

CHAPTER 1

BUILDING UPON STUDENT RESOURCES AND ATTRIBUTES

VIGNETTE: A RESOURCE APPROACH IN ACTION

As the bell rings, Ms. Miranda's high school social studies students are settling into their seats. It is the winter of 2006, and she is about to begin a simulation that transports students to another time period through role play. She begins by handing out and projecting that day's assignment on the overhead: "It is 1880, you are a recent immigrant to New York City, and it is your first day at work in a factory. You, your spouse, and your children all have to work. You enter the factory quietly and await orders."

In a booming tone, Ms. Miranda says, "I'm the factory manager. You are to create shirts on an assembly line. One of you will cut out the shirts, one of you will attach the buttons, and one of you will neatly fold and package the shirts for shipment." She hands out large manila envelopes that include paper photocopies of shirt outlines, pre-cut paper buttons, and glue. The small groups get to work as Ms. Miranda role-plays the manager well, berating them for not working efficiently, for cutting corners, for making only one shirt in the first few minutes. One boy exclaims, "I feel like a slave! Do it yourself!" to which Ms. Miranda replies, "You're fired!" Angered, the student continues, "How am I going to tell my 10 kids I got fired?" The other students giggle at the spontaneous and intense role play by their teacher and classmates. Another boy says, "I'm protesting. Give me paper and a pencil." The girl next to him provides both and asks, "Immigrant, do you know how to read and write?" He makes a sign that reads, "We Need Freedom," tapes it to a ruler, and begins marching around the room. Ms. Miranda encourages him to walk out on the job because she has plenty of immigrants waiting in line outside the door who can take his place.

After several more minutes, Ms. Miranda ends the role play and invites students to express their feelings about being an immigrant in the late 19th

century. The conversation takes a turn to modern-day immigration, and the teacher and students focus the rest of the lesson on the struggles and achievements of U.S. immigrants.

Teaching in an urban school with many first- and second-generation immigrants, and being a first-generation immigrant raised in the city herself, Ms. Miranda shares personal stories and invites her students to elaborate on their own experiences or those of their family and close friends who have emigrated to the United States. The lesson is a huge success, drawing students into the class with an entertaining simulation activity that resonated with many of them. Ms. Miranda's lesson reveals her respect for students' lives and their knowledge developed outside of school as an asset for instruction in school.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- How do urban teachers build upon the resources and attributes students bring to the classroom in order to improve teaching and learning?
- What does it mean to view urban students through an asset lens versus a deficit lens?
- What do successful teachers of urban students know about bringing out the best in their students?
- How might teaching and learning look different when students' lives are valued in the classroom?

Tell some people that you are a new teacher in an urban school and you may hear comments like, “Sorry to hear that. I’m sure that if you just put in your time, you’ll get a better job with smarter kids someday,” or “That’s too bad that someone as intelligent as you has to work with troublemakers who don’t appreciate all that you can teach them.” In truth, many experienced urban teachers will tell you that there is nowhere else they would rather teach than a city school. Given the negative assumptions and generalizations that abound about urban students, how are some teachers able to thrive? Successful urban teachers recognize the resources and attributes of their students—their gifts, talents, struggles, and dreams—and they use this knowledge to make teaching and learning most effective for all students. This recognition and utilization of students’ knowledge is known as a **resource approach** to teaching.

Oakes and Lipton (2007) describe the resource approach in this way:

Teachers who seek to build their teaching on the strengths of communities must question commonly accepted beliefs and practices surrounding

ability, race, class, gender, language, difference, and so on. They must sit at the intersection of theory and practice, constantly asking, “Why do we do it this way?” “What assumptions about the communities and cultures of my students underlie these practices?” “Whose interests does this practice serve?” “How might the cultural resources of my students contribute to achieving our educational goals?” (p. 492)

Questioning the status quo is the first step toward building upon students’ resources and attributes in order to improve teaching and learning.

Anyon (1997) argues that educational change for urban schools is related to social change. She states that “until the economic and political systems in which the cities are enmeshed are themselves transformed so they may be more democratic and productive for urban residents, educational reformers have little chance of effecting long-lasting educational change in city schools” (p. 13). Though Anyon may be right, urban teachers cannot wait for fundamental social changes to occur. They remain responsible for doing their best to improve students’ learning and success in school and life, and most take this responsibility very seriously.

In this chapter, we will consider urban students’ lives and family experiences, deficit versus asset perspectives, the concept of meritocracy, the funds of knowledge that urban students bring to the school setting, and special education in urban schools. After presenting relevant research studies, the chapter closes with the stories of two teachers who build upon students’ resources to improve teaching and learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR A RESOURCE APPROACH

Urban Students’ Lives and Families

Who are urban students and their families? What constitutes their lives outside of school? Teachers can capitalize on what students bring with them from their homes and communities when they learn more about them. Of course, it is difficult to generalize about any student’s day-to-day life outside of school, but demographic and economic trends do shed some light on the lives of typical urban students and their families. The key for a new teacher in an urban school is to understand general trends for families who live in cities and students who would attend city schools, then get to know more about individual students and families (discussed further in the section on funds of knowledge).

