

Introduction: Linking Theory, Practice, and Community in Urban School Reform

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THIS BOOK PROFILES LOCAL AND NATIONAL efforts to transform urban education and reinvent urban teacher preparation through the development of democratic school-community relationships and community-based curricula. It is premised on our belief that authentic urban school reform requires educators to work collaboratively with parents, neighborhood activists, policy makers, and community development specialists to alter the power relationships between urban schools and the communities they serve, and to create relevant, student-centered curricula and teaching methods.

The current crisis in urban schooling is well recognized. Prevailing responses to this crisis have been to hold urban schools accountable by raising standards and instituting high-stakes assessments for students and teachers alike. These top-down reform proposals too often have centralized policy and curriculum decisions and resulted in an increased emphasis on “teaching to the test,” a strategy that has not adequately addressed the academic needs of urban children and youth. We believe these reforms cannot bridge the long-standing cultural divide between the educational establishment and urban families and produce the schools that are needed to give all urban students a high quality education.

The chapters in this volume offer alternative responses to the crisis in urban education by making urban schools accountable to the communities they serve through policy initiatives that promote educational equity, community-based curricula, and teacher education and parent empowerment programs that emphasize democratic collaboration between universities, urban teachers, parents, and community members. The genesis of this volume originated in a series of programs organized by Mary Finn, Director of the Urban Education Institute at the University at Buffalo Graduate School of Education, during Urban Education Month in March 2001. This month-long focus was designed to engage urban teachers, parents, university faculty, and graduate students in the discussion of innovative approaches that link theory, practice, and community involvement in urban school reform, with the goal of offering, as Jeannie Oakes says in this volume, “some images and ideas that may embolden people . . . to *act* on their best dreams for American schooling” [emphasis ours].

Several of the chapters were talks by urban education scholars and practitioners from throughout the country presented during Urban Education Month. Other chapters in this book highlight efforts by faculty and graduate students at the University at Buffalo to link the university more closely with work in city schools and urban neighborhoods.

Buffalo, New York, is often described as a postindustrial “rust-belt” city. The current population of just under 300,000 (down from a high of almost 600,000 in the late 1960s) represents a steady decline in the industrial base and a population shift to the first-ring and second-ring suburbs, with a resulting loss of property tax revenues to support public schools. There has also been a historic disconnect between the university community and the city schools. The Graduate School of Education is located on the North campus of the University at Buffalo that was built in the suburbs during the early 1970s, much to the dismay of many of the city’s residents, who continue to believe that a downtown campus might have helped to anchor Buffalo’s struggling neighborhoods.

In the fall of 1998, the new dean advocated a focus on urban education as a central mission of the Graduate School of Education and established an Urban Education committee co-chaired by Patrick Finn and Lauri Johnson to develop a strategic plan. The Buffalo-based projects profiled in this book represent some of the recent efforts to use university resources to serve city neighborhoods and act as a catalyst for urban school reform.

Through the voices of teacher educators, community activists, urban teachers, parents, and students, we aim to illustrate how the theory and practice of community engagement might be enacted in urban teaching and preparation programs. Too often, when teacher preparation programs link research and theory-based practice, the theory studied is devoid of the social, cultural, political, and physical contexts of urban schools. The authors of chapters in this volume focus on socially and culturally based theory, theory about equity and justice and the power relations that call for action to address the educational needs of urban students.

The notion of linking sociocultural and politically grounded theory to teacher education was first developed in the 1930s at Teachers College, Columbia University, where a program was established to provide educational practitioners with a broad, integrated, and progressive approach to teaching and learning, drawing on the traditionally separate fields of educational sociology, history, philosophy, anthropology and social psychology (Tozer, Anderson, & Armbruster, 1990). By the 1960s, teacher education students at many universities were encouraged to focus their professional development in the areas of subject-based curriculum and methods of instruction, where the theories that underlie the practice are more likely to be psychological than sociological, and more inclined to encourage support for the status quo than to challenge or change it.

In addition, the emergence of urban education as a field of study in the 1960s and early 1970s often took a deficit approach to urban students and

their families rather than examining the structural inequities that created poor urban neighborhoods. The legacy of teacher preparation programs that are largely discipline-centered and aim to “fix” poor and working class students and their families remain with us today.

