

The Promises and Challenges Inherent in the American System of Urban Education

Nineteen Urban Questions: Teaching in the City, Peter Lang Publishing 2004: New York

Finding a classroom where it wasn't the same routine of entering, answering the "Do Now" and for the rest of the period copying notes, came as a shock and surprise to me. I wasn't used to debating and I never enjoyed participating in class. For, I wasn't accustomed to being in a classroom where students' voices were given such respect. The "calypso classroom" is how I would describe my tenth grade social studies class. I use this term because calypso is a form of music where different instruments and beats are used to form one melody. Although all instruments are not always in harmony and sometimes appear to be fighting each other for dominance, the mix always provides a beautiful end-product: harmonious music (176).

– Kenesha Vassell, *Crossing Swords*

Is the "calypso classroom" what we want in urban schools in the United States? If so, how do we make it the norm instead of the exception? I have just raised two questions that could become a part of the ongoing debate on urban education in this country. However, those two questions are not some of the nineteen explicitly raised in *Nineteen Urban Questions: Teaching in the City*. Such a title implies an ambitious task. It suggests that a complete overview of the theory, pedagogy and reality of today's world of urban education can be framed by just nineteen questions. However, in presenting such an overview, how can the questions stop at just nineteen?

The answer is simple: they can't. The editors of and the contributors to this book acknowledge that questions abound in this field due in part to the limited research available on public urban education (4). The editors and contributors seek to inspire additional questions through their writing. And, a common theme that runs throughout many of the nineteen essays concerns the use of questioning as an essential part of the pedagogy of urban education in the greater context of a democratic society.

This wide-ranging, progressively minded focus on questioning yields many intriguing insights. Since *Nineteen Urban Questions* includes the contributions of over twenty-five scholars of urban education, the compilation of essays holds the capacity to examine a wide variety of issues affecting the promises of and the barriers to the implementation of a successful system of public urban education. Since this compiled analysis comes from several unique perspectives, it is surprising that the contributors, in many cases, arrive at similar conclusions regarding what balance of reforms and current practices, both administrative and pedagogical, holds the needed answers to the ongoing discourse on urban education.

It is difficult, in this review, to focus on a single issue raised, as each topic discussed is of equal moment to the debate on urban education. The effective examination of each of these topics holds valuable promise for answering the question of how to craft an education system that yields physically healthy, constantly analytical, critically minded citizens ready to contribute to democracy and act on the valuable experiences gained from growing up in an urban environment.

Through this review, I seek to examine some of the primary issues put forth and provide some additional answers that could prove to be important in framing the next stage of the discussion on urban education. I have decided, in the scope of this review, to focus especially on public perceptions of urban schools, pedagogical differences between urban and suburban schools and the behemoth issue of standardized testing. A significant discussion of these particular issues, I contend, has the promise to encompass nearly every issue addressed in this compilation of essays.

Nineteen Urban Questions: Teaching in the City is not the first work on which editors Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg have collaborated. In earlier joint works, the

two have examined some of the very topics treated by other contributors in this publication. Steinberg coordinates the Graduate Literacy program at Brooklyn College in New York City. Kincheloe teaches in the Urban Education programs at both Brooklyn College and the City University of New York. Kincheloe and Steinberg each boast long records of research on urban education and related issues. Both also sport extensive lists of publications to their names.

Steinberg and Kincheloe have contracted over twenty-five contributors who hail from universities and urban schools throughout the country. Some have firsthand experience in the field, as products of and/or teachers in public urban school systems. Others write from the standpoint of many years of academic research on the distinctive characteristics of urban education.

The intended audience of *Nineteen Urban Questions* clearly is one with scholarly interest in urban education. Kincheloe, Steinberg and the contributors thus treat the book as an introduction to urban schools for those considering careers in the field. The book seeks to highlight the scope of issues an educator may encounter on a daily basis at an urban school. The writers generally recommend that potential urban educators be well versed on the issues put forth in this text before making the all-important decision of whether or not to work at an urban school. Each chapter presents its own thesis regarding a specific issue, but one of the primary intentions of the text is to illustrate why urban education is and should be different from suburban and rural education. The book characterizes both the urban background and multiculturalism as assets to a student's education, not deficits to overcome. The nineteen chapters present compelling ideas on pedagogy and the challenges and promises presented by the urban setting.

