But What is Urban Education?

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A few years ago, I was invited to a small Midwestern district to speak with district teachers, counselors, administrators, and staff about "Culture and Teaching." Upon my arrival to the district office, the superintendent greeted me in the parking lot and rushed me into his vehicle. He explained as he started the car, and began driving that he wanted me to "see" one of the district's "urban" schools before my presentation.

I did not say much, as I was driven through the stoplights and around the two lane curves. I was perplexed. As I glanced out the window of his car, I pondered: Is this what he classifies as "urban"—I saw no sights that resembled an urban environment at least in terms of the layout or structure of the town. This was *not* an urban district in my mind; it was a rural one. All the data that I had reviewed before my visit about the town/district also suggested that the district was indeed rural. However, for this superintendent (and others in the district), they were working with some "urban schools" although they did not classify all of the schools in the district as such. Because the district was located out in the midst of trees, unoccupied space, and farmland and because the superintendent was unyielding in his explanation that we were getting ready to visit an urban school, I wondered: where in the world is this person taking me? Were we traveling some 48 miles to the nearest "real city" I pondered? Surely, the city schools were zoned to a different district, I thought. I continued to contemplate as the superintendent drove—speeding up it seemed at every turn: what is the huge rush to get there, I wanted to ask, were not there still several hours before my actual presentation?

As we drove up to the school about 10 min later, I realized we were not headed out of town at all. We were headed around the corner—what seemed to be just a few blocks away—from the district's central office. Indeed, we arrived at a school that was in a rural area of the United States, yet the superintendent was resolute, persistent, confident, and relentless in his description of the school. "This is one of our struggling urban schools" he declared. This superintendent's classification is not unique from what I have come to understand. At the heart of my experience with this superintendent was the following question: What does he mean by "urban?" Unfortunately, I did not feel

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comfortable attempting to correct the superintendent because as a field, there is not a clear, uniformed, common definition related to what most of us in higher education mean by urban. Researchers, theoreticians, policymakers, and practitioners in higher education do not necessarily possess a shared definition of what is meant by urban education. This same lack of clarity is likely the case in P-12 institutions. Why should I have attempted to correct this superintendent when, indeed, he and his colleagues had their own definition of what it means to attend an urban school? People across the U.S. classify schools in different parts of the country as urban because of characteristics associated with the school and the people in them, not only based on the larger social context where the schools and districts are located. For instance, Tatum and Muhammad (2012) used the phrasing urban characteristic to describe the location and population of students inherent to their review of the literature about Black males and their literacy development.

It became clearer to me why the superintendent classified the school we visited as urban once I walked inside the building. The student population of the school was largely Black[1], and what the principal whom I met in the lobby on my arrival to the school described as "Mexican kids." There were also a considerable number of "poor" White students from Appalachia attending the school. In this way, race and socioeconomic status (namely poverty) were urban characteristics for those in the district. Before arriving at the school, though, I had not seen very many Black and/or Mexican people in the community. The principal also described challenges the school faced with standardized test scores, truancy, lack of motivation among the students, and behavior problems in the middle school. An instructional leader/coach who also met me in the school lobby talked about challenges she faced with "getting parents involved." The picture painted of the school, before I even walked down the first hallway, was glim at best. I was depressed and frustrated before I walked into the first classroom. I thought, I have to give a talk in a few hours about "Culture and Teaching," and this experience has made me less hopeful; the experience and especially the comments I engaged would indeed shape the presentation I would share with the entire group later that day. For those in the school and in the district, they wanted me to see the "real" problems of their "urban" school.

Sadly, the list of problems that the principal, instructional leader, and superintendent shared with me about the school was all external to the adults in the school: truancy, lack of motivation, parents lack of involvement all were "urban" problems that extended beyond the administration, leadership at the district office, or teachers. For the leaders in the district, the problems in the district were with the students themselves. "Tell us," professor Milner,

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"what we need to do to control the students (and their parents)" was the message I received. My point here is not to blame the principal, instructional leaders, teachers, and counselors only in the school. The idea is to suggest that there are likely some policies and practices that have not served the students in this middle school well and adults in the school and district have some control over these aspects of their work. Such responsibilities, related to policymaking and instructional practices, for example, are those that the adults in the district should be reflecting on and about as they work with the students and parents they serve. Too often, though, students and parents are blamed for all the "urban" problems in a school or district.

There are several important additional points to consider about my experience. For one, the middle school that I observed encompassed some characteristics of some urban schools, but the social context was not what many of us in urban education classify as such. The community was not in a large metropolitan city, the citizenry population was not large, and the school was not surrounded by large numbers of businesses. However, those in the district perceived the school as urban.[2] *But what is "urban" education?* How can we build knowledge in urban education when those of us in the field may not share common definitions and conceptions of it? Moreover, in what ways can we construct knowledge through common language and definitional categorization about "urban" schools and districts that will allow us to advance the field? In what ways should we learn from other disciplines such as urban sociology, urban geography, and urban anthropology in our work to define it in education?