In short, traditional approaches to linking theory and practice in teacher education have not resulted in widespread equity and social justice *action* on the part of educators. We believe such action may be exactly what is required to create urban schools that excite and inspire. While the chapters in this volume offer diverse approaches to urban school reform, there is a single theme that resonates throughout the volume, and that is the necessity of honest, democratic collaboration with the immediate community in which the urban schools are situated. We believe it is perhaps the single most important imperative that the dominant, top-down trend in urban education reform has sadly neglected.

Patrick J. Finn, in *Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in Their Own Self-Interest* (1999), argues that if we are to make significant progress in urban education, those most affected by the current conditions, the urban working class themselves, must take an active role. According to Finn, many parents sense their children are getting a lesser education, and while that angers them, they often feel isolated and dependent on the authority of the professional educators to do the right thing. To expect that the education establishment can implement the necessary reforms solely on their own initiative, however, is unrealistic.

In order to reform urban education, Finn urges us to study the work of Saul Alinsky, who used the labor organizer model to create a new public activist role, the “community organizer.” Public engagement is the term most often used to describe the efforts of a community organizer. In his summary of the 1998 report by The Annenberg Institute on Public Engagement for Public Education, Finn provides a description of public engagement and its promise:

There is a quiet revolution taking place in public education. It is the beginning of a fundamental shift in the kind of behavior Americans engage in on behalf of their children. It signals a change in the structures of power in education. It is referred to as public conversation, parent involvement, school/community partnerships, citizens’ action, neighborhood improvement, community organizing, and even standards setting. It has the following characteristics: it focuses on improving teaching and learning; it brings to the table those who are typically excluded; and it facilitates training and dissemination of information that prepares communities to make tough decisions. (p. 196)

The chapters in this volume reflect the wide variety of ways public engagement might link teachers, parents, and community to the reform process and contribute to improving urban schools. They are organized around the

following themes: Call to Action: Promoting Educational Equity; Linking Urban Schools to Their Communities; Reforming Teacher Education to Reform Urban Education; and University Partnerships for Parent Empowerment.

CALL TO ACTION: PROMOTING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

Current solutions to improve student achievement in urban schools, such as higher standards, achievement testing, accountability, charter schools and vouchers, teacher-proof curricula, and school-business partnerships, are intended to satisfy demands by educators, parents, and community leaders who are frustrated with the level of urban students' learning. But the success of any reform is dependent on the extent to which the beneficiaries of the reform are involved in its development and implementation (e.g., see Fields and Feinberg, 2001). The chapters in this section argue that without democratic and participatory educational systems—from students and teachers involved in curriculum decision-making to parents and community members addressing the need for equitable funding and neighborhood development—education reform has little chance of ameliorating the social and economic forces that are widening the income gap in U.S. cities.

Pedro Noguera links the problems of schools to the culture of the larger society, questions education reforms that focus only on testing, standards and accountability, and vouchers, and argues that the urban school curriculum should connect students to their communities. Dennis Carlson challenges school reforms that “de-skill” classroom teachers through scripted curricula and emphasize cost efficiency, and argues that there is a relationship between the crises in urban schools and the way society and communities understand teachers' work. Michael A. Rebell describes the history of fiscal equity in education cases in the U.S., the shift from equity cases to adequacy cases, and the strategy of tying fiscal adequacy to standards-based reform, which was developed by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity in New York with input from focus groups of community members. Henry Louis Taylor Jr. argues that the necessary relationship between school reform and community development must be recognized if the structural inequities in urban areas are to be addressed.

LINKING URBAN SCHOOLS TO THEIR COMMUNITIES

Redressing power differences in the social and economic forces that impact urban education is vitally necessary but is not in itself sufficient to improve urban education. Educational structures have to change as well, from classroom to school to district. Curricula must become more community based. Textbooks should take a back seat to teachers and students exploring their worlds together, with teachers designing lessons that help students make connections between their community “funds of knowledge” (Moll, 1992) and “mainstream academic” knowledge. Experiential learning and the expressive arts, whether

using traditional media or digital media, are pedagogical approaches too often ignored in test-driven education reform. This section highlights curriculum programs that are interdisciplinary, connect students to their neighborhood and the wider world, and use varied mediational tools to foster learning.

