

HANDBOOK OF
RESEARCH ON
LITERACY AND
DIVERSITY

Edited by

LESLEY MANDEL MORROW

ROBERT RUEDA

DIANE LAPP

Afterword

*From "Just a Teacher"
to Justice in Teaching—
Working in the Service of Education,
the New Civil Right*

ERIC J. COOPER

Writing an Afterword based on the excellence between the covers of this handbook is a daunting task. The challenge is to take the extensive research and rich programmatic threads among the pages, to use them and sustain their implementation. It is our hope to erect a bridge across theory, practice, and implementation—leading to what Malcolm Gladwell has called the “tipping point”—for the benefit of all of America’s schoolchildren and youth, in particular, those students challenged by poverty, whom we have called “school dependent.” Because of family challenges such as poverty, these students are solely dependent on the schools for successful learning and achievement. They must rely on the hearts, minds, and hands of educators to avoid blaming the victim, by recognizing that both the individual and the institutions called schools are responsible for improving the life trajectories of America’s young, that they are not mutually exclusive, but two sides of the same coin, if you will.

The words in this volume speak of renewed belief, hope, determination, and confidence. As Walt Whitman has written: “One word can pour such a flood through the soul” (Cooper, in press). So must the reader of this volume come to embrace the words offered by the writers, and by extending them to the context of one’s work and mission, frame in those words and actions the foundation of the American democracy—an educated and informed citizenry.

It has been written elsewhere that teachers are uniquely positioned to become the advocates and activists that students in urban, suburban, and rural commu-

nities need. Teachers and principals are for the most part trusted by students and parents. Armed with the knowledge and the strategies, broad and specific as they are, that accelerate learning in the classroom, teachers create connections between the school and home that erect partnerships between businesses, universities, policymakers, and politicians, and lead to sustained education reform, while improving and repairing shattered lives. And though education may not be guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution, it is often mentioned as a civil right, and as Jean Anyon (2005) writes in *Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement*, “can be located ideologically in the long and powerful tradition of [the American] civil rights [movement]” (p. 178).

For a long period of time during the 20th century, many influential African American leaders embraced the ideas of W. E. B. Du Bois, who called for educating the upper 10% of black Americans. By so doing he felt that these students would lead and bring others along with them. Sadly this has not happened. Students in urban school communities are dropping out at unprecedented rates—ranging from 40 to 70% in many cities and localities. Among African and Hispanic Americans, upwards of 30% of men who do not graduate from high school are in prison. Approximately 70% of black American children are born to unwed mothers. The data are frightening, especially when we consider that America will soon be projected by the Census Bureau to be a majority–minority country by 2042. How will we be able to remain competitive if we do not learn to educate all Americans in a manner that enables them to enter an institution of higher education if they so choose?

Education in America—the kind that is equitable, fulfilling, and meaningful—is in short supply for reasons that are legion, with well-documented results; the real ravages of the system are largely ignored. Despite this, the imperative remains: America’s schoolchildren—all of them—deserve powerful classrooms, swirling with powerful ideas, orchestrated by powerful and empowered teachers, and supported by dynamic home–school partnerships, as well as community stakeholders.

The work in this handbook involves developing strategic interventions and policies; improving classroom instruction and schooling through professional development, based on a solid foundation of cognitive, sociocultural, and linguistic research and theories; as well as working to engage communities in conversations that enable parents, teachers, political leaders, stakeholders, and business and university leaders to reach a common ground, so that the future of America is built on hope, not despair.

Given the urgent need for education reform, it is popular today to declare that education policy should be “data driven.” In writing this Afterword, I hold that policy should be driven by values and by vision informed by data. For example, the policy that America “doesn’t give up on people” is not data driven; it is a statement of values. Policy should begin with values that are formed into a vision of how the world should be. Data should inform the development of policy that

guides action, and plans to carry out the policy. Data must inform the “how” of our plans; values must shape the substance of our vision and our mission to make that vision real. Beliefs unite values and information.

It is quite obvious that every writer in this volume believes that virtually no child—which includes no black, brown, Asian, or Native American child—is so compromised by his or her family or community circumstances that he or she cannot be successful in school. I say “virtually” because some children have conditions that impair their ability to fulfill this goal, but they are fewer than the number of children institutionally classified in this way. Here, I am writing about the vast majority of our children.

As readers pour through and labor with the writings, research, and program applications, they struggle to blend the influence of the left brain with that of the right—understanding through neuroscience that the left sees the trees and the right, the forest. This is the challenge of reading, internalizing, and applying a volume such as the one that readers may have skimmed, perused, or are in the process of completing. They work through the millions of data sets the brain takes in over the course of a minute, while understanding that only 2% of the millions of concepts are processed consciously. As George Miller taught us years ago, the challenge of the brain is not storage but retrieval. So it will be for the readers, as it has been for me, in reading this Handbook.

How do we begin to group the information in ways that lead to real-world applications, while answering the challenge that educators face? The task is broad and the challenge of taking each suggestion from each chapter to scale is daunting. Yet, as educators, we are approximately 3.5 million strong—the same number as those who have honored America by joining the armed services. In essence, we represent an army of Americans, capable, if we join through coherent application, of truly changing the world. This will mean, however, that we learn, practice, and extend the research on the pages herein. This will mean that we recognize that teachers are, for many students, the last great hope. This means that we understand that the single most important in-school factor in terms of student achievement is the teacher. So, given our numbers and the moral high ground on which we work, why are successes not far more widespread?

