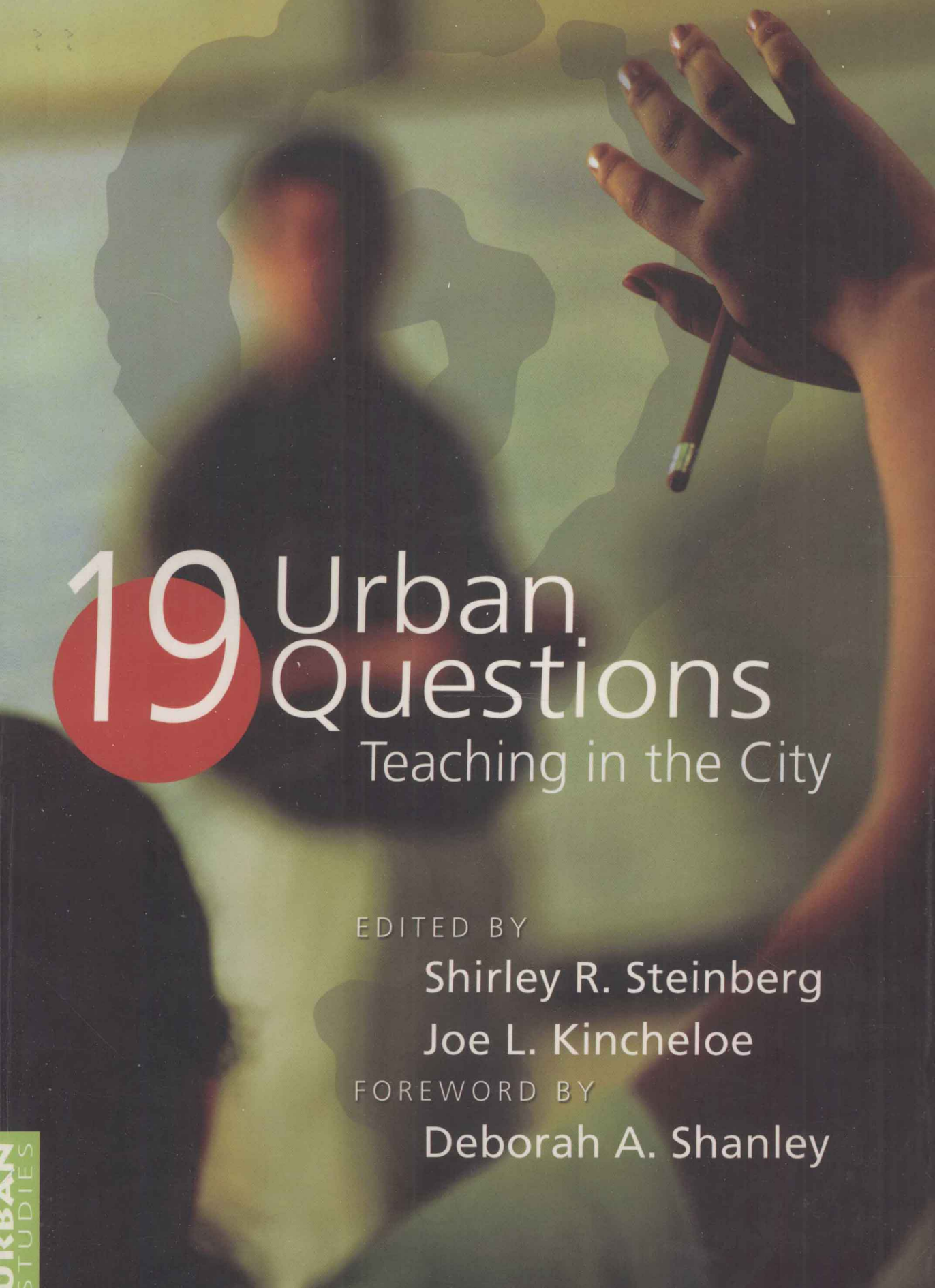
19
Urban
Questions
Teaching in the City
EDITED BY
Shirley R. Steinberg
Joe L. Kincheloe
FOREWORD BY
Deborah A. Shanley
URBAN
STUDIES

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Deborah A. Shanley

Foreword

The challenge of writing the foreword to a text that asks multiple questions in a complex world has impacted my ability to sleep at night. Every night before my bedside light is turned off, I find myself more emerged in the question "what did I accomplish today, and how did it make a difference in the lives of the children, teachers, and other members of the urban community that I am committed to serve?"