About three quarters of PK–12 students in the United States live in cities, which include large or midsize metropolitan areas and the urban fringe of these

areas (Chou & Tozer, 2008). Poverty is a challenge for many families living in these urban areas. For example, recent information from Chicago, one of the largest school districts in the country, reveals what conditions outside of school may be like for city students. Chicago enrolls 85.3% low-income children with a 24.8% mobility rate (Chou & Tozer, 2008). This means Chicago schools have an extremely high concentration of poor children, of whom about one in four move between or out of Chicago schools each year. Related to poverty is the highly segregated nature of U.S. cities. Though the Supreme Court ruled to desegregate schools in 1954, U.S. cities have become more segregated over the past two decades. Orfield and Lee (2004) confirm the trend toward segregation in large and small central cities and their suburban rings, citing five states with the most racially segregated schools in the nation: New York, Michigan, Illinois, California, and Texas. More than half of Chicago's schools are over 90% Black or Latino, and 78% are predominantly Black or predominantly Latino. As Chou and Tozer (2008) argue, "This segregation reminds us of an old and tragic lesson: Where separateness prevails, inequality is rarely far behind" (p. 10).



Black children today are significantly more likely to attend a segregated school than they were in any year since 1968, according to Orfield and Lee (2004).

The economic factors that urban families experience present serious challenges to school success. Joblessness is prevalent in urban areas, as are low-wage employment opportunities and poor living conditions (Kopetz, Lease, & Warren-Kring, 2006). The homeless child population grew rapidly in the past few years to one million in 2009 (Salopek, 2010). One in five children has an immigrant parent, and these children are much more likely to live in poverty, possess limited English proficiency, and have parents who have not earned a high school degree (Oakes & Lipton, 2007). This translates into few opportunities for urban students to view models of highly educated, skilled workforce members in their local communities, resulting in a feeling of learned hopelessness about economic security and future life chances among many urban students and their families (Kozol, 1991). Educational opportunities in school can seem unrelated to the actual and potential life paths of urban students.

Weiner's (2006) scholarship and experiences teaching in New York City are valuable when considering urban communities. She argues, "Teachers and students bring attitudes and behaviors to school that they've acquired in living in particular places, and cities are no different from other locales in making their mark on the way we view life and respond to it, in ways that are both potentially positive and negative in a school setting" (p. 60). For example, some urban students may react defensively, either verbally or physically, if they feel they are threatened in any way. This reaction may be dismissed by a teacher as an inherent character flaw, but it may be an understandable, learned response for children who have experienced the harshness of poverty and city life.

Weiner (2006) also explains that there may be legitimate tensions between urban teachers and the students and families served by urban schools.

A teacher's higher social and economic status, as well as position in a school system that for most of its existence legally and openly discriminated against racial minorities, can make teachers appear to be supporters of the status quo, even if they are not. I think that in order to persuade your students and their parents that they will benefit from what you and the school can offer, you must understand their perspective. You need not share their viewpoint, but you need to acknowledge its existence. Generally speaking, you can win their confidence by making intellectual and social space in your classroom for cultural differences, acknowledging that all students bring life experiences, beliefs, and ideas that are no less worthy of examination than your own or those of classmates. (p. 66)

Though there may be obvious differences in worldviews stemming from different life experiences, teachers, students, and families can acknowledge the

differences and respect each other's backgrounds and what each brings to the schooling experience. Ignoring these differences benefits no one, least of all the students who need to have teachers who understand them as learners and human beings. (Further discussion of this tendency to ignore differences, often known as **colorblindness**, is presented in Chapter 3.)

Murrell (2001) argues that an accomplished practitioner in an urban setting is a **community teacher**. Community teachers “draw on a richly contextualized knowledge of culture, community, and identity in their professional work with children and families in diverse urban communities” (p. 4). He maintains that any teacher candidate may become a community teacher if given the opportunity to develop and learn from practice-oriented, community-dedicated, and urban-focused teacher education experiences with the guided assistance of more skilled urban practitioners. The notion of the community teacher is grounded in the belief that students bring valuable resources and assets to their classrooms that teachers should acknowledge and incorporate into teaching and learning. It is an example of viewing students, their families, and their communities not from a deficit perspective, but from an asset perspective.

Deficit Versus Asset Perspectives

A **deficit perspective** is held when teachers maintain negative assumptions about students, when they presume that “young Americans who are not white and middle class come to school with deficits that make their school success extremely difficult” (Oakes & Lipton, 2007, p. 55). Teachers who believe that certain students cannot succeed in school because of particular attributes (e.g., they are Black or Hispanic, poor, or non-native English speakers) operate from a deficit perspective. They may also write students off before they come to school or believe that parents and students need to change to fit into an educational system that is assumed to work (Garcia & Guerra, 2004). Some have argued that deficit thinking pervades schools and society to such an extent that some educators may not even realize they hold deficit perspectives.

