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Falk, Beverly & Blumenreich, Megan. (Eds.) (2012) *Teaching Matters: Stories from Inside City Schools. Inspiring Young Children in the Classroom*. NY: The New Press.

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Our educational system is at a tipping point. Federal "Race to the Top" initiatives have taken a firm hold in many states, ushering in an era of the "New Common Core Standards," adding another layer of increased accountability for all schools. Teachers' voices have been supplanted by state and national mandates; by policies and policy makers who demand "scientifically based" data and outcomes; by a government that takes money from schools that already have few resources; by media that are complicit in chastising teachers for their perceived failure to properly educate our children. This seems nowhere more apparent than in challenging urban settings.

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It is here, perhaps, in the ultimate urban setting of New York City, that Falk and Blumenreich give voice to 15 practicing teachers' inquiry into their own classrooms. In, *Teaching Matters: Stories from Inside City Schools*, we are exposed to so much more than stories as we are guided through teachers' processes in choosing questions for inquiry, to their thick descriptions, and finally to the subsequent discovery of their own voices and development of concrete ideas from inside their own classrooms. These teacher/researcher stories resonate loudly and clearly to those of us who continue to strive toward real, authentic, equitable teacher research and learning, especially among our most vulnerable children.

Falk and Blumenreich begin this "fast" read, with a foreword by the Stanford scholar, Ann Lieberman. In reminding us of the necessity to "codify teacher knowledge" Lieberman joins the swelling ranks of teacher researchers who have highlighted the importance of what Schubert and Ayers (1992) twenty years ago, called "teacher Lore," to what Blake and Blake (2012) have recently called, "using narrative as reflective practice." It is here in their own voices, Lieberman agrees, that teachers can learn to:

> solve the problems they are facing with strategies that help them confront rather than give up, that use differences as an asset rather than a problem, and that create, rather than negate, partnerships with parents as a way to connect them and their students to their schools (p. x).

The foreword is followed by an introduction, that at first glance, seems to follow many other books in this genre — presenting findings, analyses, and ideas/implications for the classroom. The authors, however, distinguish this work with two very important additions. First, in each chapter, the teacher/researcher ends his or her story with an "Ideas from Inside the Classroom" section. This section includes the teacher/researcher's concrete ideas, in table format, from working with real students in real classrooms. More crucially, however is the addition of Appendix A in which the authors describe a step in the process of inquiry (that many of us do not take) — that of asking those whose words we seek to publish, to respond to our (re)- interpretations of their inquiry. Guided by

questions such as, "Were there any inaccuracies in how we described your project?" and "How did it feel to read someone else's version of your story?" (See Appendix A for a full explanation of their methodology; an explanation that I think would have been better placed upfront, perhaps in the Introduction). Falk and Blumenreich afforded the teacher/researchers the opportunities to revise, revisit, and once again re-interpret these important stories. This is not a minute point. It is with this extra, crucial step of asking teacher/researchers if their words ring true, that we are able to come full circle in acknowledging the importance, I believe, of the crucial place of teachers' stories in today's educational system.

Each chapter falls into one of four sections — themes of Falk's and Blumenreich's data analysis, one suspects — and include: Section One: Inside Culturally Responsive Teaching, Section Two: Inside School/Family Partnerships, and Section Three: Inside Differentiated Learning, and Section Four: Inside the Constraints of Urban Teaching. The book ends with a Conclusion followed by Appendix A (discussed above) and a very useful Appendix B that lists the questions the authors used in teasing out underlying themes in the teacher/researchers' written reports of their classroom inquiry.

An important formatting note: In reviewing this book, I found it important to summarize each chapter separately, as each teacher in each of his or her own classrooms, has a unique voice and subsequent narrative to share with us. Synthesizing their stories here (into more themes or categories) seemed to defeat the purpose.

Section One: Inside Culturally Responsive Teaching

In the first chapter, "Immigrant Children's Earliest School Experiences," Adesina Abani, a Nigerian immigrant herself, describes her experiences as a young student, drawing parallels from her own, often very difficult, yet exciting first years in her home country's schools, to those in the U.S. Often teased for her accent and ultimately accused of stealing, Adesina remembers the cultural disconnect she felt to both her teachers and other students. From these memories, she develops and initiates a successful mentoring program for children in her family's

local mosque. It is here that Adesina takes on "teacher inquiry" leaving us with important, but often un- thought-of important concrete ideas on legal issues (e.g. green cards) and food choices.

Chapter Two, "Celebrating Diversity in the Classroom," is written by a Filipina American, who as a child attending all-white elementary schools, felt like an "outsider." Now teaching in the South Bronx, Beatrice sees the importance of bringing students' diverse nature to the forefront of everything she does, so that they too do not feel "invisible." The use of the wonderful "I Am" poetry format exemplifies these 2nd graders' lives and literacies.

In Chapter Three, "Breaking the Silence—Countering Homophobia in Schools," a 2nd grade urban teacher reexamines common rituals schools impose on our students. Seemingly simplistic (and thereby overlooked) routines like separating students into lines by gender, according to the teacher, Joleen, often help to make those students already struggling with gender identity to feel increasingly uncomfortable or even inferior.
Mary, a 4th grade teacher in New York's East Harlem, investigates, in Chapter 4, how she as an outsider (born and raised in white suburbia) can connect to her mostly Latino students. Entitled, "A White Teachers' Quest to Become a Culturally Responsive Teacher, Mary describes how she was "unprepared for the unexpected" as she struggled with getting beyond, "superficial beginnings."

