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THE CELEBRATION OF STRUGGLE: BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH SOCIAL ACTION

Get up, stand up! Stand up for your rights! Get up, stand up! Stand in Washington!
— Adaptation of a song by Bob Marley

1.1 For over twenty-three years, I worked with adults and children in a privately sponsored, city-funded day care and after school center that has an enrollment of approximately 150 children between the ages of two and twelve. Both children and staff in the program were Caribbean, Latina/o, and African American. Staff members were primarily women, and several had enrolled their own children in the day care program. The racial and ethnic breakdown within the center was fairly representative of the community as a whole. According to the 1990 census, the community surrounding the day care center is over 90% Black and Latina/o. Close to one-third of the community residents have incomes below the poverty level. This is an area of Brooklyn, New York which is neglected by the city and which suffers from high rates of unemployment and crime (Singer, 1998).

1.2 The program, which I call Banza, is housed in an attractive building which boasts a skylight, indoor trees, and exposed pipes painted in a variety of bright colors. People who enter the program for the first time often comment on the welcoming, cheerful atmosphere. The building is unique and not what they expect to find in this low-income community. The curriculum in Banza is unusual, as well, in its emphasis on community responsibility, social justice, and affirmation of racial and cultural diversity.

1.3 Social action is most clearly and consistently integrated into Banza's theme calendar at the annual "Celebration of Struggle," the culminating event of Banza's school year. This is Banza's own celebration, created to express values and beliefs shared by members of Banza's community, despite differences of religion, race, class, cultural background, or political opinion. The program and the presentations at this event evoke a strong feeling of community among participants, as they endorse the values of community responsibility, affirmation of diversity, and speaking out for justice. In the year of this study, the Celebration of Struggle was interwoven with preparations for the Children's Defense Fund's Stand for Children rally.

1.4 The Celebration of Struggle was originally created as a secular alternative to the December holidays of Christmas and Chanukah, one or the other of which was observed by most families in Banza when it opened. While these two holidays could be universally appreciated for their visions of peace and of

freedom, because of their religious nature they could neither be shared by all members of Banza's community, nor endorsed by a non-sectarian, publicly-funded organization. At Banza's ceremony, participants recited a pledge that defined a shared vision:

I pledge to fight to make a world free from war and fear, free from hunger and disease, free from discrimination and despair, so long as there is one child, anywhere, who is not free. I light this candle as a sign of my bond (Singer, 1998, p. 235)

1.5 The ritual of lighting candles, borrowed from religious holidays, became a symbol of commitment to a secular pledge. For the candle-lighting the first year, two hundred candles were embedded in modeling clay which was spread over a table measuring three feet wide by six feet long. After reciting the pledge together, each child and adult in Banza stepped up to the table with her or his group and lit a candle. The magical glow of two hundred candles filled the darkened community room, as the assembled groups sang "This Little Light of Mine," a song from the Civil Rights Movement.

1.6 After the first year, groups prepared songs, poems, and speeches for the program, the ceremony was scheduled for the end of the day, and parents were invited to share the occasion and participate in the pledge and candle-lighting. Children and staff dressed up for the event, and supper was served. Instead of clay, the candles were supported by sand which was collected from the beach each year by one of the groups, and poured into frames of wood and cardboard which rested on the tops of two tables. Each frame held two hundred candles. Although the ceremony had originally been created as an alternative to religious winter holidays, preparations for the program began to require more time than was available in the month of December, so the Celebration of Struggle was moved to the end of Banza's program year, in May.

1.7 The ideas behind celebrating struggle were to honor the efforts of people around the world and throughout history to achieve a decent life, and to encourage teachers and children to adopt a critical view of the way the world is organized. The celebration also embodied the idea that in the process of struggling together for a better world, people can change themselves and their relationships to one another, even when there are no visible or broader changes in the world.

1.8 More than any other event in Banza's monthly theme calendar, the Celebration of Struggle has the character of ritual. It is an annual reaffirmation of community membership among Banza's children, staff, and parents, and a form of community "self-creation." For the children and adults who participate in Banza's Celebration of Struggle year after year, it is an opportunity to express the obligation to care for one another and to act to make the world a better place for all children. It is a "practice of commitment" and an expression of hope for the future, two of the conditions for sustaining community identified by Bellah et al. (1985).