Donnell (2010) has written about the deficit perspective in this way:

Those who engage in deficit thinking regard student failure as a result of alleged internal deficiencies, such as a lack of intelligence, or socially linked shortcomings such as dysfunctional family situations. The popular “at risk” construct views urban children and their families as responsible for urban school failure. The deficit paradigm is highly counterproductive and fails to capitalize on the positive and powerful opportunities available

in urban education. When we acknowledge that there is nothing “wrong” with urban students or their families or their communities, we must ask if the problem has been in the type of schools we have been providing for them. (p. 162)

What Donnell stresses here is that what is “wrong” may be within the curriculum and the system of urban schooling, not with the students. Donnell’s perspective reminds us that operating from a deficit paradigm allows teachers only to see what is “wrong” with their students rather than critiquing the system and building upon what is “right.”

How do teachers develop deficit perspectives about urban students? Teaching has been described as autobiographical (Bullough, Knowles, & Crow, 1991; Nieto, 2003) and research suggests that teachers’ beliefs may be difficult to alter or change (Clift & Brady, 2005; Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992). Therefore, teachers may have deeply personal and ingrained assumptions about schooling based on their individual experiences, including cultural expectations about schooling. When these experiences do not match the reality of their teaching context, the mismatch can lead to deficit views. Urban teachers may also be socialized into stereotypical, deficit models from the school culture, context, and conditions in which they operate. We believe that individuals go into urban teaching because they care about children and educational opportunity and equity, not because they hold inherently negative views about children in urban schools. Therefore, it is important to help new urban teachers examine their own autobiographies, question their related beliefs and assumptions, and develop new ways of viewing difference that move from deficit to asset paradigms.

An **asset perspective** is characterized by teachers recognizing the resources students bring with them and believing they can and will succeed in school. These teachers do not view their students as deficient or see their families and communities as problems. They recognize the assets students bring to school and build upon them. For example, one urban teacher recognized that her high school seniors possessed strong literacy skills in their first language and were still striving toward literacy skills in English (Stairs, 2010). She modified curriculum and instruction to allow first language use in her classroom in a state that required English be the only language used for instruction. She continued to speak English only with her students, but she allowed them to use academic search engines to find literary criticism articles in their native language, write early drafts of papers in their native language, and share their ideas with partners who spoke the same language. By paying attention to the literacy skills her students possessed rather than assuming they were incapable of the assignment,

she allowed her students access to high-level academic work that may not have been possible without recognizing and building upon their assets. The same could be said for Ms. Miranda, the teacher whose vignette opened this chapter. Ms. Miranda knew that many of her students were first- or second-generation immigrants and that some had family members working low-wage factory jobs. Rather than seeing this as a problem that would inhibit their learning, she used this information to help students access concepts of late-19th-century immigration and the industrial revolution.

To underscore the importance of the asset perspective in urban teaching, Donnell (2010) applies an **ecological orientation**. The ecological approach “views school life and classroom teaching as occurring within interconnected webs of settings and institutions that transcend classroom and school borders” (p. 162). This orientation underscores how isolated factors do not influence schooling so much as the whole of the socially and culturally organized environment. If the students are at the center of the web of factors (the classroom, the family, the school, the community, the society), teachers’ positive view of their assets is the critical starting point for improving their educational experience.

Weiner (2010) suggests that “school practices and assumptions emerging from the deficit paradigm often hide student and teacher abilities. An impersonal, bureaucratic school culture undercuts many of the teaching attitudes and behaviors that draw on student strengths” (p. 70). Therefore, it is imperative that urban teachers recognize deficit thinking, critique the underlying assumptions of the perspective, and move forward with a positive perspective that focuses on students’ assets to improve teaching and learning.

The Myth of Meritocracy

The term **meritocracy** refers to the assumption that, with hard work and determination, all individuals can achieve whatever they desire. As the name implies, success directly correlates with **merit**, defined as observable and demonstrable competence. It is more colloquially known as the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” philosophy: If you work hard enough, you can achieve anything. Those who do not display the same level of talent and competence should not expect the same levels of success. Some argue that meritocracy is a natural result of a democratically organized society. However, others argue that meritocracy neutralizes real historical and institutional factors that privilege some individuals while systemically discriminating against others. McNamee and Miller (2004) assert that the principle of meritocracy is closely related to the concept of the “American Dream.”

Unlike European societies historically dominated by hereditary aristocracies, the ideal in America was that its citizens were “free” to achieve on their own merits. . . . Reflecting the reality of their life circumstances, nonwhites and those with less income are more likely to identify “family background,” “who you know,” and “discrimination” as relevant factors in where people end up in the system. (p. 2)

The **myth of meritocracy**, then, refers to a critique of the overarching notion that hard work always leads to success. Oakes and Lipton (2007) explain:

The problem with the myth of merit is that it presumes a basic equality of opportunity and resources for success, and that the only variable is that of individual merit. . . . The United States is plagued by inequalities, such as disparities in safe neighborhoods, decent housing, adequate health care, and sufficient school resources; many of these inequalities are in domains that affect children’s success in school. Notably, even the most meritorious schoolchildren have very little control over these structural inequalities. So, although meritorious qualities occur with no less frequency in low-income families and among blacks, Latinos, and immigrants, inequality limits the degree to which members of these groups can parlay qualities like determination and hard work into school success and enhanced life chances. (p. 52)

One example illuminated in recent years is college admissions in the United States. Though colleges have been attempting to “level the playing field” and allow more students from more backgrounds the opportunity to achieve a higher education degree, elite schools are still primarily admitting upper-middle-class and wealthy students, sometimes as a result of their parents having attended the college. These students, known as legacies of the college, have a distinct advantage in admissions. Students who come from homes where their parents have not attended or completed college, including many urban students, are at a distinct disadvantage by not having the same connections. This calls into question the notion that a meritocracy exists in American education and underscores the importance of admissions policies that aim to diversify college campuses. (See Wise, 2003, about how racial preference did not arise from affirmative action programs in college admissions, but rather has a long history of privileging Whites in society more generally.)