A key to the answer to this question is the will to do the right thing. The often-cited statement of Ronald Edmonds offers one perspective on this fundamental question. In the book *Young, Gifted and Black* (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003), the late and sorely missed Asa Hilliard III, a professor at George State University and longtime friend of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education (NUA), quoted Ronald Edmonds: “We can, whenever and wherever we wish, teach successfully all children whose education is of interest to us. Whether we do or do not do it depends in the final analysis on how we feel about the fact that we have not done so thus far.” Edmonds often stressed that (in my words) the existence of one’s success is proof that one can achieve success in all similar circumstances. He was asserting that the nation, states, school districts, schools,

and educators—those at home and in the community—lack the will to bring the achievement distribution of black, brown, and impoverished children in line with the achievement distribution of white middle- and upper-class students.

Many years after the *Brown* decision, we must all recognize that not only are there no separate but equal tables, ultimately, there are no separate tables at all. The education of all children is “of interest” to all of us in the general sense that all in the American economy, policy, and society have a stake—an interest—in all children who grow into contributing members of these elements of America. To be indifferent to this is shortsighted, wasteful, and wrong in a society—one that is still shedding the burdens of pernicious practices and suffering the strains of private prejudices (from all directions) and is the keeper of the American dream held up by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his speech at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. We need to hold on to his dream, both in our dreams and in our waking hours. The need to close the gap between the actual achievement and the potential of the learner is great, national, and urgent. It is also personal and practical. This is what I internalized in reading all the pages of this volume.

The shift of demographics in America to so-called minority-majority, as with school enrollments in which nonwhite students are the majority, should not give false comfort that power or success will follow. In our world, many growing economies and political systems are nonwhite, but they control their own infrastructures. We need look no further than the emerging Asian economies, such as India and China, much of Latin America, or the Middle East. And although the proportion of U.S. African American population is not rising above the 12–13% range held for some time, it is noted in one chapter that 1 out of 4 American children under the age of 6 is Hispanic.

The realities of family circumstances in America—more families with two wage earners; high proportions of Hispanic and African American children living with one parent, relative, or caregiver; and an acknowledgment that many African American and Hispanic American children are “school dependent” for their learning of both basic and advanced subject matter, skills, and behaviors that are advantageous in the world, do not shield families and communities from challenges to do more and to do better by their children. The world economy is changing rapidly, and those behind or beneath the curve of those changes will just lose more ground, unless we act on the genius that is America—our ability to absorb all citizens on “common ground” and toward the “common good.”

To this end, educators and leaders must believe in the potential of their students—all their students—to achieve at levels that advance them to the next school grade, that tackle postsecondary education or a job that requires postsecondary literacy and critical thinking. This belief should apply whether a student desires to be an auto mechanic or a technology engineer. Educators must believe in their ability to engage and to educate their students, and in their ability to gain the professional knowledge and skills to do so. This is the purpose of this handbook. It is written to convey a knowledge base that can lift the achievement of all

students. It is crafted so that the knowledge translates to a variety of classroom, school, and community circumstances.

Armed with this knowledge applied coherently across schools and throughout districts, communities must believe in the ability and willingness of their educators to engage and to educate all the students. The hope I write about here is a bridge between belief and action. We are sustained not by taking cover when times are hard or challenges are great, but by taking courage from both historical figures in our struggles and the innocent yet strong hopes of our children. Hope, however, is not a strategy that sustains; hope begets strategy. Determination is the express of belief and hope in action, and confidence must be rooted in educator competence and high expectations for all students.

This, then, is our challenge. All who read this book, all who share knowledge with their colleagues must come to embrace a comprehensive, cohesive, and coordinated effort that engages the many parts of a school, a school system, and the surrounding social-political-economic system: moving, as described by one writer, from novice to expert; embracing a voice of advocacy through expert positions that enable rather than disable the learner; implementing instructional, administrative, and organizational arrangements that best guide and nurture student and teacher alike; and finally seeking the "uncommon common ground" where one group or individual is not pitted against another. As the African proverb puts it so well: "If you want to go quickly, go alone, but if you want to go further, go together."

This, then, is our challenge. The research base is clear and focused. The landscape has been cleared sufficiently to recognize that teaching is that center of the combination of policies, programs, practices, and beliefs that lifts and accelerates student achievement. Educators are the professionals who craft and deliver that teaching. Their professional skills and professional behavior, their beliefs that undergird and guide that behavior, are targeted and fine-tuned by professional development activities, before and during their service. Because most of the teachers in classrooms over the coming 15-20 years are already teaching, in-service professional development delivered by universities, agencies, and membership groups has a great mission and is the binding agent for most reforms.

Yes, it is a truism that learning occurs one person at a time, for learning is within each of us. And school change takes place one classroom at a time, for our schools are organized so that the primary "unit of production" is the classroom. And teaching only improves one teacher at a time, for no public policy, outrage, or outcry can force teachers to do what they will not do, certainly not for as long as it will take for their student to overcome external deficiencies, to gather external supports, and to build internal strengths. Thus, progress must occur one teacher, one classroom, one student at a time. Yet there is nothing in this formulation or in nature that denies that this can take place simultaneously with many places and people. This combination of efforts is demanding, but it is doable and long overdue. The formulations in this handbook provide the markers and beacons that enable coherent and sustained education reform. *Si se puede!*

REFERENCES

- Anyon, J. (2005). *Radical possibilities: Public policy, urban education, and a new social movement*. New York: Routledge.
- Cooper, E. J. (in press). Realities and responsibilities in the education village. In L. C. Tillman (Ed.), *The Sage handbook of African American education*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Perry, T., Steele, C., & Hilliard, A. G. III. (2003). *Young, gifted, and black: Promoting high achievement among African-American students*. Boston: Beacon Press.