There is no hiding from the fact that as I read each chapter and reflected on the questions, I became more uncomfortable with the fact that our conversations are not all-inclusive—and that maybe we are misaligned with the daily conversations in schools, on college campuses, at dinner tables, and at school board meetings. Perhaps a dialogue might provide a unique opportunity to open this conversation with those that usually find themselves on the margins.

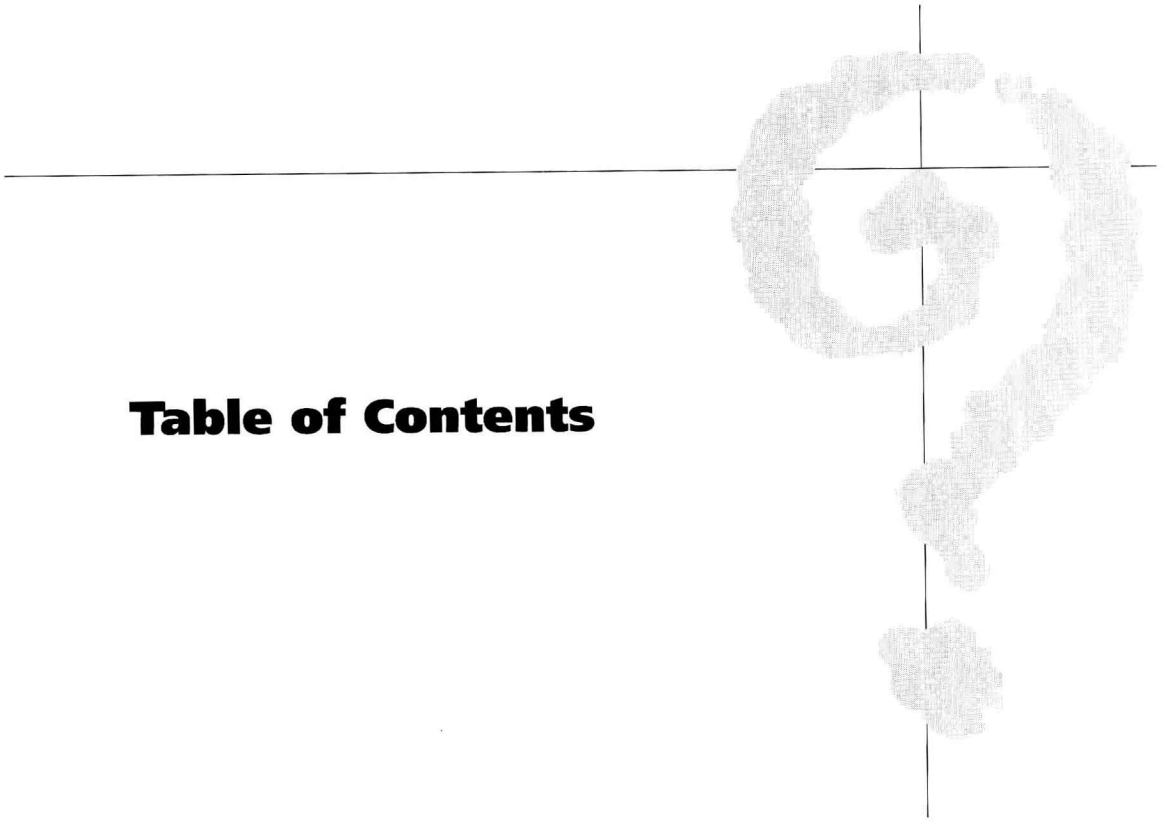
Can a book that is designed around the idea of questions which are developed around an ideological framework open the door to partnerships with others that were never considered? We are all hoping for the same results: opportunities for students presently not achieving within the urban school context—for them to gain access to what is currently denied to them. It goes far beyond a black/white agenda. It goes to the heart of what is right and just. Students deserve the best of what we can deliver in a safe, socially supported, and intellectually rich learning environment. Are we integrating into our discussions on urban education the rich research that has documented best practices? Are we inviting room for new

research? Do we extend the conversations in our classrooms beyond our personal beliefs? Do we create forums for everyone to be heard and embraced?