Another example of the myth of meritocracy relates directly to urban education and opportunity to learn (defined below; Darling-Hammond, 2010). It has been well documented that the quality of education in urban and suburban



Many believe that meritocracy exists, but in reality legacy admissions and other opportunities often tip the scale in favor of students whose parents and families are socially connected, rather than provide a truly equal playing field for students from all backgrounds.

schools is quite different in inequitable ways. Urban schools are more likely to offer “test-prep pedagogy” (McNeil, 2000) as a matter of course, where preparation for high-stakes tests becomes the curriculum, rather than the rich, meaningful, authentic learning opportunities typical of suburban schools. We have often heard our urban teacher colleagues bemoan the fact that they work tirelessly to get their students accepted and enrolled in postsecondary education, only to have those students return home the next year sharing how underprepared they were for the intellectual and creative demands of college-level work. Feeling unable to keep up with their classmates, the teachers tell us that their former students leave college and enter the workforce with only their high school diplomas for a credential. These students worked hard to earn a place in college, but the lack of consistent opportunities for high-level, college-preparatory curriculum, instruction, and assessment in K–12 urban education has left them unable to compete with other students who had multiple, varied opportunities to learn in ways congruent with college expectations. Recent research has confirmed what urban teachers have told us all along (e.g., Carey, 2008).

Many scholars focus on **opportunity to learn** (OTL) as a critical factor in school success. Darling-Hammond (2010) has been advocating for OTL standards in addition to state content learning standards. OTL standards would include “the availability of well-qualified teachers; strong curriculum opportunities; books, materials, and equipment (such as science labs and computers); and adequate facilities” (pp. 309–310). If urban students do not have access to these opportunities that support content learning, it is less likely they will succeed even though they may work very hard.

Hardworking, capable, determined individuals may end up succeeding more often in school and in society, but the real question for urban students is whether they are afforded the same opportunities to work hard and display

their competence and capabilities as students who come from more privileged backgrounds. MacLeod's (2009) ethnographic study of low-income boys provides an excellent critique of schools and American society as meritocracies. MacLeod followed two groups of neighborhood boys from their teenage years into adulthood and middle age. His research revealed how poverty is perpetuated and social inequality is reproduced from generation to generation. Effective urban teachers deconstruct the myth of meritocracy that pervades American society in order to help their students understand the challenges and opportunities available to them.

Funds of Knowledge

The term **funds of knowledge** refers to “a systematic and powerful way to represent communities in terms of resources, the wherewithal they possess, and how to harness these resources for classroom teaching” (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p. x). It represents an asset perspective on what families pass on to their children explicitly or implicitly. The assumption that underlies this approach, as described by Gonzalez et al., is “based on a simple premise: People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (p. x). These scholars argue that a primary purpose of approaching teaching from a funds-of-knowledge approach is “to alter perceptions of working-class or poor communities and to view these households primarily in terms of their strengths and resources (or funds of knowledge) as their defining pedagogical characteristic” (p. x). They believe that, even in the face of current accountability demands and high-stakes testing pressures, this approach to pedagogy is relevant and useful. As a result of their ongoing research over the past two decades, they have produced some of the seminal research on this topic.

In Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez's (1992) work, teachers were invited to be coresearchers in conducting household studies and examining the funds of knowledge possessed and accessed by Mexican families in the southwestern United States. The researchers explain how families' funds of knowledge were broad and diverse. For example, families possessed knowledge of agriculture and mining, as evidenced by their experiences with ranching, farming, soil and irrigation systems, crop planting, and timbering. Families possessed knowledge of economics, as evidenced by appraising, renting and selling, and familiarizing themselves with labor laws, accounting, and building codes. Families possessed knowledge of contemporary and folk medicine, as evidenced by first aid procedures, midwifery, and herbal knowledge. The funds-of-knowledge paradigm

views these and other forms of knowledge as important in their own right, not simply as support for or “add-ons” to the sanctioned school curriculum.

Lee (2007) and Weiner (2006) have extended the funds-of-knowledge approach in education. Lee’s **cultural modeling theory** is an anti-deficit model positing that out-of-school knowledge should be used to acquire in-school knowledge (Howard, 2010). Weiner (2006) has applied the funds-of-knowledge concept to teaching in urban schools. She has been critical of calling urban students “street smart” because it assumes that “the astuteness and maturity that children have developed living in a demanding environment aren’t applicable to the learning that should occur in school” (p. 61). Weiner advocates for teachers learning about and being respectful of students’ city lifestyles. She says that teachers who do so may describe their students not as “street smart” but simply “smart.” This approach legitimizes the knowledge that students bring with them to school.

