Chapter 39

#UrbanLivesMatter:
Empowering Learners through Transformative Teaching

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ABSTRACT

In an era marked by major political and social change, teachers of urban students must be prepared to engage and appreciate an ever-changing demographic of learners who come from backgrounds different from their own. In this chapter, we discuss the need for professional development embedded in culturally responsive teaching, multicultural education, and critical literacy, all of which have the power to incite social action. We posit that social action has the potential to empower and engage urban learners in meaningful ways. We believe this work fills the gap that exists in the literature regarding urban education and social and political movements

INTRODUCTION

What can be done to secure a brighter future for today's urban youth? That seems to be the burning question of parents, youth-serving organizations and the greater society at large. Given the past few years were ones of profound injustice and extraordinary resilience in a number of American cities, it still left many youth feeling a sense of hopelessness. Homicides, attacks, and senseless bullying peppered news outlets across the globe, and many times became interwoven into the fabric of the urban classroom. The deep psychological wounds of racism, classism and structural oppression are elements of several movements, like #BlackLivesMatter and #OccupyWallStreet that started within urban contexts and communities.

Despite the massive political and ideological synergies created around these movements, we believe a gap exists between the two—urban education and transformative teaching.

Our premise is that there are tenets that tie together intentionality of social movements and core competencies of quality teaching and learning for teachers who choose to work in urban schools. We believe that a deep exploration of these movements will reveal teaching tools, discussions, and techniques that can be used to strengthen quality teaching in urban schools, thus making them vehicles for change that can redefine and deepen democracy and equality (Clemons & Clemons, 2013). What's more, despite significant advances in enhancing educational practices, there is a worry that an intense focus on core subjects such as English, Mathematics and Science are failing students later in life. More specifically, K-12 learners are not being sufficiently equipped with the life skills to make personal and social decisions outside of the classroom which could most affect their future. Our conversation is based on the following:

1. *Schools (and communities) are often sites of reproduction or creation of such discourses.* Power can also repress knowledge (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1987). Educators who are not critically conscious of the systemic power differentials between students and teachers will likely serve to recreate these oppressive systems. If power is not checked, knowledge can be repressed. As an institution built on the relationship between students, teachers, and knowledge, schools are inherently linked to power.
2. *Power contextualizes almost all aspects of school.* Students interact with people in formal positions of power—principals, teachers, deans—and create their own codes of power. Educators teach curricula authored by people often in institutional powers, which trickles down into school spaces. Students and teachers potentially resist and reinvent the institutional rules promoted by these curricula. As a result, students and educators interact within codes of power, (i.e. implicit and explicit rules of power) (Delpit, 1988) and construct narratives of power (i.e. stories about how power is and should be enacted) as interpreters of these codes. *Power also implicates pedagogy.* Schools are sites of explicit and implicit pedagogies. Extending Gage's (1978) definition of pedagogy as "scientific basis of the art of teaching," pedagogy also implicates the governing system of values, sets of assumptions, discourses *and* the instructional decisions and interactions that come within this system.
3. *School is an active, civic space.* School is the only *compulsory* civic space for most youth. They live within a set of governed rules that promote a closed set of values (Raby, 2008; Warren, 2013). They negotiate action to fulfill their individual needs in relation to the needs of the collective group. In other words, schools are spaces where students are citizens of a broader community. Despite the massive amounts of time students spend in this politically charged space, little is known about how teachers understand, experience, and act upon/with/without power in the context of school (Briggs & Mchenry, 2013; Burke & Greene, 2015; Lenzi, Vieno, Sharkey, Mayworm, Scacchi, Pastore, & Santinello, 2014; Martens & Gainous, 2013).

Engaging Pre-Service and Practicing Teachers in Intentional Experiences in Urban Settings

We shed light on thoughtful, deliberate pathways of action teachers may use to demonstrate for students and the ways in which injustice exists both inside the classroom (through curriculum) and outside of the

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