his/her attitude toward neighborhood place making. We are hypothesizing that students with attachments to place and favorable attitudes toward place making will have a higher grade point average than students with less attachment to place and less favorable attitudes toward place making. We have developed a survey instrument to test this hypothesis and this will be implemented in the fall of 2009.

A second challenge is to develop a method to determine the impact of student activities on the improvement of the Fruit Belt neighborhood. Our approach is based on the thesis that student's efforts to solve neighborhood problems will improve both their academic performance and conditions inside the neighborhood. Therefore, we must develop an evaluative framework that also enables us determine the impact that student activities are having on neighborhood development. Since a goal of the program is to engage students in systematic work on neighborhood development projects, one way to measure community impact is to focus on those projects that impact the visual image of the community and other place making activities. We can, for example, use digital photo analysis to determine if the project has visually improved the neighborhood, and we can survey the residents in the immediate vicinity of the project to gauge its impact on their visual perception of the area. Also, we can develop an evaluative tool to determine how effective the Clean-A-Thon is in reducing the presence of blight in the neighborhood. Evaluation of both student and community benefit is the ultimate goal. Information is not only needed to determine the effectiveness of the program, but to empower students by showing them that their actions are actually making the neighborhood a better place to live.

Conclusion

The Center for Urban Studies is still in the early stages of turning Futures Academy into an authentic university-assisted community school that can drive the neighborhood development process in the Fruit Belt. We have developed a teaching and learning model to inform our programmatic activities and we have established a good mix of programs that connect academic classroom learning to problem solving activities in the Fruit Belt neighborhood. Moreover, we have put into place a strategy for popularizing the program throughout the entire school. Now, the central task lies in strengthening the existing program and increasing the number of students

participating in the *Community as Classroom* initiative. Currently, we are able to work with only about 60 students per year, not including the approximately 300 students that participate in the annual Clean-A-Thon. The key to increasing the number of students impacted by the *Community as Classroom* Initiative is to popularize academic based community service (ABCS) at the University at Buffalo. By increasing the number of university-based ABCS programs at Futures Academy, not only will we increase the number of students served, but also we will accelerate the possibility of teachers integrating active learning and problem-solving programs in their day to day activities. Moreover, this will strengthen the connection between the University and the school.

Lastly, before our program is significantly expanded we need to develop and refine the evaluative tool necessary to test our assumptions. Even at this point, early anecdotal data, including commentary from both students and teachers, suggest that the program, as a whole, is producing more engaged and productive students. Thus, during its early stages of development, the *Community as Classroom* is reinforcing Dewey's notion that the intelligence and maturity of children develop best when they are involved in the quest to solve the puzzling real-world problems confronting them and their families and when they are given the opportunity to reflect deeply on these problems.⁴⁵

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Endnotes

- i For a in-depth discussion of the philosophical foundation of the university assisted community school that we are attempting to build, see Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett, *Dewey's Dream* and Taylor, H. L., Jr. (2009). *Inside El Barrio: A Bottom-Up View of Neighborhood Life in Castro's Cuba*. Sterling Drive: Kumarian Press, 86-95.
- ii Ira Harkavy argues that academic-based community service (ABCS) is the main building block in the development of university assisted schools. We agree. In our approach, the first step in the construction of this building block is the creation of a pedagogical model that informs academic-based community service. This means that ultimately, to build an authentic university assisted community school, we must succeed in popularizing ABCS at the University of Buffalo and to link this activity to our work at Futures Academy.
- iii Since its founding, the Buffalo-Niagara Medical Campus insists that is not in the Fruit Belt, but represents a "neighborhood" of and in itself.
- iv New York State standards are benchmark indicators that the child is expected to reach by the completion of his/her grade level. Scores on standardized test are used to determine if students are meeting these standard and the curricula is geared toward teaching the learning performance standards.
- v In 2009, we expanded the post-competition grade levels to include 6th graders who could be "incubated" as the core of the competition team for 2010.
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