Brian Schultz (2008) provides an example of creating curriculum along with your students by capitalizing on their funds of knowledge. When he was a teacher at a Chicago public school located next to the Cabrini Green housing project, he engaged his fifth-grade students in a class activity to identify problems affecting them. After coming up with 89 problems they felt impacted their day-to-day lives in the city, the students decided the most pressing issue for them was their inadequate school building, and they wanted a new school. Schultz describes how “the students’ action plan became the epicenter of the entire curriculum for the remainder of the school year” (p. 7). Students and teacher engaged in cross-curricular learning in authentic ways, all because the teacher valued what students knew about their neighborhood and their lives outside of school and invited this knowledge into the classroom to further their learning. Schultz’s students told him that prior to their fifth-grade year with him, their strengths and abilities learned outside of school were not valued or nurtured. Schultz argues, “If education was measured by the students’ successes in their neighborhood via their own lived experiences, many would outperform their more affluent peers, not to mention their teachers” (p. 6). By using students’ funds of knowledge, he transformed the curriculum, and students learned about the potential of political and social action.

Scholars have acknowledged that some school subject areas may draw rather seamlessly from students’ funds of knowledge (e.g., social studies, language arts), but other subject areas may not be so easily incorporated (e.g., mathematics, science). Gonzalez, Andrade, Civil, and Moll (2001) say, “We had found that a linear transference of mathematical knowledge from

household to classroom was problematic. Yet, we were aware that deep and rich mathematical processes were being tapped in the forms of constructions, buildings, landscapes, gardens, and clothing” (p. 120). They explain the mathematical processes involved with sewing as an example of how advanced mathematical processes are used by seamstresses, though not recognized as such. The potential for learning from day-to-day lived experiences is possible even with math, though perhaps not in the same linear ways math is taught in school. The funds-of-knowledge approach respects local knowledge and uses it to enhance and improve teaching and learning.

Special Education in Urban Schools

One group that is often marginalized and viewed from a deficit rather than an asset perspective is students identified for special education services. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (known as IDEA 2004) reauthorized the original IDEA law requiring that students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment from birth to age 21. This means that students should have the support they need to work on curriculum materials alongside their nondisabled peers as much as possible. Morse (2001) argues that curriculum and instruction for special education students look different depending on the school context—urban, suburban, or rural. He argues that “inner cities face unique challenges” (p. 5), such as how to provide the least restrictive environment when full inclusion of special education students in general education classes requires additional resources in an environment where resources are especially scarce. Resources that provide for certified teachers, paraprofessionals, and planning time are necessary for inclusion settings but often cannot be fulfilled by urban districts.

Additionally, there continues to be evidence that poor, African American, and Latino students—who primarily populate urban schools—have been disproportionately placed in special education programs. Blanchett (2009) argues that “special education is the new tool for the resegregation of African American and other students of color in special education” (p. 370). For example, in Georgia, while Black students made up 39% of the special education population in 2009–2010, they made up 47% of students classified as having emotional or behavioral disorders and 57% of students classified as having intellectual disabilities. Are there urban students who need special education services? Absolutely. But why is it that the number of urban students

who are identified for special education is disproportionately high compared to students in other schools?

Some believe that minority students are overidentified in special education, particularly classified as mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed, as a result of systemic racism and that minority students who *are* properly designated for special education services receive poorer services than White students (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Data have revealed that urban special education students are more likely to be taught in separate classrooms rather than educated with the general education population, which is troubling as special education students included in general education classrooms tend to perform better than peers in pull-out settings and have higher achievement test scores, among other positive educational outcomes (Kozleski & Smith, 2009). Urban special education students need culturally responsive practices in both pull-out and general education settings as well as highly prepared, fully licensed special education teachers, who are often in short supply (Blanchett, 2009).

One issue receiving recent attention is how to determine whether an English language learner (ELL) needs special education services. Many school-based personnel have a difficult time distinguishing a language disability from normal second language development. This results in some ELLs being overidentified or underidentified for special education services. Zetlin, Beltran, Salcido, Gonzalez, and Reyes (2010) argue, “An equitable, culturally and linguistically sensitive assessment plan should include evaluation of background variables such as first and second language proficiency (including receptive and expressive assessment in both languages), language dominance, and educational history including exposure to bilingual and/or ELD models, immigration pattern, socioeconomic status (SES), and cultural background” (p. 61). This comprehensive assessment plan is often not in place, presenting many challenges to appropriately identifying ELLs with or without special needs. Urban teachers should work closely with other school personnel to advocate for effective and comprehensive assessments of ELLs who may need special education services and ensure that they are placed in classrooms where their learning needs may be met.

Morse (2001) states that “urban school personnel can be assured that they will continuously be challenged to create a comprehensive curriculum that meets the presenting needs of urban special education students” (p. 15). We agree, and we suggest that it is critical for urban teachers to consider how special education students are advantaged or disadvantaged in their schools and to advocate for equitable, nondiscriminatory practices for identifying, instructing, and assessing these students.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT A RESOURCE APPROACH

The body of research on adopting a resource approach to teaching in urban schools is still developing. Research has confirmed several benefits to a resource approach (Donnell, 2007; Gay, 2010; Love & Kruger, 2005; Quartz & TEP Research Group, 2003; Storz & Nestor, 2008):

- Activating students' prior knowledge increases learning.
- Drawing upon students' interests improves engagement.
- An asset perspective creates an inclusive classroom climate and a sense of belonging.
- A resource approach challenges the status quo and creates democratic classrooms.

