

Book Review:

Kozleski, E. B., & Thorius, K. K. (Eds.). (2014). *Ability, equity, and culture: Sustaining inclusive urban education reform*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press. 272 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0807754924 (pbk), \$34.95.

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Ability, equity, and culture: Sustaining inclusive urban education reform, edited by Kozleski and Thorius (2014), is a remarkable compilation of work, written by a diverse ensemble of educators, researchers, practitioners, and advocates. A thought-provoking book that looks critically at urban education reform, the authors challenge readers to have a broader understanding of what the term *inclusivity* entails. The editors present the work of 17 authors who were all part of the National Institute for Urban School Improvement (NIUSI). These authors shed light on various aspects of systemic urban reform in policy, pedagogy, and practice. Issues discussed range from the micro to the macro change initiatives to classroom environments and district culture, as well as successful models of student-centered programs around the country. Using data from 12 years of research conducted under the sponsorship of NIUSI, the contributors paint a hopeful, if daunting, portrait of what equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive education should and could look like. Ultimately, the contributors of this book believe that sustainable, scalable, successful systemic educational reform is attainable, provided that all stakeholders are committed to cultural responsiveness and inclusivity for *all* students. In order to achieve this goal, the authors posit that reform needs to combat discrimination based on socially constructed notions of difference, such as gender, race, ethnicity, ability, class, and sexual orientation.

Book Overview

The book is divided into five parts: I) Examining a Theory and Framework for Systemic Change, II) Centering Students and Families in Urban School Reform, III) Teacher Efforts in Transforming Urban Learning Environments, IV) Building and District Leaders' Roles in Urban Reform, and V) Intersections of Macro, Meso, and Local Policies for Urban Reform. The guiding theoretical frameworks discussed in part I provide a foundation and structure for the rest of the book as

well as a vision for educators and practitioners seeking to become agents of change in their own settings. The three theoretical frameworks are cultural historical activity theory, complexity theory, and intersectionality theory. All three are weaved throughout the book as a way to ground the various perspectives of the featured authors. Kozleski and Thorius (2014) begin by challenging dominant discourse around diversity and cultural relevant pedagogy, which is mostly concerned with issues of race, gender, language, and ethnicity. They also take a critical view of typical understandings of inclusive accessible education, which has traditionally focused on the physical inclusion of students with disabilities in general classrooms or on offering reasonable special education services. Instead, the editors ask their readers to connect the dots between a set of complex issues. The book's theoretical frameworks help readers to make these connections.

Book Analysis

Unlike most literature about urban education reform, this book is a profoundly deep and optimistic look at how education can be improved for the most marginalized students. The editors describe the purpose of the text as an impetus for "educational practitioners and change agents looking to develop their understanding of crucial areas of policy and praxis to support and expand the spread of inclusive urban education reform" (p.3). School leaders who are committed to educational agendas that meet the needs of a diverse group of students will find the book an excellent resource. However, readers may also find the material difficult to process because of its use of theory with which the audience may be unfamiliar. Part I, in particular, is dense and relies heavily on outside sources to establish the theoretical framework of the book.

The vignettes and practical steps provided can be useful for policy makers and educators alike as an instrument for implementing inclusive, culturally re-

sponsive reform in urban schools. The authors endorse a very specific form of transformation: one from a “top-down, authoritarian, expert-driven, compliance focused accountability reform recipe” to a “collective, organizational learning endeavor in which the best research, evidence-based practices, and ongoing inquiry become the way forward” (p. 20). Each subsequent part of their book highlights an initiative taken up in various districts throughout the country that sought to create such a transformation. The challenges, triumphs, and pitfalls of these efforts are illustrated using data and personal vignettes. The vignettes are clear, concise, and mostly generalizable to different groups. They consist of educational experiences told from multiple perspectives, and they occur throughout the book to highlight the complex dynamics of urban schools.

The heart of the book emphasizes solutions to issues of educational equity and ways in which school leaders and educational practitioners can successfully implement them. In one example, researchers successfully utilized data maps and statistical models to evaluate assessment tools used by practitioners in districts where culturally and linguistically diverse students were over-represented in special education programs. In another chapter, authors presented classroom vignettes to illustrate the implicit negative messages minority students are given and how these messages hinder, rather than advance their learning. These real world examples are then followed by ways to move towards a more inclusive classroom.

The final section of this book is dedicated to policy at various stages of reform, such as state, local, and even federal level. Kozleski and Thorius (2014), who co-author the last chapter of this section, provide a set of tools to challenge and spearhead policies recommended to transform urban education into a more equitable environment. Readers who might be daunted by the theoretical frameworks will certainly appreciate the clear recommendations for concrete action. The book concludes with the authors noting that the work of systemic urban school reform is an ongoing “quest” that requires all participants to be fully engaged and to confront issues of “power, privilege, and oppression” (p. 241).

Application for School Leaders and Administrators

In practical terms, this text calls for educational leaders to think more analytically about day-to-day practices and school settings. For instance, when offering a class or workshop, educators need to consider if the location they have chosen is easily accessible to people with disabilities. The authors provide a multitude of

ways in which administrators can be more inclusive, from ensuring universal access, giving consideration to special needs, and using best practices in pedagogy. Moreover, administrators and school leaders will be made more familiar with current educational policy, able to connect with other leaders in similar situations, and able to understand ableism in order to combat it from within. By using the recommendations provided in this text, schools can provide stakeholders an opportunity to voice their concerns, needs, and wishes instead of patronizing and dismissing their experiences. While this book focuses on unique aspects of systemic reform and challenges faced by educational leaders, its overall purpose is to guide practitioners and policy makers towards a more equitable education system --one that works to actively undermine explicit and implicit forms of ableism, racism, sexism, and other forms of exclusionary practices.