This emphasis on child-centered, experiential curricula that ground students' learning experiences in their local environment has a long tradition in progressive education (e.g., see Dewey, 1938). In recent years it has also been manifested in rural and environmental education through the notion of "place-based" or "place-conscious" education, which aims to "enlist teachers and students in the firsthand experience of local life and in the political process of understanding and shaping what happens there" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 620). These chapters highlight examples of how "place-conscious" education that is centered on the strengths of urban schools and communities might be implemented.

Greg Farrell and Michael McCarthy describe Expeditionary Learning, a school reform effort that is based on experiential learning through the interdisciplinary, long-term study of a topic that meets content standards and often results in a project that connects the school to the larger community. Arnold Aprill describes ongoing arts partnership programs in thirty public schools in Chicago, which integrate the arts into the curriculum, provide professional development for classroom teachers, and connect the schools to the larger arts community of the city. Mathias Schergen, a Chicago art teacher, describes the creation of an art installation called the "Memory Museum," by students in a Chicago elementary school in response to the massive wave of gentrification and redevelopment taking place in their community. Suzanne Miller and Suzanne Borowicz report on *City Voices, City Visions*, a project that prepares teachers to use digital video technologies with their sixth- to twelfth-grade urban students.

REFORMING TEACHER EDUCATION TO IMPROVE URBAN EDUCATION

While many colleges and universities have programs to prepare students to become teachers in urban schools, the number of teacher education programs that focus on social justice, equity, and community engagement remains far too small. Most teacher preparation programs offer few opportunities for students to learn the basics of parent and community involvement through their coursework and practicums or to gain an understanding of the strengths of the diverse communities that make up poor urban neighborhoods. This section includes three examples of teacher education approaches that recognize the need to prepare teachers who understand and appreciate the communities in which they teach, as well as the need for community involvement in authentic school reform.

Jeannie Oakes describes the teacher education program at UCLA's Center X, in which learning to teach means becoming a member of a community of practice within a school and also involves spending time in and making

connections with the communities outside of schools, with an explicit commitment to social justice. Ann Marie Lauricella reports on a learning experience designed to expose pre-service teachers to the positive aspects of city life, through visits to urban neighborhoods led by local activists and community organizers. Dennis Shirley reflects on how a statewide school-university partnership in Massachusetts can serve as a source of community organizing for parent engagement and involve teacher education students in the real-life issues of urban schools.

UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS FOR PARENT EMPOWERMENT

The academic community, particularly urban universities and their schools of education, has an obligation to address the current crisis in urban education. Just as public schools must connect with their local communities and include all participants in the educational endeavor if education reforms are to succeed, urban colleges and universities also must connect with local schools and their communities if they are to contribute to education reform that brings about greater social justice and equity. The chapters in this section are examples of programs and projects, created by university educators and their graduate students, that seek to increase parental and community involvement in urban schools. These programs are based on a model of sharing power so that all members of the learning community can contribute to the process.

Lauri Johnson gives an account of a university-community partnership that conducted a door-to-door survey of parents of Buffalo Public School children about the schools we have and the schools we need. This partnership jumpstarted other school reform projects in the school district. Gillian Richardson reports the results of her study of working-class parents' perspectives on the politics of literacy education. Patrick Finn, Lauri Johnson, and Mary Finn describe a series of workshops conducted in a poor and working-class Buffalo school designed to develop "powerful literacy" and empower parents as active partners in and advocates for their children's education.

FINAL NOTE

The voices of students, parents, and educators throughout this volume challenge us to reimagine urban education, to move from a view focused on the deficits of urban schools and neighborhoods to one in which urban students, parents, teachers, and community members are empowered to transform urban schools through their collective efforts. The authors acknowledge and applaud the benefits that can be derived from democratic and participatory educational systems that collectively develop curriculum linked to community needs, enlist multiple stakeholders in working for equitable funding and neighborhood development, and establish true partnerships between university teacher education programs and the urban communities that they serve. We invite you to

join us in this effort to envision urban schools that challenge and inspire and serve as engines for social change in urban neighborhoods and the larger community—to practice urban education with an attitude.

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