The beginning chapters of *Nineteen Urban Questions* largely address commonly held, media-driven perceptions about urban education. Kincheloe argues in the introductory chapter that such perceptions serve to perpetuate the American tradition of institutionalized racism (4). As an example, he cites the movie “Dangerous Minds,” in which Michelle Pfeiffer is portrayed “as a white savior of the uncivilized African American and Latino students of the ‘hood’” (3). This type of Hollywood mentality drives the notion that the white way of life is ideal and that the only means for “salvation” of minority students is to begin to “act white.”

Kincheloe attributes this common view in part to researchers who, in examining adolescent development, consistently choose to study middle class whites. “The lack of information on low-socioeconomic-class nonwhite urban youth is in itself a form of institutional racism” (4). Basing educational theory and practice on findings that apply to such a narrow segment of the population could potentially convince educators to adopt the wrong approach to urban education. To transform urban students into the likes of middle class, suburban students should not be the goal of urban schools. Urban schools serve distinct student populations. Thus, educational practice in those schools should be adapted to truly work for that population. Kincheloe writes of the large multi-lingual, immigrant populations typical of urban schools: “Instead of framing this reality [linguistic diversity] as a problem, we might view it as a dynamic asset” (9).

Urban schools must constantly battle these and other traditionally prejudiced notions. Another challenge that Kincheloe cites is the societal perception that urban schools are constantly failing students. This, in part, takes root in the idealization of suburban schools based on their higher standardized test scores. As Kincheloe writes, it

is difficult for students and teachers alike to fulfill their responsibilities confidently when they are so sure their achievements will go unnoticed.

[T]eachers and even educational leaders, so caught up in the right-wing discourse of urban minority-student incompetence, lose faith in their students' abilities and the possibility of teaching them rigorous academic material....In a climate in which urban teachers as failures have been the order of the day, [one] often forgets how much good pedagogical work takes place [in urban schools] (9-10).

Kincheloe states that teachers in urban environments, in order to build on their present successes and bring about valuable change, need a comprehensive understanding of the environment in which they are teaching.

Understanding this wide range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge about the urban context, teachers are much better equipped to understand the interrelationships that shape their professional practice....Schools mirror and refract these historical and sociological dynamics (14).

The environmental factors shaping an urban school are different from those shaping a school in the suburbs. It is therefore unrealistic to expect that today's urban students will widely succeed in the context of the Eurocentric pedagogy employed in white, middle class suburban schools, some of the contributors argue.

If the same pedagogy cannot be used in urban and suburban environments, then it is wrong to assess both school systems using the same standardized tests that, by nature, favor well-to-do, white suburban students. Kincheloe writes,

Many poor and/or minority group students clearly understand that they are not viewed as intelligent in urban schools that assume the validity of psychometric data. [Reliance on standardized assessment] assumes an acceptance of a mechanistic worldview that is caught in a socially decontextualized [sic] system of reasoning (18-19).

Using his research, Kincheloe shows that nearly all students in every type of school system do, in fact, engage in higher-order thinking. This type of thinking is sought by educators but not measured by standardized tests. For that reason, urban students are not publicly recognized for their abilities to engage in such complex thinking.

As shown, reliance on this system of psychometric data traditionally discriminates against urban schools. Through legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act, federal funding for those schools that do not perform well on standardized assessment is put in jeopardy. This condition, thus, promises to paralyze urban schools that are serving children successfully in ways not reflected through standardized examination.

The same misguided reliance on psychometric scores that characterizes urban schools as failing also perpetuates the inaccurate notion that disproportionately many learning disabled children attend urban schools. Joe Valentine, a special education teacher at a New York City middle school, in his chapter, writes of his distrust of the evaluation systems used to classify learning disabled students. “Rarely has this researcher [Valentine] come across an accurate evaluation of a child,” he writes (130).