1.9 Eventually, the Celebration of Struggle evolved into a series of events spread over a two to three-week period. These included a "conference of struggle," the candle-lighting ceremony, and the celebration itself. The candle-lighting was separated from the Celebration of Struggle after several years, because the community room was too crowded to safely accommodate the two large tables of candles, all the children, and their parents. The children and staff had their own candle-lighting ceremony, and a second, symbolic candle-lighting took place on a stage at the Celebration of Struggle, with representatives from the children, staff, and parents coming up to light a dozen or more larger candles.

1.10 The "Conference of Struggle" was initiated in 1983 to increase discussion among the groups in Banza about what kind of world they wanted to have. Originally intended as a forum for discussion, the Conference came to be a series of dances and dramatizations, each of which conveyed an idea about the need to struggle for a better world. Each of the five preschool and five school-age groups prepared a dance

or play, complete with costumes, scenery, and a mural that announced the title of the presentation and depicted its message. Two or three groups made presentations each day of the conference, once at three-thirty for the other groups, and again after five o'clock for their parents.

1.11 While the Celebration and Conference of Struggle evolved over the years, the original pledge remained, calling for action "as long as there is one child, anywhere, who is not free." At the same time, despite the willingness of teachers to recite this pledge with their children, they did not regularly translate their verbal commitment into social action projects. In 1996, the year of this study, the integration of the Celebration of Struggle with Stand for Children made the belief in action more tangible and accessible, even for the staff members and children who did not actually travel to Washington on June 1.

1.12 In an effort to rally opposition to the proposed federal Welfare Reform Bill, which threatened to drastically increase child poverty in the United States, the Children's Defense Fund put out a call for "friends of children" to travel to Washington, D.C. on June 1, 1996 and "Stand for Children." Earlier attempts in Banza to discuss the problems attached to the proposed bill had been largely defeated by staff tensions, disagreement, and reluctance among SAC members to associate themselves with the issue of welfare. Marion Wright Edelman, head of the Children's Defense Fund, framed the issue as one of children's needs rather than of welfare for adults, thus sidestepping significant divisions over welfare reform, both nationally and within Banza (Children's Defense Fund, 1996).

1.13 Three staff members who went to hear Edelman speak at a local organizing meeting returned full of enthusiasm about participating in Stand for Children. When I proposed Banza's participation at a meeting of the Social Action Committee (SAC) in March, I was the only one of the three who attended the meeting. The response from committee members was guarded. At first, SAC members responded to the idea of going to Washington in the context of the lobbying trip to the State Capital two months earlier, when SAC members had been enthusiastic about organizing for the trip, but staff response was poor. Although they spoke of their pride in the outspokenness of the children who participated, they were disappointed by the limited turn-out. Two months later, feeling the demands of work and remembering their frustrations with the earlier trip, SAC members were not inclined to take on the organization of an even larger and more complicated trip to Washington.

1.14 Two committee members gave a more positive view of Stand for Children, arguing that there was more time to plan for Washington than there had been for the State Capital trip, and they promoted the suggestion that Stand for Children become the theme for the Celebration of Struggle. Sharing the story of a successful past trip to Washington gave some SAC members an opportunity to provide positive leadership in the committee meeting, and it helped to create a more optimistic context for Stand for Children. Committee members described to one another their work decorating Banza's street, their successful skit, and the fact that three buses from Banza and the community center had traveled to Washington. Shared memories of success mitigated their initial resistance, and SAC members began to reconstruct themselves as people who "do" social action and who give leadership in Banza. When I asked again who would go to Washington, one by one committee members raised their hands, seeming to take up their picket signs as the staff and parents had done at the end of the staff skit in 1992.

