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Tellin' Stories, Finding Common Ground

Spring 2009

By *David Levine*

In October 1999, a small group of African American and Latino parents gathered at Washington D.C.'s Bruce-Monroe Elementary School to begin a workshop series facilitated by Teaching for Change's parent empowerment project *Tellin' Stories*. During the first workshop, the organizers placed a "story fortune" bag in the middle of the room. The bag was filled with evocative storytelling prompts, such as "My first day of school," "A time my Mom/Dad made me proud," and "A time I felt I had no voice." As the parents chose prompts and shared stories, they began to build bonds of empathy. During the next few weeks, they shared stories and participated in other trust-building activities through which they talked about their challenges, their children, and positive and negative experiences with the school.



Illustration: Jordin Isip

This is how *Tellin' Stories* used story sharing to begin a collaborative quilting project. Each parent participating in the workshop designed and completed a square that included images and a written message embodying a crucial and sustaining life story. A parent, Rodney McDaniel, recalls the impact of this weaving together of stories. "Through the quilt, you would take a little part of your experience and make it into art, and we would sew it onto the quilt," McDaniel said. "One African American parent ... had a child who died, the victim of a violent attack. We had a Hispanic parent who had a child killed through a violent act. Even though they didn't speak the same language, they were brought together and turned out to be the best of friends because of the common ground they had."

In close collaboration with the *Tellin' Stories* staff, these workshop participants went on to form the Parents and Friends of Bruce-Monroe. The parent group has gone on to play an important role at the school, which currently serves 370 students and is in the process of transitioning into a bilingual program. The Bruce-Monroe story illustrates the considerable potential of parent organizing to contribute to equity-driven urban school reform. The need for such reform is starkly evident within the troubled D.C. public school system. For decades, DCPS has struggled with widespread academic underachievement, an inefficient bureaucracy, and aging and inadequate buildings. Frequent turnover of top leadership—seven superintendents in 10 years—has meant a roller coaster succession of changing policies and programs. These difficulties have

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been exacerbated by a failure to consistently involve parents—especially low-income black and Latino parents—as essential and respected partners in the education of their own children.

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The pioneering work of *Tellin' Stories* and the Parents and Friends of Bruce-Monroe offers four vital lessons for those concerned with the fate of urban education:

- 1) Parents can help construct and sustain a welcoming and democratic environment vital to the success of a school.
- 2) In a multicultural school system, meaningful progress depends on building cross-cultural bridges of empathy and unity.
- 3) Disenfranchised parents can gain the skills and build the relationships necessary to wrest precious victories from resistant school system bureaucracies.
- 4) In partnership with teachers and administrators, parents can become directly involved in improving classroom achievement.

1. Creating a Democratic and Inclusive School Culture

For low-income parents and parents of color, a host of factors can make their children's school feel like an alien and intimidating place. Before *Tellin' Stories* began working at Bruce-Monroe, parent involvement was minimal. Past negative experiences with their own schooling, difficulties communicating with staff, and lack of confidence that they were qualified to be equal partners in the formal education of their children often kept parents from feeling comfortable within the school. Wanda Gaddis, an African American parent who emerged as an early leader, recalled being "terrified and anxious" when she brought her daughter to the school to participate in Head Start. Her feelings were colored by the negative experiences of her older sons in several DCPS schools and her own early departure from school after 8th grade.

For Latino immigrants, strong engagement within the school could at times clash with norms within their home country. According to Ramiro Acosta, a Bruce-Monroe pre-kindergarten teacher who served as the school's parent center coordinator from 1999 to 2003, Latino mothers who came to the school were timid about raising concerns. "They didn't have the language to demand. In Colombia [for example] the school culture that they were familiar with was that parents did not get involved in school matters. [They would think] 'Whatever the school policies are, I will follow. What do I know about education?'" This deferential stance was at times reinforced by difficulties interacting with school personnel. Only a few teachers and none of the front office personnel spoke Spanish. A Latino parent coming into the office would sometimes feel ignored. At the same time, office staff reported that they wished they knew Spanish and that they sometimes felt unconfident interacting with parents who understood little English.

With crucial guidance from the *Tellin' Stories* staff, the Parents and Friends of Bruce-Monroe initiated a rich array of activities designed to draw more parents into the school, build a greater sense of community, and ensure that parents would be considered respected contributors to the education of their own children. The group offered workshops to help parents understand the district's new learning standards and learn how to conduct effective parent-teacher conferences. They sponsored educational workshops led by the math and reading specialists in the building. To help teachers gain an appreciation for the diverse cultural resources of the neighborhood, parents conducted community walking tours—visiting a nearby black heritage bookstore, a health



Photo: Jill Weiler
Bruce-Monroe teacher Ramiro Acosta, right, works with parent and child.

food store, Asian-owned corner grocery stores, and the local post office. These tours were the first time many teachers had walked around the neighborhood, and gave participating staff a chance to see parents take on a leadership role.