According to Valentine, standardized evaluations are not appropriate, especially in an urban context, because they fail to distinguish between those with behavior problems and those with learning disabilities. Valentine notes that the same root problem with standardized assessment that characterizes so many urban schools as failing is also at work in designating so many urban students as learning disabled. “For the most part an evaluation is so decontextualized [sic] that it only remotely resembles anything the child will accurately mature into,” he argues (130).

Why, then, do we continue to rely on the same standardized tests despite their demonstrated shortcomings? Valentine contends that “some theorist might go so far as to say that testing is used purely as the gatekeeper to monitor the upper versus lower classes and to subjugate those who are not able” (130).

Despite various, unmeasured successes that occur on a daily basis in urban schools, the current system of urban education is not without its problems. However, as

discussed, through the topics examined in *Nineteen Urban Questions*, one can conclude that forcing urban schools to emulate suburban systems as closely as possible is not the solution. Conversely, promoting a pedagogy that is uniquely urban could hold the answer to the question of how to make urban systems succeed. Urban students bring backgrounds and experiences different from those of suburban students to their school communities. Therefore, incorporating students' knowledge gained through such experiences into the pedagogy of urban education, according to many of the essayists, could hold promise for the future of urban education. Multiculturalism and urban background, therefore, cannot be treated as obstacles that inhibit education of urban students. Instead, they must be viewed as advantages unique to the system of urban education. I will address this uniquely urban pedagogy at a later point in the review.

The comprehensive nature of the essay collection offers scattered glimpses of such a pedagogical concept. However, the publication's chief purpose is to force readers to develop their own perspectives and ideas on the pedagogical theory at work in urban education. The authors successfully accomplish that task. In addition, the tactic of addressing commonly held misconceptions of urban education works effectively in opening the reader's mind to the progressive ideas put forth.

However, some notable shortcomings in the essays exist. The book could go further to address some major issues, such as disciplinary techniques and the achievement gap between males and females. These issues, after all, have their place in forming the comprehensive urban pedagogy. I address these two issues below.

The second essay asks why, exactly, urban schools are different from suburban schools. Clearly, differences between the two systems exist, as outlined in the previous sections of this review. However, the authors of this chapter ultimately stray from

answering the question they've posed. Instead, they are intent on continuing to clarify common misconceptions about urban schools. For example, they cite data showing that student-to-teacher ratios in urban schools are slightly lower than those in suburban schools (31).

Throughout the chapter, the primary difference outlined by the authors between the two systems is public perception, in that the suburban system has been idealized and the urban system demonized. Though the two systems are rightly different, urban schools, in a few select areas, I believe, could apply concepts used in suburban settings. These changes would not negatively affect the unique urban identity, but enhance it. The adoption of certain suburban disciplinary techniques in the urban school could prove to be especially effective in promoting democratic ideals.

In an independent study of disciplinary tactics used in both urban and suburban districts in New Jersey, an independent researcher found that suburban teachers offered more extensive and varied techniques than urban teachers in response to how they addressed students' improper behavior. Urban teachers generally listed the time-honored techniques of detention, removal of the child from class and assignment of additional class work as a consequence. Suburban teachers listed some of the same techniques, but also indicated that they discussed students' behavioral action either individually or with the entire class (Blackadar 9-10, 13).

Improper behavior on the part of urban students often takes root in the home environment. According to another independent study, this one on exposure to violence among urban and suburban youth, "the prevalence of community violence is much higher in the inner cities than elsewhere." Due to this exposure, "inner-city children...are at far

greater risk for problem behaviors and are getting into much more trouble than are suburban youth” (Ripple et al. 2).

Due to the local origin of much improper behavior, it is important that urban youth demonstrate a basic understanding of the origins of their behavior. They must, in addition, learn how to avoid the negative consequences that witnessing acts of violence can have on their own behavior. Discussion is the best way to ensure that students possess this necessary understanding. In an urban school, particularly, it is the teacher’s role to ensure that such a discussion takes place. Families must fulfill their commitment to properly discipline their children, but teachers must do their part as well, for “teachers support family life” in their unique societal role (Blackadar 6).