1.15 Discussion of Stand for Children with the rest of the staff began with a video of the 1992 march to "Save Our Children, Save Our Cities." Twelve teachers from Banza had participated in the 1992 trip, seven of whom were still working at Banza during this study. Familiar faces and the dramatic changes in the children over four years provoked comments and enthusiasm from those viewing the video. Like committee members at the SAC meeting, staff members in these meetings were slow to talk about Stand for Children until some of them began to tell stories about their roles in the 1992 March in Washington. Millie (names have been changed for this article), who had been on maternity leave at the time, recalled coming in to design a t-shirt stencil so members of Banza's delegation could make their own t-shirts. Others gave descriptions of the Washington Mall in miniature created inside Banza. Once again, as

teachers told each other stories about the earlier march, they seemed to reconstruct themselves from bystanders into people who "do" social action, and they influenced others in the circle to see themselves as participants as well. Each time Tanisha read a statement she had prepared for these staff discussions, those present responded with spontaneous applause: "It's time to go to Washington so we can change things. . . We need to make sure the voices of our children are heard!"

1.16 During the next two months, staff responses to Stand for Children were uneven. Teachers in the after-school program were well-represented on the SAC and relatively enthusiastic about joining Stand for Children, but preschool teachers seemed distant. However, when I distributed Stand for Children buttons to some of the preschool teachers, asking that they wear their buttons every day, others sought me out, wondering if I had forgotten them. At the same time, only one of the preschool teachers, under pressure from her own children, signed up to go to Washington. In addition, one or two preschool teachers were heard to grumble, "I stand for children every day," implying that they did not need to go to Washington in order to stand for children.

1.17 Despite resistance to the trip itself, teachers adopted Stand for Children as the theme for the Celebration of Struggle. The teachers for one of the preschool groups agreed to explain Stand for Children posters to their class, and to have their children help deliver the posters and explain them to the other groups. In consultation with supervisors, classroom teachers planned projects which incorporated Stand for Children into their classroom curriculum.

1.18 The SAC organized a candy sale and two fish fries to help pay for the buses to Washington, and most of this fund-raising was positively received by parents and other staff members. Emphasizing that her two sons were insisting on going to Washington, Millie took two cases of candy to sell so she could earn free seats on the bus. Other members of Banza's staff supported the trip to Washington by selling candy and buying fish. Gwen's group helped with distribution of the candy. One eight year old girl in the group, accustomed to this job from fund-raising for the State Capital trip and recruiting parents to the meeting with the police Inspector, looked parents in the eye, and said, with a clarity and self-confidence that would be envied by most adults, "This is about going to Washington for 'Stand for Children Day.' Do you want to come? Can you sell candy for the bus?"

1.19 Staff discussions provided one opportunity to build community. Although discussions did not necessarily resolve staff conflict, they helped to remind staff members of their common purpose. The meetings to discuss the Celebration of Struggle were organized with this goal in mind. The director prepared an outline for staff discussions of the Celebration of Struggle, which began with stories of past programs, stressed the importance of team work, and asked the staff to identify the messages they wanted to present during the program. She introduced the discussion with a video of a previous Celebration of Struggle.

1.20 As staff members spoke during the meetings, they projected a feeling that this event was theirs. While the Celebration of Struggle might not produce change in the world, it was a time when staff experienced a sense of hope and possibility through their work and the accomplishments of their children. Even if there were no change in the world, they could see change in themselves. It made them feel special, and it helped them attain images of themselves as people struggling for a better world. The Celebration of Struggle was an annual affirmation for the staff that they stood for children. It was not difficult to relate this calendar event to plans to Stand for Children in Washington.

1.21 Periodically during the weeks of preparation for the Celebration of Struggle and Stand for Children, the children spontaneously burst into the chant, "Who's going to Washington? I'm going to Washington! Why? To stand for children!" At the Conference of Struggle, the slogan, "Stand for Children in Washington" punctuated each performance.

1.22 The children's presentations represent one of the ways children are helped to understand difficult or unfamiliar ideas. As they act out the stories and speak their lines, the stories become meaningful, and as teachers relate the stories to the theme of Stand for Children, the children begin to conceptualize the meaning of going to Washington. For the younger children, the plays are ways of being part of something larger than themselves which they do not yet fully understand. The two year olds know that they want to be with their friends, and they learn that they will take their turn presenting in front of the larger Banza community, but these experiences do not necessarily bring them to Karen's conclusion that we all need to stand for children in Washington. However, the message is meaningful to older children in Banza and to the staff and parents, and the younger children are positioned to develop a broader understanding "little by little."