Why do we continue to allow standards to stifle both teachers and students. Do we continue to talk to ourselves but not to those that are most affected by decisions and standards? We must take our words to the community.

We must ask these questions. We must ask if they extend beyond the urban environment. Do we focus too much on dropouts rather than pushouts? As we focus on a test-driven educational environment, whom do we lose? In this book, Flo Rubinson challenges some of our present beliefs on dropouts, as David Forbes speaks to a public system that too narrowly defines spirituality. We must listen to the voices of children entering young adultood and take the information, as Haroon Kharem speaks about—we must turn it into a positive direction. One cannot watch *Boyz N the Hood* and not know that Doughboy possessed superior leadership skills—skills that just needed redirection by both adults and peers.

Reading *19 Urban Questions: Teaching in the City* gave me the edgy feeling that there continues to be a disconnect—but with a reexamination that we must look again at each way in which we approach our work.



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Joe L. Kincheloe

CHAPTER ONE

Why a Book on Urban Education?

Why a book on urban education? Because in the early twenty-first century one of the most compelling concerns involves the question of what to do about our neglected urban schools. Thirty-one percent of U.S. elementary and secondary students go to school in 226 large urban districts. There are nearly 16,000 school districts in the United States, and almost one-third of all students attend 1.5 percent of them (Fuhrman, 2002). As Philip Anderson and Judith Summerfield write in their chapter in this volume, another important reason for focusing attention on urban education involves the fact that in the urban context one finds "the emergent American culture." Indeed, they conclude, the ways in which urban educators shape the urban pedagogy in the coming years are central to the way Americans reinvent the nation. With this in mind, the United States faces an uncertain future because in these 226 urban districts, observers have found a wide diversity of problems and successes. Because of the scale of this diversity, this book or this chapter could be entitled "Urban Education: A Dialectic of Challenges and Opportunities." We'll keep the title *19 Urban Questions: Teaching in the City*, but we know that within every chapter this interaction between challenge and opportunity will manifest itself.

The Perpetual Crisis of Urban Education

Urban education is always in crisis—yesterday, today, and certainly in the near future. Teacher shortages force many urban school administrators to scramble madly during the first weeks of school to fill classroom vacancies. Inadequate funds

cause cutbacks in essential services in the middle of the school year. In contemporary U.S. society, the use of the term *urban* itself has become in many quarters a signifier for poverty, nonwhite violence, narcotics, bad neighborhoods, an absence of family values, crumbling housing, and failing schools. Over the past several decades educational researchers have been producing data confirming the deficits of urban youth, while sensationalizing media produce images of urban youth running wild and out of control. In this context many urban school leaders attempt to hide the problems undermining education at their particular schools (Kozleski, 2002; Ciani, 2002; NWREL, 1999). As Florence Rubinson explains in her chapter in this book, many schools, under the flag of public relations, mask their dropout rates. The critical problems besiege many of us who work in urban systems, and we have come to realize that without significant structural changes, even increased funding will only prop up pathological systems and provide little help for students and teachers.

In the middle of the eye of the perpetual crisis, teachers keep on teaching and many students keep on learning. Indeed, there are urban teachers who perform good work in a context in which impediments are many and resources few. Even if resources were provided, if equal funding of urban school systems were mandated, there would still be inadequate monies. Poor urban schools are so in need of financial help that equal funding would have to be supplemented by additional infusions of resources just to get to where they might be able to visualize the equality of resources on the distant horizon. Overwhelmed by these disparities and the crisis atmosphere surrounding them, urban policymakers have sought to replace huge, bureaucratic systems overseen by boards of education with new smaller, locally operated organizations.

