5. HARLEM RENAISSANCE: A STORY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE, SCIENCE AND URBAN SCHOOL REFORM

In this chapter we tell the story of Amelia Johanson, a middle school principal, who designed and led an urban middle school with a focus on science, math and social justice. As her story shows, Amelia is a compassionate educator who believes in all children being given the best education possible in a loving supportive setting. She believes in the power of education to grant opportunities and change lives of those who have been disenfranchised. Choosing to begin a school in a high poverty urban community reflects her commitment to social justice and the power that education can have to emancipate. As you will see, undertaking such a challenge presents many obstacles and opportunities. What follows is Amelia’s journey through an effort to reform urban schooling through one small middle school in Harlem, NYC.

THE SOCIAL JUSTICE PROBLEM WITH URBAN SCHOOLS

To situate schooling squarely in the realm of political action, to position teaching and learning as vehicles toward equality and access, to challenge systemic forces that order and norm the school community, we came to see through my experiences, both as a child who attended public schools in New York City, and as a teacher who had worked in them, that a social justice perspective could illuminate new and uncharted pathways, as a lens through which to focus and around which to organize the mission of a school.

Almost 17% of the nation’s students are living in poverty. In large urban centers, like New York City, Atlanta, Houston and Los Angeles, that number more than doubles to 35-45%. Further, nearly 40% of urban students are attending high poverty schools. Students living in poverty are more likely to attend schools with outdated texts, are offered fewer opportunities to participate in summer or enrichment programs, have less access to certified teachers in math and science, and consequently face higher degrees of academic failure; having higher high school drop out rates than their more affluent or suburban counterparts (Anyon, 1997; Calabrese-Barton, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 1999). Low performing schools in urban centers are characterized by low teacher morale, high rates of teacher turnover and more teachers teaching without or out of their license areas (Darling-Hammond, 1999). In New York City recent numbers indicate that they may have as little as a one in two chance of having a certified math or science teacher.
In the wake of the No Child Left Behind act, many poor, inner city schools/districts/systems find themselves in the midst of reform to ensure both improved educational outcomes and continued monetary support from the federal, state and city government. Most of these efforts are forced to conflate educational achievement with standardized test scores, even though many researchers point to the dangers of such unions. Numerous studies have shown that low socioeconomic status has a negative impact on student achievement. Poor urban students continue to under perform when compared to their more affluent suburban counterparts Oakes’ (1990, 2000). Studies examining student’s test scores on national exams find that although poor urban students are making gains, there are still significant gaps in their achievement. Issues of race and ethnicity complicate this phenomenon, which indicate that in almost all instances poor children of color score lower on norm referenced measures than do their white counterparts.

In addition to lagging behind in achievement poor urban students are often not presented with the same opportunities to learn science. They are more likely to have unprepared teachers and have fewer chances to enroll in the advanced courses that are on the college bound trajectory (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Oakes, 1990). Other studies indicate that poor students are more frequently tracked into low level science courses in which behaviors and wrote memorization are valued more than the acquisition of dynamic science content, skill and process knowledge (Oakes, 1990). The following questions emerge, “What are the goals and purposes of public schools?” “What role does the teaching and learning of science play in attaining those goals?” and finally, “Are schools in poor urban areas designed, organized and allowed to function toward meeting those goals”?

As for how social justice will be enacted as a process at schools, we need to draw our attention to the art of teaching. In order to fully articulate this aspect of social justice, we must both defer to and depend on teachers and their use of pedagogy to enact praxis, which places a search and demand for justice at the core. The interpretation of social justice may vary considerably at this level. Is the content knowledge being taught as a tool, to be used in order to critique their world? Or is the implementation of social justice more obvious in terms of tasks and projects the students will complete as assignments? Or is it more about the presentation of the curriculum, is it better framed to offer more students access? Or is it more authentically assessed to offer more students opportunities to demonstrate ownership of knowledge rather than just transmission of facts and regurgitated synthesis?

It is not that reform efforts have never been seen or functioned as political agendas in motion, rather that such dramatic shifts, such radical perspectives and suggestions call into question so much of the status quo (Freire, 1972). As deeply seated, core values are challenged, choices and consequences are called onto the carpet, and those leading schools into new territory are forced to answer hard questions. What does it mean to teach and learn science? Whose vision of science gets taught? How is learning assessed? To what extent does who is teaching and who is learning matter? And in what ways does it matter? Change is hard, especially when it means exposing values and ideals that we hold dear but are