

Ability, Equity, and Culture: Sustaining Inclusive Urban Education Reform

Elizabeth B. Kozleski and Kathleen King Thorius, Eds.
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Students in our urban schools continue to experience marginalization because of the various factors associated with race, gender, sexual orientation, linguistic backgrounds, and ability. This often results in troublesome inequities in our urban schools, such as racially segregated student placements and an overrepresentation of students of color in the special education setting. Kozleski and Thorius, the editors of *Ability, Equity, and Culture: Sustaining Inclusive Urban Educational Reform*, address these problematic issues and argue for an inclusive and culturally responsive reform that counters historically exclusive systems. This book helps empower educational practitioners to take an active role in urban education reform through actions such as reflective teaching and leadership practices, as well as inclusive classroom designs. As a former special education teacher in urban dual-language programs, I wish I had had this book as a resource before or during my time in the classroom. By weaving in powerful vignettes of educational experiences through various perspectives, the authors highlight the complex dynamics of urban schools and effectively demonstrate how teachers, administrators, and researchers can practically and effectively address issues of access and educational equity.

In Section One, Chapter 1, Kozleski and Thorius situate this collection of resources in a position that strives to expand the “inclusive urban education reform movement” (p. 3). While inclusive education often refers to general education classrooms that physically include students with special needs, the editors focus on a movement that provides meaningful learning experiences to *all* students by introducing the lessons researchers and practitioners have learned through the National Institute for Urban School Improvement (NIUSI), a technical assistance center funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (Kozleski & Smith, 2009). NIUSI’s goals include assisting urban schools and students with special needs in inclusive settings, and throughout this book, stories are organized through NIUSI’s Systemic Change Framework (SCF), which focuses on the need to integrate reform efforts at each systemic level and applies a student-centered approach that unifies practitioners into a system of teaching and learning. The editors present narratives through the theoretical framework for systemic change and provide evidence for how

districts, schools, and community efforts must interact and include the voices of families and students in order to succeed in social transformation.

Section Two focuses on centering students and families in urban school reform. In Chapter 2, Zion and Petty encourage readers to consider the potential of student voice in urban education reform. They provide tools for those of us engaged in urban school reform to guide and reflect upon our progress in “emancipatory systemic change” (p. 57), which will allow our students full participation within community decisions. In Chapter 3, Kozleski and Artiles shift from a traditional focus on competition in education and instead describe school success as the “degree to which all students are able to access, participate, and acquire robust tools” (p. 64) for participating in their everyday lives. This chapter encourages teachers to consider the essential role that culture plays in our daily lives and how dominant cultural norms can contribute to the marginalization of certain students. The authors explain how practitioners can focus on activities that support and nurture student learning. In Chapter 4, Graff and Vasquez present the influential work of the Participatory Action Research (PAR) group, which is committed to assisting Mexican-origin parents of children with special needs navigate the complicated special education system. Through the example of PAR’s work, the authors show how transformational frameworks, such as the Systemic Change Framework, can help teachers provide equitable opportunities for families who have been traditionally marginalized.

Section Three of the book focuses on how teacher efforts can contribute to the transformation of urban learning environments. In Chapter 5, Gonzalez and Mulligan address the instructional dynamic as the intersection of content, students, and teachers. They provide useful suggestions for creating inclusive classroom communities by focusing on the cultures in the classroom, the school culture, and the classroom culture. The authors in Chapters 5 and 6 explain the power of examining cultural influences on educational practices, and provide suggestions for ensuring that we are not excluding our culturally and linguistically diverse students from meaningful learning experiences. Chapter 6 urges teachers to play a meaningful role in urban education reform by interacting and collaborating with students and families within the communities. Thorius and Scribner emphasize the importance in teachers’ reflections of how their own identity, “including their beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning and assumptions about students [and] families” (p. 145), are connected to student outcomes.

Section Four focuses on the role of building and district leaders in this reform movement, but the messages are also applicable to teachers. In Chapter 7, Garrison-Wade, Gonzales, and Alexander encourage readers to learn more about equity in order to better understand leaders’ efforts. Though it is often challenging for staff members to let go of longstanding practices, many traditional activities cause exclusion and it is therefore crucial to address issues of power and privilege in relation to education. Chapter 8 offers an inspiring example of a school in which self-contained classrooms were no longer acceptable. The staff was able to achieve this admirable change partly because of the space the principal provided to develop a collective vision of inclusive education. Sullivan and Jorgensen acknowledge that resistance is a natural part of

change process, and “effective leadership requires navigating both the organizational and interpersonal obstacles” (p. 184). The vignette illustrates how change is obtained not solely by a principal’s decision, but also through collective discussions with an entire staff.

The final section of the book examines the intersections of macro, meso, and local policies for reform. In Chapter 9, Hart-Tervalon and Garcia focus on how dominant culture norms often contribute to a disproportionate number of students of color in special education placements. By analyzing how teacher expectations of students may be culturally informed, it is hoped that practitioners can address this issue of overrepresentation. Kozleski and Thorius end the book by exploring how policies, such as those in urban reform, can stick. Among several suggestions, they highlight the need for authentic decision making in order for policies to take hold.

Ultimately, this book is an excellent resource for those of us committed to creating educational programs that meet the needs of a diverse group of learners. The vignettes and various tools offered move beyond research findings and offer practical steps that parents, teachers, school leaders, and policy makers can take to implement an inclusive, culturally responsive reform in urban schools.

References

Kozleski, E. B., & Smith, A. (2009). The complexities of systems change in urban schools. *Urban Education, 20*(10), 1–25.



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