In his essay, Derrick Griffith, an urban teacher and former student of New York City public schools, contrasts the effects on his behavior of his third grade teacher’s constant yelling and another’s attitude of respect and understanding. His third grade experience led him to become disengaged in his studies. However, “Ms. ‘Yeller’ taught me the importance of creating a classroom environment based on mutual respect,” Griffith writes. When he finally had an understanding teacher, “we...would do nothing to disappoint her....I worked very hard to please her by excelling in everything I did” (271-3). Griffith’s story demonstrates the positive results of effective discipline, such as a respectful classroom atmosphere and greater academic engagement.

As discussed above, urban students must have sufficient opportunity to reflect on their behavior. One particularly moving contribution to the publication, which focuses on the drive of some urban students to become writers, offers one possible medium for such reflection to occur.

Winthrop Holder, a high school history teacher in the Bronx, New York, serves as advisor to his school's literary magazine "Crossing Swords." The publication boasts some students' incredibly well-written, reflective essays. The value of democratic discourse and the need to question the status quo in life are common topics. Holder writes of the importance of conveying these reflections of urban students through such a medium. Holder's writing is very intriguing and demonstrates the positive impact written reflection can have on the lives of those who contribute to the literary magazine.

Many of the essays published in "Crossing Swords" offer students' own, thoughtful insights into their home environments. For some students, this type of reflection could be what is needed to understand the origins of their behavior and attitudes toward life.

In addition, several essays in the literary magazine offer student insight into the way classes are conducted. One such essay contains the quotation that begins this review. Kenesha Vassell, a former student of Holder's, discusses the way in which Holder conducts his class, describing it as the "calypso classroom." Urban teachers commonly strive for classroom order while they are teaching. However, Vassell suggests that Holder's willingness to sacrifice some classroom order as a way to inspire student excitement through discussion is valuable. "In order for students to learn, the classroom cannot be conducted as a dictatorship where students' voices are silenced and the teacher has all the say." Vassell writes about how this environment has been created:

[S]tudents presenting different opinions and points of views [sic]...led to frequent heated debates that weren't always harmonious. But in the end...we were able to help each other to see and appreciate another side of an issue (176).

The success of “Crossing Swords” is demonstrated through the well-written, analytical essays that pertain to complex subject matter that come from a variety of students. However, of forty-eight contributors to the magazine during Holder’s tenure, only six have been male, despite “continuous outreach to all students” (196). Holder, throughout much of his essay, mentions the gender gap but offers no analysis into the problem. He only wonders.

Researchers are currently observing that this sort of trend is not uncommon. Female students, in recent years, have demonstrated greater prowess in their studies than have their male counterparts (Alloway et al. 351). It has been suggested that instruction in humanities subjects, such as English, is biased toward females, as “there is a mismatch between the demands of school English and common experiences, interests, or aptitudes of boys, and that this discourages many boys from engaging enthusiastically and successfully with English learning” (Alloway et al. 352).

Some schools in the United States have experimented with single-sex classes in order to eliminate such a bias (Riley par. 36). However, such an approach to the gender gap would be less than ideal in an urban setting. Urban schools often serve populations whose personal links to the days of compulsory racial segregation are close. Therefore, conducting single-gender classes may evoke similar emotions.

In addition, single-sex classes are not conducive to a democratic system of education within urban schools, a pedagogical objective cited in various essays. A participatory democracy requires mutual understanding among fellow citizens. Single-sex classes would not foster such an attitude. In order to address the gender achievement gap, therefore, educators must pay careful attention to the curriculum selected and evaluate it for bias toward either gender. A curriculum that shows no gender bias would

presumably contain materials that would appeal to the interests of students of both genders. For example, a non-gender-biased English curriculum could address as many tales about the lives of urban cowboys as about feminism and the development of the female role in society.

Certainly, more research must be done to better understand the nature of such bias. Also, urban educators must make special efforts to involve males in subject areas in which they typically lag behind their female counterparts, generally in the humanities areas. The issue is one that requires utmost sensitivity from all parties.