Chicago experimented with such a plan in the late 1980s, establishing local school councils that attempted to put communities in contact with their schools. Results have been mixed and their successes open to diverse interpretations (Halford, 1996). In New York City in 2002–2003, political and educational leaders debated the role of boards of education as Mayor Michael Bloomberg sought an alternative framework for governing the city's schools. The crisis atmosphere and the uncertainty of the continuity of urban educational governance structures make it difficult for urban school administrators and teachers to focus on long-term projects. Teachers learn quickly that numerous classroom interruptions are the norm and that they have precious little time for lesson planning and pedagogical reflection on their practice (Lewis & Smith, 1996). Crisis management and survival until the end of the school day too often become the modi operandi of urban education.

Gangsta Paradise: Representations of Urban Education

It has become obvious to many scholars and educators that something has changed in the contemporary era. Over the last several decades, new structures of

cultural space and time generated by the bombardment of electronic images have colonized our consciousness, shaping the way we see ourselves and the world. Electronic transmissions from radio, TV, popular music, movies, video, e-mail, and the Internet have saturated us with information about the world around us. Some refer to this new world as *hyperreality*—a place with so much input that we have difficulty processing all the data we encounter. In hyperreality the information that is electronically produced often takes on a realism that trumps our everyday lived experiences. The world we view on TV often shapes our perspectives more profoundly than what we directly observe in the society around us (Kincheloe, 2001; Kincheloe, 2002). In this context, consider media representations of urban education. Portrayed in film and TV as a danger zone, inner-city schools are seen as homogeneous locales of peril where no one should ever venture.

In the 90s, Hollywood films about urban education moved from the feminine missionary of Michelle Pfeiffer's Lou Anne Johnson in *Dangerous Minds* to Tom Berenger's macho special forces operative Shale in *The Substitute*. Whereas *Dangerous Minds* promotes Pfeiffer as a white savior of the uncivilized African American and Latino students of the 'hood, Berenger's Shale represents the end of hope. Shale's final solution is to kill them all as he "terminates" the cocaine ring-leading black principal (Ernie Hudson) and many of his students of color in full gangsta regalia, representing public education's Battle of Armageddon. The audience knows that tax-supported city schooling is a failure and that society must find a new way—prison—to deal with these "urban animals." *The Substitute* resonated with so many viewers that it spawned two appropriately named sequels—*The Substitute 2: School's Out* and *The Substitute 3: Winner Takes All*.

While there are many other films in this genre, such as *187*, suffice it to say that these films, combined with literally millions of TV news images of inner cities, city youth of color, and urban schools in poor neighborhoods, help inscribe particular affective and cognitive impressions with political/ideological consequences. Indeed, many Americans from suburban and rural areas know more about urban youth and city-dwelling African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Arab Americans from media images than from face-to-face contact. Thus, a sociocultural chasm has been produced between middle-class teacher education students and the students they will teach if they do their student teaching or obtain positions in urban schools in poor communities. Also, these representations, as they filter into the racial common sense and the folk psychologies of the larger society, present real obstacles to urban students attempting to succeed in schools. In this context such students have to deal with negative stereotyping in relation to their scholastic aptitude and their character.

Such representations even affect scholarly fields. In adolescent psychology, for example, it is interesting that so little research has been produced about factors of race and socioeconomic class as they relate to the identity development of young people. In many educational circles, inquiry into the representations of urban

schools and students in media productions is still viewed as a frivolous form of research, with little to contribute to the study of teaching and learning (Henke, 2000). It is amazing that in the first decade of the twenty-first century, so little research has been produced in relation to urban education and urban students (Fuhrman, 2002). Indeed, most research on child and adolescent development involves middle-class whites. The lack of information on low-socioeconomic-class nonwhite urban youth is in itself a form of institutional racism (IUYL, 1996). A critical urban education that understands the complexity of the intersection of race, class, gender, sexual, religious, and ability-related dynamics as they relate to education seeks to address these racism-produced deficiencies.

