

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### ***Urban dreams: Stories of Hope, Resilience, and Character, edited by M. J. Elias, G. Ogburn-Thompson, C. Lewis, D. I. Neft (2008). Lanham, Maryland: Hamilton Books***

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*Urban Dreams: Stories of Hope, Resilience, and Character* is a compilation of writings by students (Grades 5 through 12) in Plainfield, New Jersey. The editors describe Plainfield as urban, largely minority, and a community likely to produce a number of “at-risk” children. The writings of the book are essays coming out of John Templeton’s *Laws of Life* essay contest. *Laws of Life* encourages students to document, in writing, their core beliefs, core values, defining experiences, life role models, and aspirations. *Urban Dreams* strives to show the writings of urban minority students as being positive, uplifting, goal oriented, and filled with hope and potential. The editors of *Urban Dreams* also hope that the book will bring new insight to its readers regarding the potential and promise of urban students.

When *Urban Dreams* is compared to many other recent books on urban education it is a

breath of fresh air. Instead of documenting what urban students cannot do and the multitude of reasons why they cannot do it, this book is a compilation of hope, potential, and promise in the form of student essays. It shows what urban students can do and what our expectations of them should be. It is from this perspective that *Urban Dreams* succeeds magnificently and should be highly inspirational and thought provoking to all who care about improving education in spite of daunting obstacles and the resulting lowered potential of success.

The *Laws of Life* essay contest is pedagogically a program of dual intent; it involves practice, instruction, and discourse in both composition skills and character education. The competition aspect of the essay contest undoubtedly brings with it pressures upon teachers involved to generate as high a quality

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product as possible. The essays are of high quality and are often informative and inspirational. Because *Urban Dreams* focuses largely upon the final essay products, however, it has failed to adequately illuminate either the process of composition creation or the process of character building. Because of this failing, readers have little sense of witnessing these children in the process of becoming.

In beginning *Urban Dreams*, it is impressive that the essays of fifth grade students are so abundant. With extended reading, however, it is this impressive positive of youthful voices that begins to take on a somewhat negative cast that colors the entire book. What should have been the promise and hope of youthful voices seems to take on a sterility of artificiality. Gone are the traditional misspellings of all young writers, as are most of the grammatical errors, dialectical expressions, and occasional slang that would be expected of any youthful practitioner of the language. Small glimmers of authenticity in language seem to have been replaced with an apparent striving for a polished finished product. With the emphasis on a finished product to be judged, there is a sense of reading essays that are too well edited, of consuming words too well prepared. Without the book's labeling, the essays become unidentifiable as having come from an elementary student or a secondary student, as having come from an East Coast urban student or a Midwest suburban student.

That the written word is different than the spoken word goes without saying. *Urban*

*Dreams* shows some of the deficiencies that can easily arise in the written word. For language to be living it must breathe context and feed upon social input. It is likely that the book would have been far more alive had it focused on processes as much as it focused on products. The editors of *Urban Dreams* provide an "Appendix for Educators" to give educators the rationale and the processes involved in implementing *Laws of Life*. One of the foundations to the *Laws of Life* process is dialogue; dialogue with teacher, with peers, and with family. Had the book also included some of that dialogic process, it would have gone far further in allowing readers to know and understand the remarkable attributes of these young students. It also would have allowed readers to differentiate the processes of composition instruction and that of character building. Such an inclusion would have allowed readers to more fully believe the writings, to more fully see and relate to, the thought and emotional process of urban youth, and to create the positive emotional attachment to these students and their strivings, which was a major goal of the editors. The pedagogical product showcased in *Urban Dreams* shows the deserved breadth of hope and resilience within urban education, but a glimpse into the pedagogical process would have magnified an empathetic understanding of character and growth through observing it at a much deeper individual level.