The development of a distinctly urban pedagogy requires a similar, common sensitivity from all parties involved. Throughout this review, I have frequently spoken of the need for urban schools to expound upon a pedagogy that is uniquely urban – a pedagogy geared to the distinct qualities, experiences and needs of a diverse urban population. Most every topic in the scope of this review that I have either discussed in the context of change or deemed a positive aspect of urban schools is a part of the answer to the question “What exactly is a distinctly urban pedagogy?”

One of the elements of this pedagogy that I have addressed in this review is the need to incorporate the lessons learned from the valuable urban background of students into everyday classroom lessons. Joe Valentine, the scholar of special education in urban schools, refers to this as the incorporation of “indigenous knowledge.” “[I]ndigenous knowledge reflects the dynamic way in which the residents of an area have come to understand themselves in relationship to their natural environment,” he writes (129). Valentine describes the teacher’s role as that of the “facilitator,” as his or her duty is to square students’ understanding of newly introduced concepts with their preexisting, experience-based knowledge.

Indigenous knowledge must be incorporated into all subject matter, including science. Koshi Dhingra examines how to do this in the chapter “How Should Science Be Taught in Urban Settings?” Dhingra has taught science in various urban settings and has trained aspiring science educators. She examines, in part, the role that representations of science in the media can play in class. She recommends the use of material that interests students, such as the publication *The Real Science Behind the X-Files*, because of the potential it offers to connect science to the outside world. Dhingra writes,

[I]f teachers are not open to the use of such material, they will continue to feel that school science has little to do with their everyday world. Television represents the everyday world....The medium is a tremendous resource as motivation, point of reference, or basis for critique in the classroom (226).

I believe that the incorporation of indigenous knowledge into the practice of urban education holds tremendous promise to solve some age-old problems and to stimulate enthusiastic and innovative scholarship among urban students. Urban teachers must demonstrate a readiness, a special enthusiasm to embrace this concept for the sake of their students. Urban teachers must follow the lead of Koshi Dhingra and Winthrop Holder. As Kenesha Vassell, Holder’s student, writes in her “Crossing Swords” essay,

In the classroom I began to notice that my social studies teacher, the adviser, had a talent for pulling information from students by presenting topics in a way to involve the entire class in discussion. Even the “bad” students were interested (176).

A style of teaching that intrigues even the “bad” students is what urban schools in the United States need. Under such a teaching style, “classes would be more interactive, as in the ‘calypso classroom,’” Vassell writes, “and fewer students would cut classes because they will now have something to look forward to” (176). As an urban student, Vassell has the firsthand experience needed to make such claims. She likely knows multiple students who have dropped out of school prior to graduating due in part, in some

cases, to disenchantment with school. If students can become intrigued by their studies, as Vassell describes, then dropout rates could potentially fall, representing a new day in American urban education.

Before this happens, however, it is essential that the necessary pedagogical changes be implemented in order to stimulate students' interest in class material being examined. This is an important step toward creating scholars prepared to participate in and transform democracy in the twenty-first century. The students of today are the promise of tomorrow. Urban students are no exception, for that is what should be expected of them.

Nineteen Urban Questions: Teaching in the City can spur endless thoughts about the promise of even slight changes to the practice of urban education in the United States. This collection of essays embodies both the promise and the challenges. They demonstrate contributors' comprehensive understanding of the environment of urban education. Such understanding is necessary for those seeking to be involved and make changes. After reading all nineteen essays, the reader is likely to have a well-balanced understanding of the promises and difficulties inherent in the practice of urban education. As Steinberg, the co-editor, writes in her conclusion, it is important that one considering urban education as a career choice be aware of the various issues that could affect him or her on a daily basis. Otherwise, such a person is likely to become one of the fifty percent of urban teachers who leave their jobs before completing five years (285). For one considering a career in urban education, *Nineteen Urban Questions* is a starting point that can be used as a basis for further research into all aspects of public urban education.

Reviewed by: Matthew Stone

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