The Blurred Boundaries of Urban Education: Addressing Complexity

There is nothing simple about urban education. Just when we think that we've made a definitive statement about the uniqueness of the category, up pops a contradiction that subverts our confident pronouncement. What passes as urban education involves a wide range of circumstances (Willard-Holt, 2000). Sometimes the boundaries between suburban, rural, and urban schooling are more blurred than we initially realized. As Anderson and Summerfield point out in their chapter here, analysts need to be very careful when they proclaim, for example, that urban schools are more dangerous than suburban schools. Violent crime statistics indicate that the difference in violence between urban and suburban schools is minimal. As Judith Hill puts it in her chapter, "What Is Urban Education in an Age of Standardization and Scripted Learning?"

> Urban environments are some of the most contradictory areas of our world, where the extremes of our civilization coexist—the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor, the most privileged and the most disenfranchised, live and work here in large concentrations.

Researchers confirm that nowhere are the obstacles to success and the existential needs of students as great as in urban areas. Yet at the same time it has to be said that urban locales also contain some of the most helpful resources for young people and their families. We return to our dialectic of challenges and opportunities. Educators, researchers, and school leaders must view every school as a self-contained entity that might be similar to or different from the urban schools around it. Thus, we must rid ourselves of assumptions and study each school on its own merit. This means that we must focus attention on the sociocultural context of each urban school, examine student backgrounds, the positions of empowerment and disempowerment from which they operate, the knowledges they bring to the classroom, the languages they speak, and the ways in which all of these dynamics shape learning and teaching (Wang & Kovach, 1996; Willard-Holt, 2000). In his chapter, "What Is the Role of Counseling in Urban Schools?" David Forbes reflects this complexity when he contends that school counselors who are

worth their salt must understand and act on the recognition of these diverse and complex dimensions of urban schooling, from the psychological domain to the ideological.

What Are the Unique Features of Urban Education?

Keeping in mind the complexity and contradictions of the category, it is important to ask whether there are features of urban education that are unique. After careful study of the question, I believe that the following characteristics apply.

Urban schools operate in areas with high population density. Technical definitions of urban areas typically maintain that they are characterized by plots of land on which population density is at least 1,000 individuals per square mile. In addition, many urban scholars contend that such areas average at least one building per two acres of land.

Urban schools are bigger, and urban school districts serve more students. Simply put, urban schools and their districts have larger enrollments than rural or suburban ones. These large urban educational institutions are more likely than their suburban and rural counterparts to serve large numbers of students of low socioeconomic class. In these densely populated urban areas and large schools, students are more likely to be ignored or overlooked in the crowds. In such a context it is difficult for urban students to experience a sense of community, and this alienation all too often leads to low academic performance and high dropout rates.

Urban schools function in areas marked by profound economic disparity. Even though numerous poor people can be found in rural areas, urban venues are characterized by high concentrations of poverty existing in close proximity to affluence. Over 80 percent of high-density poverty areas in the United States are located in the nation's 100 largest cities. A disproportionate percentage of minority students and their families are plagued by this concentrated urban poverty, which hampers their quest for academic success on many levels. In urban schools located in these areas, it is not uncommon to find an appalling lack of resources. Financial inequalities mar these schools and school districts, undermining efforts to repair dilapidated buildings, supply textbooks for all students, and provide teachers with instructional materials and equipment. Even when such schools get equipment such as computers, they may sit unused for months or even years because schools have no money for the wiring and phone lines necessary for their use. It is not surprising, therefore, that urban students in poor areas have less access to computers and the Internet than their rural and suburban counterparts. All teachers, no matter in what area they pursue their practice, face the challenges of teaching students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. There is a compelling difference in

teaching a class in which 2 students out of 20 are poor and teaching one in which 36 out of 37 come from a low socioeconomic background.

Urban areas and urban schools have a higher rate of ethnic, racial, and religious diversity. In densely populated urban locales, people coming from different ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds, to say nothing of different economic, social, and linguistic arenas, live in close proximity to one another. Nearly two-thirds of urban students do not fit the categories of white or middle class, and within these populations high percentages of students receive free or reduced-price lunches. Achievement rates for poor minority students consistently fall below those of white and higher-socioeconomic-class students. Surveys of teachers and staff in these highly diverse and poor urban schools consistently indicate that they often feel overwhelmed by the problems that undermine lower-socioeconomic-class minority students' quest to succeed in schools. The frustration of such teachers and staff members is exacerbated by the perception that few care about the well-being and the success of these students.