The core work of the parent group takes place during weekly meetings typically attended by 15 to 20 parents. These gatherings are co-facilitated in English and Spanish by *Tellin' Stories* organizer Jill Weiler, who has worked with the parent group since 1999, and Parent Coordinator Lillian Hernandez, whose administrative aide salary comes from the school's annual budget. As parents engage in planning and educational activities, they also come together in ways that provide them with an emotional home within the school. They express support for each other through baby showers and birthday celebrations, and even occasionally collect money when someone can't make a rent payment.

Terry Johnson, an African American parent, explains that through the meetings: "We bond. I know for me and I'm sure for a lot of the other parents the meetings are a stress relief from home, and help us understand that we are in the same thing together."

The bonding that takes place at these meetings, Weiler notes, provides a critical foundation for parents becoming comfortable within the school and transcending the passive roles provided by traditional forms of parent involvement. "For the first time many parents feel connected to each other and to the school, and school becomes a different kind of place—a safe, welcoming place. We share stories—it's very different from having the security guard interrogate you, or coming to a PTA meeting where parents sit in rows, receive reports, and go home without even knowing the name of the person they sat beside. It makes school the kind of place that parents want to be."

From the start, members of the group began to contribute to the school in many ways. Principal Marta Palacios notes, "Parents who attend those [parent center] meetings are the voices of those who never come." According to Palacios, many of these parents linger at the end of the school day to help clean up the tables in the cafeteria, tend to a crying student, or take an ill child home if his or her own parent can't show up. The consistent presence of a core of parents has lessened incidents of teachers yelling at students and encouraged the one or two staff members who were chronically late to work to become more prompt. For many Latino parents, participation in the weekly meetings and other activities became a way to overcome the language barrier and the sense that their opinions did not matter. Teacher Ramiro Acosta explains, "They started feeling empowered, 'My broken English isn't that broken. They [the staff] can understand me, and I'm being heard. They don't care about my mistakes'."

2. Building Cross-Cultural Unity

For the past several years, many Central American immigrants have been moving into the historically African American Columbia Heights neighborhood where the school is located. By 2007, 65 percent of Bruce-Monroe students were Latino, 32 percent were black, and 3 percent were Asian. This mix of students, and the multicultural evolution of the neighborhood it represents, has made cross-cultural community-building essential for the success of the school. Although incidents of open hostility are rare, the demographic shift has brought competition for jobs and community resources and lack of trust.

Tellin' Stories organizer Doris Watkins has vivid memories of this mistrust when the parent group was being formed. She remembers "walking into a room on a regular basis and seeing that the African American parents were sitting on one side and the Latino parents were sitting on the other side." *Tellin' Stories* staff members helped the group address underlying tensions through a "fish bowl" exercise. Latino parents congregated in the center of the room. Encircled by the black parents, they talked with each other about three questions: What makes you proud to be Latino? What do we find challenging? What don't we ever want people to say about us? The black parents responded to what they heard, and then answered the same questions as they were encircled by the Latino parents. This enabled each group to articulate their desire to escape the damaging effect of powerful stereotypes. Reflecting on their hard work to provide for their families and their commitment to their children, African American parents said: "What I didn't want people to say about me was that I was a

welfare recipient and that I didn't care about work. ... I don't want you to say about me that I let my kids run wild and that my parenting skills are terrible."

From the Latino parents, Watkins notes, different concerns emerged: "I heard them say, 'We want you to understand that we have to feed our families.

... We get offered the opportunity to get a job, we're going to take it.' ... Often-times, those are the same jobs you are pursuing: the housecleaning, the office work."

Despite the progress made though such explorations of racial tensions, there are still signs of cultural distance. Even though regular black and Latino participants in parent meetings greet each other warmly and describe the group as a "family," African American and Latino parents are still likely to sit at separate tables, and during the last couple of years black parents have been underrepresented at the meetings. Through unity-building exercises and sponsoring activities that affirm the diversity of the school, the parent group continually works to strengthen cross-cultural connections.