This section reviews some examples of representative research on resource approaches toward teaching. Cucchiara and Horvat (2009) investigated the involvement of parents in urban schools. Through a qualitative investigation and comparison of two urban elementary schools, it was noted that there is variation in both amount and type of parental involvement. This involvement ranged from a collective approach to an individualistic approach. Also, parents of students in urban schools were identified as possible catalysts for positive change in the school environment. Donnell (2007) investigated, through a longitudinal interview method, the means by which urban teachers learn to teach. Beginning teachers in urban schools that focused on the mutual learning of teachers and pupils developed a strong sense of efficacy that holds with them throughout their teaching careers. Moll and colleagues' (1992) study of low-income Mexican American households examined funds of knowledge available for developing innovations in teaching that drew upon the knowledge and skills found in the households. By visiting homes and documenting the wealth of knowledge available in the community, teacher researchers discovered that teachers and parents could equally share their family and school expertise. K. Schultz, Jones-Walker, and Chikkatur (2008) followed four teachers from the same teacher education program over two years to determine how they implemented a "listening stance"—using knowledge of students' strengths and needs to plan classroom instruction. The teachers in the study struggled to enact what they learned about students in the face of standardized core curriculum in math and reading; however, "teachers negotiated small moments of time to bring students' voices and interests into the classroom" (p. 181). Upadhyay's (2005) study of one urban elementary school science teacher

using students' funds of knowledge for teaching reveals how the framework can be applied with science content. Upadhyay found that students' experiences and knowledge paired with science content led to enhanced learning. Finally, Whitney, Leonard, Camelio, and Camelio's (2006) study shares students' perspectives about good urban teaching. See Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Research Studies on Taking a Resource Approach in Teaching

Author(s)	Purpose	Findings	Implications	URL
Cucchiara & Horvat (2009)	Researchers aimed to discover what motivates parent involvement in urban public schools; how this involvement affects the teacher's methods, classroom management and relationships; and how it affects students' success in the classroom.	Parents fell along a continuum, ranging from strongly individualistic to collective when interacting with the school. Parents were found to bring a variety of resources to urban schools; one of the most significant was that they acted as catalysts for change. Collective approaches were more successful in improving children's school-related experiences.	This study indicates that parent involvement in urban schools can bring significant resources to the school. Their commitment to the well-being of all of the children, values, and social justice points to the importance of parent involvement in urban schools.	http://aer.sagepub.com/content/46/4/974.full.pdf+html
Donnell (2007)	The researcher explored how beginning teachers learn to teach in urban	Teachers who were able to learn both with and from their students	Teachers preparing for urban schools should be given support in	http://uex.sagepub.com/content/42/3/223.full.pdf+html

Author(s)	Purpose	Findings	Implications	URL
	<p>schools and to connect their learning to their daily practice.</p>	<p>experienced a greater sense of efficacy. Beginning teachers in urban schools benefited from individualized support in generating knowledge regarding teaching in these schools.</p>	<p>learning both about their students and from their students, while at the same time providing these students with an education. Student achievement in urban schools rests on urban teachers' transformative teaching practices. These practices can be developed via various initiatives in teacher education for both preservice and practicing teachers.</p>	
<p>Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez (1992)</p>	<p>Teacher researchers sought to develop innovations in teaching that drew upon the knowledge and skills found in local households.</p>	<p>Learning about low-income Mexican American families' household funds of knowledge allowed teachers to see beyond stereotypes and experiment with practice.</p>	<p>It is feasible and useful to have teachers visit households for research purposes. By assuming the role of learner, teachers establish new, more symmetrical relationships with parents.</p>	

(Continued)

Table 1.1 (Continued)

Author(s)	Purpose	Findings	Implications	URL
K. Schultz, Jones-Walker, & Chikkatur (2008)	Researchers conducted a two-year ethnographic study to examine how four new elementary teachers listened to students and made decisions about instruction.	The teachers listened to individual students, the rhythm and balance of the classroom, and the community and cultural contexts, but struggled to find ways to adapt mandated curricula and transform their teaching practice.	New teachers must be explicitly taught how to negotiate the multiple demands and contradictions of urban teaching.	
Upadhyay (2005)	The researcher observed one fourth-grade teacher to determine how she integrated her students' life experiences with her own to make science meaningful for them.	The teacher made her students feel that their questions, ideas, experience, and knowledge were integral to science learning. The teacher used students' funds of knowledge to introduce new science concepts and recognized that science involves connections between many concepts and everyday experiences.	The science curriculum available may have an impact on how well teachers draw upon students' funds of knowledge. (The "Linking Food and the Environment" curriculum was successful.)	

Author(s)	Purpose	Findings	Implications	URL
Whitney, Leonard, Camelio, & Camelio (2006)	Researchers surveyed urban high school students to determine attributes of teachers they admired and classes they felt most comfortable in.	Students' responses indicated three themes about good teaching: personal connections (teachers know students), universality (teachers help all students learn), and balance (teachers are strict but firm).	Urban teachers should access their students as experts in identifying strengths and areas of improvement for schools and teacher education programs.	

