

The Hardest Questions Aren't on the Test: Lessons from an Innovative Urban School

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Title: The Hardest Questions Aren't on the Test: Lessons from an Innovative Urban School

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Elected officials and the media continue to clamor for magic formulas, prescribed models, and a clear set of instructions for turning around our troubled urban high schools. Despite NCLB sanctions and district-wide reform measures, many high schools continue to struggle to graduate students from underserved populations. Linda Nathan brings the discussion back to center, by rejecting the “cookie cutter” method of educating urban youth, and instead reaffirming an important tenet of improving education: “reform is essentially political and [that] you must know your community’s context before plunging in” (p. xxv). Thus her book rejects a formulaic approach and instead focuses on challenging teachers, administrators, and parents to ask tough questions, challenge norms, and rethink the methods used towards the acquisition of knowledge.

The setting for Nathan’s narrative is the Boston Arts Academy, a racially and ethnically diverse magnet high school with 420 students. Students must audition for a spot by performing music, dance, or a theater piece or presenting a visual arts portfolio. Its faculty is composed of 50 percent teachers of color, and 95 percent have advanced degrees, “some more than one” (p. xi). Nathan’s analysis of the school’s success (95% of students attend college) is framed by a series of questions:

What does your school stand for? How do you make curriculum relevant? What roles do teachers, leaders, and students play in helping shape the school? What are the questions we are avoiding asking? What are the questions behind the problems we are facing? (p. xxvii).

As Nathan makes clear, principals alone cannot effect change in urban high schools. She argues that their role should be to challenge stakeholders through this questioning

process, with the goal of developing a unifying framework that guides teaching and learning. The framework will be unique to every school and community, along with the values and ideas that are contained within it. Nathan's narrative may be helpful to teachers and administrators engaged in processes of developing a common vision for their school, as she highlights both her successes and her setbacks, reflecting on learning from the latter and celebrating the former.

She focuses on the metamorphosis of students as they discover new strategies for learning that encompass the arts and teachers' openness to linking teaching strategies from one discipline to another (e.g., a math teacher who participated in a dance class asks herself: how can you use dance to teach math?); and students take ownership of their learning through open evaluations conducted by teachers and senior students. The framework developed by the Boston Arts Academy community "makes learning and assessment transparent to everyone" (p. 29). For Nathan, the education component of this framework is only one piece of a goal of education, which is to prepare students to interact more effectively with each other and the world. Tangentially citing Freire's work, Nathan argues that education is liberation if it moves beyond its singular focus on academic assessment.

The more interesting parts of the book focus on the application of their unifying framework outside of academics, specifically in the handling of controversial issues on campus, including homophobia. Nathan chronicles several incidents in which she engaged teachers, parents, and the community to resolve contested issues, not always to everyone's satisfaction, but as she proudly states, "we asked ourselves hard questions and let those questions lead us to action. We didn't go on doing nothing" (p. 48).

For educators challenged to turnaround their urban high schools, Nathan makes several important points. One is that the media portrays school leaders as heroes. From Jaime Escalante's *Stand and Deliver*, *Mr. Holland's Opus*, and *Freedom Writers* to Michele Pfeiffer in *Dangerous Minds*, teachers are solitary warriors fighting inept administrators and stereotypical unruly students. But as Nathan argues, teaching and working with students is not a solitary activity and collaboration is essential for success. The lack of a collaborative spirit can be deadly for budding teachers, as she illustrates in a vignette of her interviews of prospective teachers for her school learning community.

Secondly, Nathan argues that talking about these tough issues and raising their profile in a collaborative manner, is "doing something." For example, at the end of the book Nathan devotes a full chapter to their campus discussion on race, specifically the achievement gap. Despite best efforts, their school's honor roll was largely white, and students who received A's in college-track courses such as physics were all white -- this in a school that is 17 percent white. While acknowledging that the achievement gap is one of the most talked about issues in education, Nathan charts a course for discussing data with the faculty, identifying the challenges they faced in sharing this information with students, and ultimately opening the door for their participation in addressing this historically difficult challenge. In a nod to Bourdieu (1990) and Lareau (2003), teachers point to the role of class in determining school success. Unfortunately, Nathan does not

develop this point, nor does she present relevant literature that may be helpful to those interested in exploring this issue further. To me, this side-steps a tough question: should schools also provide this cultural training to low-income children so they can be more like middle class children? Or do we focus on the school as a structure and examine the ways it privileges middle class knowledge? Or both? Nathan appears to suggest this middle ground.

In the end, this book may be helpful in an introductory course as the vignettes, which also focus on a variety of students, are engaging and illustrate the complexity of urban education. The lack of literature or theory is an issue, yet the school's success is evident, and Nathan eloquently presents the struggles innovative schools face every day. Although not a formula for success for other schools, there are important lessons to be learned from this analysis.

References

Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J.C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. New York: Sage Publications.

Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal education: Class, race and family life*. Berkeley: UC Press.