1.23 At the Celebration of Struggle, the theme of Stand for Children was again emphasized by each teacher, and it was highlighted in the decorations covering the walls of the community room. Parents were moved by the performances of the children, and by the care from the teachers which made the performances possible. Care was evident in the way the teachers dressed the children and themselves, in the way they helped the children on and off the stage, and in the way they beamed with pride as the children performed. One of the teachers commented later, "I get chills when I see the kids up there stamping their feet and putting their fingers in the air. . . I feel proud, not only of the kids in my group, but also the kids that I had for a long time." For the adults in Banza, the future was embodied in these children and in the possibilities they projected as they sang their songs and recited their poems together. During the Celebration of Struggle, a future where all people are valued and cared for was realized in Banza's community room.

1.24 The June 1 rally in Washington, D. C. made it possible for some of the parents and staff members to act on their pledge at the Celebration of Struggle. Grace, a teacher in a school-age kindergarten group who sang "Stand Up for Your Rights" at the Celebration of Struggle, was one of the teachers who traveled to Washington on June 1, 1996. In an interview she told me:

I was glad that our song was done last, because the message was for all the parents, to let them know, you have to get up. You have to make that stand. We've been teaching the kids that they have rights...You have to fight for your rights. You have a voice? Let your voice be heard...And that was what that song was about. We have voices that we want heard, so get up and stand up for your rights...At the end, I had parents coming to me, telling me, I'm going to Washington...Put my name down...And I think that day, too, when they sang that song, it touched me. And I just said, I gotta go put my name down *today*. I can't keep putting it off. I have to put my name down today. Because, even though you're hearing it, you're teaching them the song, when they sang, it empowered me. I think that's what it was. It empowered me.

1.25 On June 1, Banza filled two buses to Washington, a total of fifty-one adults and thirty-six children. In addition to the eight staff members, thirteen passengers were parents from Banza, and eighteen were students from the program. The rest of the people were mostly friends and relatives of parents and staff, and some were former parents, children, or teachers from the program. A few were staff or Board members from the community center, and a few came from the surrounding community, including two African American corrections officers who had participated in the Million Man March in November, 1995, and were new to the Center. The crowd in Washington was perhaps thirty percent white, and the rest were mainly Black and Latina/o, making it considerably more diverse than Banza's surrounding community. Both the make-up of Banza's contingent and that of the entire crowd in Washington represented a degree of diversity which was often affirmed at Banza, but seldom realized. For some members of Banza's contingent, the sense of harmony and optimism among the crowd in Washington expressed the belief that people from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds really could work together.

1.26 One member of Banza's contingent made a videotape of the group in Washington, and, as a result, one of the buses had an instant replay of the day on the way home. In the video, several parents remarked that their children had persuaded them to come to Washington. A mother quoted her four year old saying, "Mommy, please, can't we go to Washington?" until her mother gave in. A father emphasized that his six year old daughter was responsible for his presence in Washington. As Banza's Board President thanked everyone on the bus for joining Banza and the community center in Washington, she referred to the video, commenting that parents were really giving their children a gift by bringing them to Washington. She emphasized, "They will always know we believe in them and in their right to a better future."

1.27 A sense of community was strengthened for some of the adults and children in Banza, as they saw themselves representing those who wanted to go to Washington, but were unable to go. Tanisha described the excitement of children in her group. "Even the day before? That Friday? They told whoever was going, 'remember to say my name, or think about me while you go, because I'm not gonna be there.' And then that Monday, they were asking, 'Did you think of me?'" Grace described her response to parents who were unable to go to Washington. "I really did have to go, because there were a lot of people counting on me. . . I needed to make that stand, if not for myself, for those who wanted to be there but couldn't make it." She described herself as representing those who could not go to Washington. "The parents knew I went to represent them. Because I told the parents, I'm going there, and your name is right there on my shoulder. Don't worry about it. I know you can't make it. Don't worry about it. I'm there for you." Staff members and children who went to Washington were not only standing for children. They stood for parents, children, and colleagues who could not be in Washington.