3. Parent Power vs. the Power of Bureaucracy

After completing the quilt project in 1999, Bruce-Monroe parents focused on prioritizing concerns. This involved sharing perceptions about school dynamics and issues, asking teachers and the principal what they saw as crucial problems, and visiting other schools with successful academic programs. Through a walk-through inspection of the building and discussions with school staff and children, the parent group discovered disturbing problems. Garbage cluttered a front entrance that lacked permanent trashcans, and mice and roaches infested the building. Most of the water fountains needed to be replaced.

Ceilings were blackened near inadequate ventilation ducts, posing a danger for asthmatic children. A hallway was closed because of exposed asbestos. Children reported bladder problems because they couldn't use bathrooms that lacked doors on the stalls and functioning toilets. Lack of exterior lighting made the school dangerous at night. A broken gate allowed outside adults to enter the playground, where they sold drugs and verbally and physically harassed students.

Then there were the walls, or rather, the lack of walls. The Bruce-Monroe building is divided into four large instructional "pods," originally designed to be open spaces to accommodate team-taught classes. Since this kind of teaching is no longer in vogue, each of these pods was used to accommodate three separate classes, separated by flimsy five-foot-high partitions that did nothing to abate the noise problem. Parents witnessed how difficult it was for children and teachers to concentrate in this environment.

By spring 2001, the parent group had embarked on a six-year struggle to compel DCPS to address the host of physical problems that plagued the school. *Tellin' Stories* helped parents develop the skills needed to document problems, organize activities, and exercise leadership. The parents petitioned public officials and testified at several school board, city council, and mayoral meetings. In January 2004 they wrote the new superintendent of their anger after encountering "a series of rotating DCPS officials delivering an endless string of broken promises." By May, they demanded that the DCPS chief building operations officer "correct these violations to create a school you would be proud to send your own children to." The next month, over 40 Bruce-Monroe parents and students demonstrated in front of the school demanding new walls for the pods.

Eventually, the parents were able to win significant, if partial, victories. The



Photo: Rick Reinhard
Parents and Friends of Bruce-Monroe, supported by the Tellin' Stories Project of Teaching for Change, took their demands for a crossing guard to the 4th District Police Station. Here they celebrate their victory.

clanking DCPS bureaucracy implemented several repairs—new windows, new playground equipment, functional bathrooms, improved exterior lighting, and the opening of a newly renovated auditorium that had been unusable for several years. In 2003, the school board finally appropriated \$1.4 million to build walls for one of the pods; although the financially strapped district never did commit funds to fix the remaining pods.

Perhaps the most important lesson that Bruce-Monroe parents learned through these battles was to remain insistent that school officials deliver on promises made. Jill Weiler recalls that at the start of the struggle for building improvement, most parents believed "there is nothing we can do." But five years later, when a DCPS official said there were no additional actions the parent group could take to move the process along, a parent said, "Don't you ever tell us that!"

4. Parents Can Directly Help Teachers Improve Academic Achievement

Even for successful parent groups, direct engagement in boosting the quality of classroom instruction is a tough challenge, given the complexity of the teaching and learning, bureaucratic approaches to curriculum, and teachers' reluctance to consider parents as qualified to comment on instructional matters. Yet it is in this area that the Parents and Friends of Bruce-Monroe have perhaps done their most pioneering work. In the fall of 2003, the group created an Academic Achievement Committee that included Jill Weiler, Lillian Hernandez, and seven parents. They began by reviewing standardized test data in reading and math from the prior two years. They learned that while scores for most classes fell well below the national average, scores in a few classrooms were noticeably higher. With the permission of Principal Palacios, they began scheduling classroom observations with teachers to learn which teaching practices were successful and to discuss with teachers the kind of support they needed.

To facilitate the observations, the committee developed a checklist on what to look for. Their questions included: Was student work displayed? Was the lesson organized and engaging? Did the teacher treat the children in an age-appropriate manner? Was special help needed by the teacher? During the follow-up conferences, committee members praised teacher strengths, raised questions regarding areas of concern, and asked the teachers how parents could support them.

Realizing that teachers might feel threatened by the presence of parents in an evaluative role, the committee emphasized that the purpose of the visits was to learn, to affirm the hard work and skills of teachers, and to ask how they could offer help. Although several teachers expressed enthusiasm for the parent observations, others were ambivalent and a few were hostile. Anonymous complaints prompted a staff member of the Washington Teachers Union to write Palacios, demanding to know the purpose of the evaluative checklist, declaring, "Parents are not trained to conduct observations and have no authority to participate in teacher evaluations."