Section Two: Inside School/Family Partnerships

Chapter Five: In, "Bridging the Language Gap," Evelyn Chang, a Chinese American, describes her shock at learning in her elementary classroom, that not only did many of her students read "below grade level," but that when asked (and translated by neighborhood volunteers) parents often omitted vital information about their children such as how much they read at home. Determined to change this situation, Evelyn tries out new translation "strategies" as well as learns to "reach out to families." Wonderfully surprising was Evelyn's revelation that parents WERE interested in their children's success.

In "Addressing the Unspoken," (Chapter Six) Joan, a 25 year teaching veteran, examines how both teachers and

parents can help ease children's transitions from home to schools in the early grades. Importantly, through this inquiry, Joan has learned to "transform" her role as an "authority figure," to a teacher and partner with parents. Joan believes, as a result, she has transformed her classroom to a much more welcoming place.

In Chapter Seven, Kanene Holder borrows from Louis Moll's (2005) "Funds of Knowledge" research and takes us into her science classroom in East Harlem. "Incorporating Families' Funds of Knowledge into the Classroom" is probably the best written chapter of the entire book as Kanene takes us from Moll's research, to her own inquiry, to unexpected lessons, and finally toward integrating her new understandings into her classroom, clearly using her students' families and the community as resources for her inquiry and for her students' learning.

Chapter Eight by Rory Scott, a director of an Early Childhood Center in upper Manhattan, talks from his own local knowledge (born and raised nearby) about "Bridging Differences," reminding us that although Harlem is known for its African American residents, it also houses a large population of African immigrants. Extremely diverse (from the Ivory Coast as well as Senegal, Gambia, Ghana, Mali, and the Sierra Leone) Rory discovers that within this great diversity lies another cultural barrier: language. Pointing to the fact that most schools reproduce notices home to parents in both English and Spanish, and often other languages such as Chinese, there are never any translators (nor is the city required to provide) translators for these African languages and dialects. Rory has a good understanding of the complexity of institutionalized racism even among seemingly-like groups, and he brings his new understandings into practice in realistic ways.

In "Parental Supports for Early Literacy, Chapter 9, Kisha Pressly a pre-K teacher in a Harlem public housing development, begins her chapter exasperated-- exasperated by research she has read that talks about how kids in Kentucky learn to read better (than her own) as she struggles to find any connection to her students. Luckily, as her study progresses, Kisha learns the very valuable lesson that indeed parents often do "intuitively" know about "early literacy supports" and can help her in her quest to reach the children.

Section Three: Inside Differentiated Teaching

Struggling with the differing needs of children in a multi-age, dual language classroom, Neurys Bonilla, a kindergarten teacher, in Chapter 10, discovers not only the workability of "peer tutoring" and other heterogeneous groupings, but also the fact that she was spending entirely too much time on some children's "difficult" behavior. Both revelations served to deepen Neurys' "knowledge and convictions about good teaching."

In Chapter Eleven, Travis Sloane, a science teacher for students with "special needs," found that initiating this inquiry (and thus discovering effective strategies for these students) "enhanced and improved his overall teaching." Wonderfully, Travis saw early on that "active investigation" among his students was just as crucial in science learning as it was with so called "general education" students. Repetition, a tool, used for many "under-performing" students, Travis learned too, may have been helpful but "needed to be combined with a variety of teaching strategies."

Carol Castillo's dual language kindergarten class, described in Chapter 12, resembles many classes found throughout New York City: close to 100% of the students are immigrants, and although speaking the same language—here, Spanish-- come from many diverse cultures such as Dominican, Mexican, and Cuban. What Carol did first though is a departure from her co-authors: she read and reviewed the literature on language acquisition. (To be fair, others in this volume may have done the same, and simply did not add their findings into their final narrative). In doing so, she discovered an important point about language learning: there are crucial differences in the acquisition and application of basic oral language skills and those needed to handle academic content. This knowledge had a major impact on her teaching.

Understanding the meaning of the German word "kindergarten," Hazel-Veras Gomez, in Chapter 13, "What is Happening to Our Children's Garden," immediately questions the prescribed curriculum set out before her in her new position as a Kindergarten teacher, confirming

that, indeed, kindergarten students, no longer experience play as learning. Determined to undermine the dangers of a "scripted curriculum" and its underlying philosopy, Hazel searches for strategies that she can use that will make real change in these students' learning environment.

In Chapter Fourteen, " Incorporating Physical Activity into the Public School Pre-Kindergarten Day, " lisa schaffner [sic], discovers the many benefits of finding ways to include physical activity into her children's day. Finding several potential options for activity in her cramped classroom (and within many time (constraints), lisa introduces and leads (among other activities) a formal "music and movement time" where she becomes a DJ and students dance along to her chosen music.

In the final chapter, 15, "What can a teacher do to improve the climate for learning in a school," Laurie Jagoda, a middle school teacher, studied (the effects of) and implemented school wide initiatives like, "developing a school vision," and "creating a school government." Throughout all of these projects (some student-based, others teacher-based), Laurie learned the importance of "teachers supporting teachers" and the very real impact these ideas had on their understanding of and push for more "meaningful professional development."

Teaching DOES Matter. This book reminds those of us in education—as teachers, teacher educators, teacher researchers—that the very mandates that control so much of our curricula, funding, and publishing decisions can be reconstructed to reflect what we know is good teaching—what we know, as insiders—as to what works—in spite of standardized tests, national core curriculum standards, and other accountability measures that declare the opposite. Don't be fooled by the ostensible simplicity of this text. The stories told here by practicing teachers, are rich in the narrative tradition of inquiry, taking us deep into the actual workings of student and teacher practices. There simply is no replacement for that. And yet there are many more stories, many more narratives to be written. Read. Write. Talk back.

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