Urban schools experience factionalized infighting on school boards over issues concerning resources and influence. In almost all urban contexts, school boards have fought over salaries for particular school employees, personnel hiring and firing, school assignments for particular students, and the microdynamics of school construction. In densely populated, diverse, and poor areas, such disputes have erupted as local school boards find themselves as the major dispensers of jobs in the area. Because of the important role they play in areas with few resources and opportunities for employment, urban school boards have focused more and more on day-to-day school operations and less and less on policy-level deliberations concerned with improving student success.

Urban school systems are undermined by ineffective business operations. Urban schools in poor areas have more trouble obtaining the basic resources needed to operate schools than do their rural and suburban counterparts. School buildings are often run-down and in dangerous states of disrepair; substitutes are frequently used to cover classes for months at a time, and business staff at the district level often have obtained their jobs through political patronage and longevity rather than expertise. Promotions in the central offices, contracts for school services and supplies, and even curricular decisions with accompanying contracts for purchasing instructional materials are often made on the basis of political favors and influence, much to the detriment of educational quality.

Poor urban students are more likely to experience health problems. In many urban schools, the effort to construct a high-quality learning environment is, in the immediacy of everyday needs, less important than addressing issues of student health and safety. For example, school administrators are often more concerned

with providing a warm building on a cold day or fixing unsanitary and disease-producing bathrooms than with more long-term academic concerns. When compared with rural and suburban students, urban students are less likely to have access to regular medical care. Concurrently, such urban students are more likely to develop cases of measles and tuberculosis and suffer the effects of lead poisoning. As Leah Henry-Beauchamp and Tina Siedler report in their chapter in this volume, the number of urban students with asthma has reached epidemic proportions and is growing. Far too many of these urban children with asthmatic conditions do not receive medical attention.

Urban schools experience higher student, teacher, and administrator mobility. In poor urban schools, researchers find that frequent moving between schools undermines student achievement. Some analysts have noted that the poorer the student, the more moves he or she is likely to make. The same schools experience higher teacher turnover—one out of every two teachers in urban schools leaves in five years. Poor inner-city schools find it difficult to retain teachers when school systems in surrounding suburban areas can offer teachers more lucrative salaries, better-maintained schools, a higher-achieving student body, and less demanding work conditions. In addition, studies illustrate that urban teachers are treated with less respect and participate less in decision making that affects their working lives. Thus, students in poor urban schools who are most in need of caring, experienced teachers often are taught by the least experienced teachers. In addition to high student and teacher turnover, urban administrators do not serve in their positions as long as their suburban and rural counterparts. Superintendents in urban systems stay for an average of three years—an insufficient period for their policy changes to have an effect.

Urban schools serve higher immigrant populations. In the twenty-first century, not unlike the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, urban schools educate a large number of students who are immigrants or whose parents are immigrants. Many of these families came to the United States to escape political harassment and/or financial despair. Along with these voluntary immigrants, urban schools serve students whose ancestors were involuntary immigrants (African Americans, for example) who share a history of discrimination and injustice. Each of these groups experiences problems unique to its background, and urban educators need to understand and know how to address these concerns.

Urban schools are characterized by linguistic diversity. Because of their large immigrant populations, urban schools have more students speaking different languages than their suburban and rural counterparts. In New York City, for example, more than 200 languages and dialects are spoken in the school system. Because our teachers and educational leaders are generally white and middle class, they usually do not have the heritage or educational background to make positive use of

such linguistic diversity, which tends to be seen as a problem rather than a unique opportunity.

Urban schools experience unique transportation problems. When urban students are asked why they are late to school, one reason that particularly stands out involves their dependence on public transportation—subways and buses in particular. Such public transportation is not designed for school schedules and can often be unreliable. Subways sometimes are too crowded to get on in order to get to school on time. Schedules are sometimes changed abruptly and the subway train may skip stations. I have engaged in numerous conversations with urban students who pick up a subway or bus at one station and have to transfer two or three times in order to get to school. Each transfer, of course, increases the chance that they will experience a delay or cancellation. Urban teachers who do not understand these dynamics will often punish students for tardiness. Such teachers assume that the students made no effort to get to school on time.