In order for a field to develop and mature, it seems essential for there to be some shared knowledge about how it is defined. At present, many studies share definitions of urban education that are disconnected from other definitions, those established through bodies of literature and various forms of discourse. I argue that this definitional work, classification, and categorization are critical, foundational, aspects of the work we do in the field and needs to be developed. Thus, urban education typically has some connections to the people who live and attend school in the social context, the characteristics of those people, as well as surrounding community realities where the school is situated. Not all urban districts and the people in them are "bad." There is a rich array of excellence, intellect, and talent among the people in urban environments—human capital that make meaningful contributions to the very fabric of the human condition in the United States and abroad. Yet those in the district I visited seemed not to recognize the assets of those in the school. They seemed to classify the school as urban because of their perceived shortcomings of students and parents in the school.

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In this editorial, I would like to provide three conceptual frames for how we (those interested in and especially those who study urban education) might talk about and define schools in urban educational environments. These areas of conceptualization are evolving and are not finite in terms of their definitions or their categorizations; they are interrelated. I offer these as a space for discussion, critique, and perhaps advancement as the field works to develop what I called transformative knowledge in urban education (see, Milner, 2012, for more on this) to construct and deconstruct what we know (and how we know it) in my previous editorial. These conceptions offer a first glance of what *could or might be* through further development and conceptualization.

Urban Intensive might be used to describe school contexts that are concentrated in large, metropolitan cities across the United States, such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Atlanta. What sets these cities apart from other cities is their size, the density of them. These environments would be considered intensive because of their sheer numbers of people in the city and consequently the schools. In these cities, the infrastructure and large numbers of people can make it difficult to provide necessary and adequate resources to the large numbers of people who need them. In sum, urban intensive speaks to the size and density of a particular locale; the broader environments, outside of school factors such as housing, poverty, and transportation are directly connected to what happens inside of the school. Urban intensive environments would be those with 1 million people or more in the city. *Urban Emergent* might be used to describe schools, which are typically located in large cities but not as large as the major cities identified in the urban intensive category. These cities typically have fewer than one million people in them but are relatively large spaces nonetheless. Although they do not experience the magnitude of the challenges that the urban intensive cities face, they do encounter some of the same scarcity of resource problems, but on a smaller scale. In these areas, there are fewer people per capita; the realities of the surrounding communities are not as complex as those in the intensive category. Examples of such cities are Nashville, Tennessee; Austin, Texas; Columbus, Ohio; and Charlotte, North Carolina. *Urban Characteristic* could be used to describe schools that are not located in big or midsized cities but may be starting to experience some of the challenges that are sometimes associated with urban school contexts in larger areas that were described in the urban intensive and the urban emergent categories. An example of challenges that schools in the urban characteristic category is an increase of English language learners to a community. These schools might be located in rural or even suburban districts but the

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Table 1. An Evolving Typology of Urban Education

Category	Definition
Urban intensive	These schools are those that are concentrated in large, metropolitan cities across the United States, such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Atlanta.
Urban emergent	These schools are those that are typically located in large cities but not as large as the major cities. They typically have some of the same characteristics and sometimes challenges as urban intensive schools and districts in terms of resources, qualification of teachers, and academic development of students. Examples of such cities are Nashville, Tennessee, Austin, Texas, Columbus, Ohio, and Charlotte, North Carolina.
Urban characteristic	These schools are those that are not located in big cities but may be beginning to experience increases in challenges that are sometimes associated with urban contexts such as an increase in English language learners in a community. These schools may be located in what might be considered rural or even suburban areas.

outside-of-school environments are not as large as those in the urban intensive or urban emergent schools. I attempt to capture and summarize some of these ideas in Table 1 above.

As a field, the framework above can be useful in helping researchers, theoreticians, and practitioners name and conceptualize the work they do in ways that are indeed consistent with the population and social contexts studied or theorized about. It also provides practitioners with language to communicate the realities of their contexts in ways that are meaningful and representative of the communities they serve. Thus, I encourage researchers to (re)consider these classifications and to think about how they might be used as theoretical, conceptual, empirical, and practical tools to make sense of environments. In particular, my charge to authors is to think about how these tools might be useful as they investigate problems through the various areas of emphases associated with urban education: curriculum and instruction; counseling and social services; educational policy; equity; leadership; psychology and human development; special education; and teacher education. I argue that as a research community of scholars, we must make clear what we mean by urban education. Our lack of shared understanding, definition, and language usage can make it difficult for us to

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advance the work necessary to improve the life experiences and chances of students who need us to *work with* (Freire, 1998) them to improve communities, districts, and schools.

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Notes

1. The terms Black and African American will be used interchangeably throughout this editorial.
2. It is important to note that those in the entire district, even after I left the middle school, continued talking about the school I visited and a few others in the district as urban throughout my visit.

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