When the committee met with faculty members to discuss their concerns, they learned that some teachers thought that the wording of the observation checklist focused on the teacher in a way that was unfairly judgmental. Teachers were invited to join the committee and the form was revised to include the suggestions made by both the teachers and the WTU staff. In hindsight, Jill Weiler believes that teachers should have been involved from the beginning. "Our new practice is to engage teachers in a conversation before classroom visits to help guide our observations, and the response has been positive," she said.

The first formal report to the school community on these parent visits included strong praise. "We have many gifted teachers at Bruce-Monroe who engage and inspire our children! These teachers were excited and exuberant about what they were doing and held the children in the palm of their hand. Their energy and enthusiasm were contagious!" Other highlights included: mutual respect between teachers and students, lessons that connected to students' lives and utilized thought-provoking questions, genuine affirmations of students, and an effective range of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic teaching methods. In the follow-up conferences the majority of the teachers were genuinely positive, many expressed gratitude that the parents had visited, and several were comfortable engaging parents in genuine, two-way dialogues.



Photo: Deborah Menkart
Children read at a 2004 demonstration in front of Bruce-Monroe to demand desperately needed building repairs.

Among the "lingering questions and concerns" the committee reported were some classes in which students were "not being challenged or stimulated," and a couple of classes where students copied words from the board without understanding what they were writing. They also noted the many students who were reading two or more levels behind grade level, a need for increased teacher outreach to parents, and the need of mentoring for new teachers and opportunities for teachers to learn from each other.

The classroom visits and follow-up meetings are now an ongoing tradition at Bruce-Monroe. According to Principal Palacios, this process has enhanced the capacity of the Bruce-Monroe community to focus on academic achievement: parents come to see themselves as valued learning partners in the learning mission of the school, teacher motivation to offer their best is enhanced, and students' desire to behave well and work hard is encouraged because they know that parents care about how well they are working with their teachers.

Bruce-Monroe Today: Enduring Challenges and Imperiled Promise

The experience of the Parents and Friends of Bruce-Monroe demonstrates the substantive promise of parent organizing. But it also demonstrates that such work is difficult—that it depends on perseverance in the face of daunting obstacles. Precious organizing energy that could be focused on steps to improve academic achievement has often been diverted to fighting for the rudiments of a physical plant that provides a workable learning environment for children, rudiments that are taken for granted in nearby prosperous suburban districts. And as the work unfolds, *Tellin' Stories* staff have struggled to find the right balance between providing essential guidance and technical assistance and challenging parents to take the lead. Reflecting back on nine years of work within the school, Jill Weiler notes that at times she and Lillian Hernandez have taken on responsibilities that they should have helped parents perform themselves. *Tellin' Stories* continues to search for effective ways to help parents develop the initiative, habits, and abilities essential to becoming effective leaders.

And progress can bring its own unexpected contradictions. Jill Weiler reflects:

The challenge of this work is having the patience and persistence to work for sustainable change that may be years down the road in collaboration with parent leaders who know that to truly benefit their children, the change should have happened yesterday. As our parent leaders increase their knowledge and develop their confidence and leadership skills, they often make the choice to send their children to a school with a better academic record. While we recognize this as an indicator of success, it also creates a need to constantly identify and mentor

new leaders.

The contradiction between promising progress within the school and the challenges it must negotiate as part of a struggling school system were dramatically evident during the 2007-2008 school year. As the bilingual program continued to successfully expand and the teachers undertook new and promising curricular initiatives, the school encountered a threat to its very existence. Faced with shrinking enrollments, DCPS released a list of buildings to be closed that included Bruce-Monroe. The tradition of militant activism developed by the parents since 1999 played a decisive role in saving the school from being shut down. Parents marched to two public hearings and met privately with DCPS Chancellor Michelle Rhee, offering spirited testimony against the closing of the school. Acknowledging recent academic gains and the strength of its family involvement, Chancellor Rhee agreed not to close the school. The chancellor's compromise plan consolidated Bruce-Monroe with Parkview Elementary School for the next three years while the school's present building is demolished and rebuilt.

Saving the school meant taking on the considerable challenge of moving to a site three quarters of a mile away and building a new community that includes Parkview parents, students, and teachers. Since the start of the school year, this new phase in the life of the school has gone well, as the blended school communities learn to work together to fashion a distinct identity. And at those inevitable moments when the turnout at a meeting is discouraging and the problems seem immense, Jill Weiler sustains herself with the thought that movements for social justice invariably start out small. She is fond of quoting Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world." At Bruce-Monroe Elementary School, Mead's words never rang more true.

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