Teachers working in poor urban schools are less likely to live in the communities surrounding the schools than teachers in suburban and rural systems. In this context teachers become socially, culturally, and economically isolated from their students and the parents. In their isolation, teachers do not understand their students' ways of seeing school as an institution and the world around them. Teachers who find themselves in such a situation are cut off from the helpful information that parents can give about their children and the communities in which they live. Without such valuable knowledge, teachers often make judgments about particular students without having more than one perspective to explain why these students perform as they do (Bamburg, 1994; Lewis & Smith, 1996; Halford, 1996; NWREL, 1999; Weiner, 1999; Kozleski, 2002; Fuhrman, 2002; Westview Partnership, 2002; Ng, 2003; Mezzacappa, 2003).

Keeping Hope Alive: Possibility, Change, and Resilience

Often in the literature of urban education, wide-angle views of the field project a depressing picture of inner-city schools. More specific studies and analysis often uncover success stories that play out daily among dedicated and knowledgeable teachers, visionary administrators, and brilliant students. It is very important that as we paint a macroportrait of the problems of urban education, we do not forget the heroic efforts of these individuals. This is the case especially in relation to the children and young people who attend poor urban schools. Despite the poverty, racial and class discrimination, intelligence and achievement tests that distort their abilities (Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Hinchey, 1999; Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Villaverde, 1999), the linguistic differences, and the many other problems of inner-city life, many students still succeed. No educator should ever forget this. The editors and authors of *19 Urban Questions* keep this knowledge in mind every day

that we walk into urban schools and work with students and teachers. In this context we fervently believe that positive change is possible. Indeed, it is this hope that animates Derrick Griffith, Kecia Hayes, and John Pascarella in their chapter, "Why Teach in Urban Settings?" Buoyed by hope and empowered by their knowledge of the complexity of urban education, Griffith, Hayes, and Pascarella's conversation illustrates the wide body of knowledges and insights needed to succeed as an urban educator.

Thus, while refusing to ignore the problems, we continue to struggle to help more urban students succeed in their academic pursuits and their quest for socioeconomic mobility. In this context we walk a tightrope between pointing out the problems (while avoiding cynicism) and calling attention to the successes (while avoiding rose-colored perspectives). We advocate a curriculum that draws on the strengths of urban students, rather than relying on indicators that point out only their weaknesses. In the domain of linguistic diversity, for example, instead of framing this reality as a problem, we might view it as a dynamic asset in planning one's vocational life. In a globalized world, Americans in a variety of occupations need bi- or multilingual skills, and employers will pay to find such individuals (Halford, 1996; IUYL, 1996; NWREL, 1999).

This critical reframing of urban education in terms of possibility is no easy task in the first decade of the twenty-first century—but it is necessary. Jonathan Kozol (2000) is helpful in this reframing effort in his book *Ordinary Resurrections*, which examines urban life and education through the eyes of children in a poor neighborhood in the South Bronx. Documenting the difference between teaching in 1960s Boston, in the hopeful atmosphere that racism and poverty would soon be eliminated, and teaching in the more cynical South Bronx of the 1990s, Kozol uses the phrase "ordinary resurrections" to signify that in the worst of times educational victories can be won. In a sociopolitical atmosphere in which the public and even the educational conversation about promoting racial justice is not commonly overheard and when precious few political leaders speak of making urban schools less separate and more equal, some urban teachers and educators become very discouraged. Other teachers 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 (Bamburg, 1994).

In such an atmosphere, diatribes against urban teachers and their "criminal students" become the order of the day (Willard-Holt, 2000). As a teacher-educator in New York City during the Rudolph Giuliani administration, I was amazed at the mayor's verbal attacks on the alleged across-the-board incompetence of the city's teachers. On numerous occasions Giuliani attempted to humiliate teachers to punish them for their "failures." In his chapter in this volume, Joe Valentine speaks as a special educator in the New York City public schools. In a climate in which urban teachers as failures have been the order of the day, Valentine con-