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Stairs, A. J. & Donnell, K. A. (Eds.) (2010). *Research on Urban Teacher Learning: Examining Contextual Factors Over Time*. Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing, Inc.

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Research on Urban Teacher Learning is a collection of mostly empirical research focused on urban teacher learning. This book sets out to and accomplishes the task of exploring whether, why, and how context matters in urban teacher learning. Several chapters clearly address the complexities of local contexts in urban schools and districts in terms of hiring practices, bureaucracies, pressures of accountability, new teacher support, and relationships to students, families, and colleagues. In fact, the exploration of context across multiple chapters is a significant contribution to the research literature on teacher learning in urban schools.

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For instance, Tricario and Yendol-Hoppey make three valuable assertions in their chapter researching the experience of two first-year teachers. These assertions take both the context of the district and schools as well as the personal traits of the research participants into consideration in order to expose difficulties and promising options for supporting both new teacher survival and success. They carefully expose the barriers certain contexts can provide to effective new teacher development. Additionally, Donnell in her chapter regarding the conditions and resources in learning about urban education, provides an extensive and helpful analysis of the conditions and resources that both serve to educate and mis-educate new teachers in urban contexts.

Meller's research provides important insights into the context of urban teacher learning by tracking the growth of a teacher during her first year of teaching regarding the use and application of critical literacy. Her research exposes the difficulty and complexities new teachers may face in implementing such important practices into their classrooms. Furthermore, Friedman and Daniello provide conceptual insight through provocative analogies regarding the role of politics, policy, and pedagogy in urban schooling contexts and the need to support teacher professionalism in urban schools. These chapters are excellent samples of useful research that contribute to the knowledge of our field as well as push the need for consideration of local contexts to the forefront of research.

The excellent research contained in this text provides valuable insights into urban teacher learning. However, the text would be strengthened as a whole from improved organization and framing. For instance, the first section is titled, "Theories of Urban Teacher Learning" and would better frame the entire text if the chapters comprising it more directly addressed theories of urban teacher learning, built off of the most current research, and conceptually and theoretically clarified the meaning of the term "urban" across the research presented in the book.

The longer I work in teacher education and educational research, the more I find a need for clarity in use of the term "urban," as it is not used consistently in all contexts to mean the same thing. Nor are all schools districts and schools in urban geographical locations the same, as is

evidenced by the excellent research in this book. Therefore, by “urban” do we mean the racial and linguistic background of students? The geographical location of schools? The type of district? The socio-economic status of students’ families and communities? The label of low performance as measured on standardized tests? All of the above?

As the research in this volume underscores, there might be similarities across varying urban contexts or student populations, however, there are also substantial differences in school and district structures, resources, student and teacher demographics, policy mandates, and geographic location. Therefore, in exploring context in “urban” teacher learning, we need to be clear about what those differences and similarities are despite the common label of “urban.” The reader would have a more nuanced understanding of the editors and authors’ use of the term “urban” if it had been conceptually clarified upfront.

Additionally, in this first section and across the text, readers would have benefitted from a more complete description and discussion of multilingual learners as well as the need for teacher expertise in supporting quality educational opportunities for multilingual learners at all levels of English development. The editors and chapter authors discuss the presence of “English Language Learners,” in urban schools, but focused on teacher learning and practice regarding cultural responsiveness (Ladson-Billings, 1995) instead of both cultural and linguistic responsiveness (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008). As multilingual learners are one of the fastest growing student populations in the United States (Crawford, 2004) and are often enrolled in low performing schools in urban environments, the authors inclusion of explicit work related to teacher learning and multilingual learners would have been beneficial.

As evidenced by federal policy such as “Race to the Top” and “No Child Left Behind” as well as the recently released movie “Waiting for Superman,” the national trend in education policy and the school reform debate is to focus on the lowest performing schools in our country. Frequently, these schools are found in urban, high poverty areas and serve predominantly students of color. Despite the extended national attention on the issue of struggling

schools, many proposed and enacted solutions to improve low student performance in urban schools are not based on empirical research. Therefore, educational researchers concerned with teaching and learning in urban contexts are eager for their work to influence policy decisions.

In fact, the editors of “Research on Urban Teacher Learning: Examining Contextual Factors Over Time” call for more work related to teaching and learning in urban contexts to be explicit in terms of research methodologies and theoretical frameworks in order to be relevant to policy conversations. They state:

We contend that in this age of accountability urban scholars must be publishing articles and books that put research at the center of discussions of the preparation and professional lives of urban teachers in order to have a voice in the policy arena (p.6).

While I strongly agree that educational researchers need to be more involved in the creation and implementation of policy, putting research at the center of discussions is insufficient in and of itself to make our work relevant to policymakers. Therefore, while there are substantial amounts of quality research in this text, the editors’ assertion about relevance for policymakers would be stronger if the text as a whole spoke more directly to current issues, debates, and conversations happening in the policy arena, such as connecting teacher learning to student outcomes.

It appears that this text would more easily communicate with policymakers if there were increased attention and connections between teacher learning and student outcomes. To be clear, I am not arguing that student achievement is only measurable through standardized tests. In fact, standardized tests are an imperfect measure of what students know and can do as well as how teachers are performing (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Goto-Butler, Orr, Gutiérrez, & Hakuta, 2000; Menken, 2008). However, pupil learning can be and is measured everyday in classrooms across the country in helpful ways to inform teacher learning and practice (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, and Wiliam, 2003). With low performing, urban schools often facing low graduation rates, high drop-out rates, and a school accountability system entirely focused

on student outcomes, research on teacher learning in these schools is going to be most powerful in both policy and practice if it directly addresses the connection between teacher learning and student outcomes.

Furthermore, scholars concerned about teacher development in urban schools labeled low performing are best equipped to inform policymakers of more useful, informative, and influential methods of measuring pupil learning related to teacher learning and practice by creating and researching such practices. The high-stakes accountability movement focused on standardized tests scores could potentially be combated with strong empirical research that provides helpful accountability alternatives. Engaging in research on teacher learning like that in this text and connecting it to desired, measurable, and informative pupil outcomes could help shift the accountability movement into a direction that actually supports high levels of student and teacher learning.

Overall, Stairs and Donnell have provided us with an excellent collection of research regarding the importance of context in teacher learning as well as a substantial amount of longitudinal research showing the importance of context in teacher learning over time. The work contained in this volume contributes to the knowledge in our field and provides a foundation for asking continued questions into the context and practice of learning to teach in urban schools overtime.

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