PRACTICE

In this section, practicing urban teachers **Dennis Groenke** and **Gillian Maimon** reflect on how they build upon the resources and attributes students bring to the classroom in order to improve teaching and learning. Dennis teaches middle school science in Knoxville, Tennessee, and Gillian teaches first grade in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Their firsthand accounts illuminate the theory and research that were reviewed earlier in this chapter.

Dennis explains how he uses what he knows about students' strong community ties to enhance his science teaching.

Dennis: Many of my students live in the same neighborhood in close proximity to the school. More than half of them walk to school. Therefore, they tend to have strong social networks outside of the school that I can build on in my classroom. My students hang out with each other in neighborhood public parks or laundromats, for example, so they develop social bonds. Mostly this is positive (sometimes negative), but either way there are communally shared experiences that the students bring to my class. They know each other's families, histories, stories. They are used to being together, and this camaraderie is something I build on in the classroom to create positive learning experiences. For example, I have the students work a lot in

cooperative lab groups—to look at microscope slides, discuss cell parts, prepare lab reports. I use my evolving understandings of students' out-of-school social relationships to make decisions about groupings. I tend to let friends work together, as I've found this promotes more engagement and participation. Also, I like to draw from the students' knowledge of and awareness about their neighborhood and community landscapes to create teachable moments. As an example, recently a corner appliance store burned down, exposing a hillside that had been excavated to make room for the building. I took pictures of this and used them to teach science concepts (e.g., erosion, sedimentation, types of rock, phototropism). This really engaged the students, as they all recognized where the building had been. After the lesson, some students walked by the hillside to see it for themselves.

I also spend some time with students trying to get them to take pride in their communities and neighborhoods. During our conservation unit ("Reduce, Reuse, Recycle"), we adopt our school grounds as a "green zone." We collect all loose debris; sort everything we collect into paper, plastic, or scrap metal; weigh it; and then recycle it. This makes an impact—I hear students complain about how fast the school gets "trashed" again.

Like Dennis, as Gillian determines her students' assets and resources, she considers what she knows about students, their families, and their communities. Here she reflects on one particular experience the day before school started for the year.

Gillian: As I worked to prepare the classroom for the arrival of the children the next day, a mother walked into the room. She asked if I was Teacher Gill and I told her yes. She may not have known me, but she had been on my radar screen for years. My first year at the school was also the year that her oldest child had entered kindergarten. The boy immediately attracted the alarm of his teacher because, at the age of five, he was not yet toilet trained. This fact, as well as other developmental delays and signs of neglect, prompted a great deal of concern about the child's home situation. When the mother began making surprise visits to the classroom, her emaciated appearance and unfocused eyes left little doubt about one of the sources of problems at home. Over the years, we have been able to chart the status of the mother's heroin addiction simply by eyeballing her

physical state. On this day, her coloring appeared good and she was carrying more meat on her bones than I had observed in the past.

This year, I was to be the teacher of Danny, her second son. Her third child, a daughter, was in a different teacher's first-grade room. Because Danny had spent two years in kindergarten, he was now in the same grade as his sister, though the girl was a year younger than her brother. I confess that, at the end of last year, when I saw Danny's name on my new class list, I asked our principal if it might be possible to assign him to a different classroom. It was not that I worried about teaching the child. (From all I had seen of him, he appeared to be an eager learner.) Rather, I had concerns about my ability to treat the mother with patience and respect.

This was hardly the first time that I had taught the child of a drug-addicted parent. What was new for me in this circumstance was that the mother happened to be White. I had not been aware of the numb resignation with which I regarded non-White addicted parents until this mother evoked in me such a visceral sense of revulsion. Clearly my repugnance for this parent was not an appropriate reaction (nor, for that matter, was the remove I had felt from the non-White parents), but it was a true one. Perhaps the greatest peril (and, at times, the greatest reward) of the work that I do is that I cannot help but be human in the way that I experience each day. It would be a challenge to keep my emotions from contaminating my interactions with this parent.

As it turned out, the mother had simply come to request an advance copy of the supply list I would be sending home with the children on the first day of school. She intended to go shopping over the weekend and wanted to make sure that she made the appropriate purchases. I was both relieved that her request was such a reasonable—indeed productive—one and ashamed that I had feared it might have been otherwise.

Gillian's ability to look inward and be honest about her negative assumptions reveals her highly developed reflective stance, a necessity for a successful urban teacher. She also has purposefully committed to school rules that do not align with rules of the neighborhood, as she shares in the next excerpt.

Gillian: My rule against hitting back is sometimes at odds with what children are told at home. When a child tells me, "But my mom told me that if somebody hits me, I should hit back," I say, "Then hit him back at your house, because the rules here at school are different." This is one instance

when I do not attempt to build a bridge between school and home. I recognize that there are good reasons that some children's parents advise them to deal with problems in this way, not the least of which is that, in the context of the neighborhood, a child who doesn't fight back is seen to be a ripe target. But school should be a place in which revenge need not be a child's only way to feel defended. Children should be able to trust that their teachers will step in and deal with any child who is causing them physical harm. I know that as students get older, teachers have less and less power as authority figures and hence are less effective defenders of children. But in an elementary school like mine, in which even the hardest-headed children still want to be loved by their teachers, there is no reason for the code of the neighborhood to supersede the school's determination of what defines appropriate behavior.