1.28 On the Monday following the rally the idea that Banza's delegation in Washington represented those who could not be there was reinforced in the discussion at the singing. Karen reported, "after I saw the tape, I felt like I wish I was there; I wanted to be there. I should have been there." Once more, a feeling of community emerged as teachers and children listened to people tell the story of the day in Washington. Once more, a video of the event created a shared context, allowing those children and staff members who had not been in Washington to feel included and to put themselves there.

1.29 The staff response to Stand for Children can be explained by looking at the context of this event. First, it was integrated into Banza's annual calendar event, the Celebration of Struggle. Second, it was promoted by a national organization which generated attractive literature, posters, buttons, and press coverage, and it was spear-headed by a nationally-renowned, inspirational, Black woman. Third, a number of children responded to the chants and preparations for the Celebration of Struggle by urging their parents to take them to Washington. Both Millie and Pascal, neither of whom went to Washington, reported that their children pressured them to be able to go, and several parents who traveled to Washington with their children related a similar pressure. From the point of view of staff and parents, it was possible to identify with this activity because it was clearly for, and embraced by, the children.

1.30 The national sponsorship provided reassurance to staff that Banza was not doing this alone, without support. As the event grew closer, more organizations became involved, and staff felt encouraged that this was going to be an important demonstration. The integration of Stand for Children into Banza's curriculum made it a meaningful experience for staff as well as for the children. As they developed curriculum for this project, staff members identified themselves as people who stand for children. Their belief in the children and the enthusiastic responses of the children helped to strengthen staff commitment to this event.

1.31 Stand for Children was an opportunity for staff members, parents, and children to change themselves, even if they could not change the world. The experiences of the day would remain with them and help them to redefine their ideas about themselves. For those who went to Washington, participation in "Stand for Children" expressed a sense of community responsibility, a feeling of relationship to Banza, and hope. On the video from the day, Gwen asserted, "I feel strongly that we've lost a sense of community [in our

society]. This is my step in getting it back." Natalie contrasted the feeling of being in Washington with the group from Banza and her original plan to travel on her own. "It made you feel like you were part of something. You weren't just out there on your own. . . you're out there with your banner, and we're from Banza! You know? And when we were singing our songs, everyone was looking. And seeing all of us come together, it made you feel important."

1.32 Looking around at all the different groups in Washington, Stephanie said, "Being in Washington symbolizes hope for parents and children. Parents and children who attend today will look back and remember that they were part of this rally." Banza's Board President described the day as a gift parents were giving to their children, "They will always know we believe in them and in their right to a better future."

1.33 The integration of the Celebration of Struggle with Stand for Children reinforced Banza's themes of community responsibility, affirmation of diversity, and speaking out for justice. At the Celebration of Struggle, community responsibility was fulfilled by the participation of every group. In Washington some members of Banza's community stood for the rest. In the Celebration of Struggle, diversity was affirmed in the presentations. At Stand for Children, diversity was affirmed by the choice to be in Washington with groups from all over the country, from different racial, religious, and cultural backgrounds. In the Celebration of Struggle, the children spoke out through the messages of their poems and songs. At "Stand for Children," they spoke out by being there, and by singing together, "We are here today, fighting for a better world."

1.34 Both of these events contributed to the strengthening of community in Banza. They grew out of stories of the past, and they would soon become new stories to tell about who we are in Banza, and what kind of people we want to be. The Celebration of Struggle was a "practice of commitment," and it projected a vision of a future in which every child would be valued. Stand for Children provided a way to act on that vision. Together these events provided a window of hope, the "minimum of hope" which Freire argues is necessary to "start the struggle." Freire also calls this "an education in hope (Freire, 1995)."

1.35 Children frequently become a source of hope for the adults who care for them. In Banza, hope was generated by the enthusiasm of the children and their trust in their teachers as they worked together to create the vision of possibility which was projected in the Celebration of Struggle and in Stand for Children. These displays of hope were anchored in the community of support which teachers helped to build year-round in Banza, through the many ways they created relationships to the children and to one another.

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