Gillian clearly understands that life in city neighborhoods may require children to develop some defensive tactics in order to survive, but to create a school environment where students can thrive, she explains the different code of conduct she expects. She is teaching her students how to behaviorally "code-switch" depending on the context. She is also creating a safe, loving climate where kids can feel protected. New urban teachers can learn from Gill's thoughtfulness when making decisions about teaching and learning.

Dennis also reveals thoughtfulness as he decides that his middle school science students can appropriately engage with popular culture to enhance their learning.

Dennis: Another resource my students bring to the classroom is their keen knowledge of popular media. Again, sometimes this can be both positive and negative (as we don't want kids watching too much TV). But I have learned I can build on this knowledge to engage students and teach science concepts. For example, lots of my students like the show *Dirty Jobs* on the Discovery Channel. In each episode, host Mike Rowe takes on some of the dirtiest jobs in the country, such as making homemade cheese and cleaning zoo cages. In one episode, Rowe took on the job of collecting owl pellets (which is owl vomit). The pellets are sold to schools for science dissection activities. I do an activity with owl pellets and show the episode before we start. Students love it. The show is funny, but perhaps more important, the students see how the pellets are obtained, cleaned, and processed. And they feel the lesson is immediately relevant. This is probably one of the

more popular activities I do all year. I pair up with the language arts teacher and we teach Carl Hiassen's young adult novel *Hoot*, which is about an endangered species of owl. This is a nice way to bridge content areas—students learn about the anatomy and digestion habits of owls and then read about owls and their increasingly endangered habitats in the book.

Another media source popular with students is cartoons. When I showed an excerpt this year of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* during a conservation unit, many students recognized the cartoon *Futurama* that Gore uses to make points about global warming. The fact that my students knew a cartoon that Gore was using seemed to validate the content for them. They recognized the media source and seemed to connect to the information. I referred to the cartoon several times as we moved through the unit, building on these connections.

Dennis's excerpt reveals his attention to students' prior knowledge when designing his curriculum units. By building bridges between known information and new information, all students can experience success in school. Gillian and Dennis are two urban teachers who recognize students' assets and resources to be utilized in their teaching.

WRAP UP

This chapter has focused on putting a resource perspective at the forefront in urban teaching. You have read about the realities of urban students' lives and families, the difference between deficit and asset perspectives, the myth of meritocracy, funds of knowledge, and the overrepresentation of urban minorities in special education.

Certainly there are real challenges, struggles, and disappointments evident in urban education today. There are teachers, administrators, and other school personnel who view urban students and their families from a deficit perspective and believe that American society truly operates as a meritocracy. Effective urban teachers can be mindful of the challenges while, at the same time, making a concerted decision to focus on the assets their students bring from their homes and communities into the classroom. Real-life experiences can improve teaching and learning in urban schools, and new urban teachers can successfully connect with their students and promote learning. Cornbleth (2008), who conducted a study of novice

urban teachers, shares our worldview on the potentials of drawing upon student resources in the urban classroom: “Rather than add-ons or a ‘bag of tricks,’ think of tailoring teaching to better fit our students and build on their strengths, teaching as custom-made or ‘designer’ rather than mass-produced or ‘off the rack’” (p. 145). We believe that each urban teacher has the potential to create a designer classroom where all students thrive and succeed.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Reflection

1. Reflect on your prior schooling and life experiences. How would you describe your opportunities to learn? Were there ever moments when you noticed discrepancies between your opportunities and those of students in other classrooms, schools, or districts? Do you think you operated in a meritocratic system, or did you or others you know have advantages without seemingly working hard for them? Provide specific examples to support your response.

Action

1. What are some resources and assets your current students bring to the classroom? How can you adapt your curriculum to draw on these assets and enhance your instruction? Provide specific examples of student resources and the related curricular modifications you will make and why.
2. Conduct a modified Equity Audit of your school. Find all the data available about teachers, programs, and achievement. Look for teacher experience, mobility, and education; demographics for special, gifted and talented, and bilingual education, as well as discipline referrals; achievement test performance (state and SAT/ACT/AP/IB tests), dropout rates, and graduation tracks. Analyze what the data reveal about equity and learning opportunities in your school. How might you draw upon local communities to make your school more equitable? Create a plan of action. (See Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009, for a full description of Equity Audits.)

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Books

- Gonzalez, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (Eds.). (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- McNamee, S. J., & Miller, R. K., Jr. (2004). *The meritocracy myth*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
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- Weiner, L. (2006). *Urban teaching: The essentials*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Websites

- The Council of the Great City Schools (www.cgcs.org)**
A national organization exclusively representing the needs of urban public schools since 1956. The website offers many resources, including a link to the organization's newsletter, *Urban Educator*.
- Rethinking Schools (www.rethinkingschools.org)**
A progressive education journal that balances classroom practice with theory and emphasizes socially just solutions to urban school problems.
- Teaching Tolerance (www.tolerance.org/magazine/archives)**
An award-winning magazine dedicated to reducing prejudice and promoting equity.

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