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A Brief History and Contemporary Issues

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This paper is designed to provide insights into both the ever-shifting nature—as well as the trajectory of—urban education in the United States. We provide a brief historical synopsis, a contextualization of how education in urban settings is commonly constructed through popular discourses, and a discussion of how the definitions and perceptions of urban schools influence research and policy measures. Lastly, this paper offers a brief exploration of recent movements and complications concerning urban education reform.

Introduction: What Counts as Urban?

As urban areas expand and demographics continue to shift at rapid rates, there has been a renewed interest in what counts as "urban" in education. While, in some cases, the distinction might be clear, urban schools are often classified as urban "because of the characteristics associated with the school and the people in them, not only based on the larger social context of where the schools and districts are located" (Milner, 2012, p. 557). What's more, schools that are classified as urban, regardless of their physical location, are often interpreted and portrayed negatively (Milner, 2012; Noguera, 1996; Watson, 2011). Correspondingly, urban students are often described as unmotivated and unwilling to learn, with parents who are uninterested and uninvolved (Watson, 2011).

Some scholars and organizations have refocused attention on the characteristics of urban schools and define them in terms of physical location and the city's population (NCES, 2006) or, at the very least, stress the importance of clarifying what is meant by urban (Milner, 2012). Additional scholars have contended that to define urban education by geographic location alone, without taking into account the racial and ethnic diversity that is representative of many larger cities, is to ignore the fact that the very demographics of urban areas result in large populations of African American and Latino children who are not receiving an adequate education (Delpit, 2012; Kenny, 2000; Milner, 2013). While the historical sections of this paper highlight the developments over time of education systems through a location-based focus on events in densely populated cities, we also wish to trouble this geographic interpretation and contend that urban education has also been a loaded term used as a "code word" for poor, low-performing African American and Latino populations and their teachers (Watson, 2011; Jackson, 2011).

A Brief History of Urban Education

During the 1800s, the U.S. education system underwent major reconfigurations. In the 1820s and 1830s, diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and immigrant populations flooded American cities. Both rural villages and urban areas struggled to accommodate an influx of children in a time of industrialization and drastic demographic shifts (Graham, 1974; Rury, 2005; Tyack,

1974). As can be imagined, the public systems prevalent in rural areas could not meet the needs of the sheer number of people in urban environments. Industrial order, therefore, was prioritized over one-room schoolhouses and educational reform sought to transform schools into efficient structures that re-formed educational systems in a business-like fashion (Tyack, 1974) and often sought to train the children of immigrant communities to become "useful citizens" (Rury, 2005).

Throughout the rest of the century, educational reformers throughout large urban areas implemented various reorganizations. In an effort to "instill common values" (Tyack, 1974, p. 33) and control the masses, reformers in many large cities in the U.S. reorganized responsibility among administration and teachers, restructured the school board, and developed assorted forms of standardized assessment, curriculum, and required textbooks. Furthermore, superintendents sought to decentralize schools and apply a factory model in an effort to bureaucratize the education system. These transitions not only reflected the business and technological developments of the time—through the appeal of a meritocracy—simultaneously "reinforced racial, religious, and class privilege in many cases" and delivered a structure that could potentially provide "opportunities for women, equalize educational expenditures between rich and poor sections of a city, and provide a system of instruction which was impartially efficient for all classes of the population" (Tyack, 1974, p. 42). An example of this was the creation of high schools—which solidified the pyramid-like structure of secondary education familiar today, but used tax dollars from the poor to fund high schools that were mostly accessible to rich students whose parents had the option of choosing to keep their children in school rather than placing them in the workforce. It was not until the 1900s that high schools became institutions available to the masses became what would eventually be a widely accepted American educational structure (Tyack, 1974).

As the school system in urban areas was restructured and re-envisioned, there was also an increased interest in the perceived purpose of schooling. Some were resistant to the ways in which education was evolving because they questioned their standardized, mechanical nature. In his study of schools in 36 cities in 1892, Joseph Mayer Rice critiqued the inordinate amount of recitation and memorization in schools and commented on the ways in which students were taught to value facts and recitations over analyzing and synthesizing material (Rice, 1893). Several critics of the bureaucratic nature of school systems, however, "did not question the aim of transmitting the dominant culture through public education, other dissenters opposed the common school precisely because they treasured cultural differences which public schoolmen were attempting to destroy" (Tyack, 1974, p. 84), and still others complained of the general cost to fund and maintain this new educational structure. These tensions spilled over into the 1900s, as parents remained skeptical of this new "one best system," especially in regards to its continued emphasis on science and efficiency. For example, implementation of the IQ test in the early and mid-20th century was of particular interest to administrators in urban school systems, who regarded the IQ test as a means of classifying and sorting students. Although IQ testing had passionate supporters, many educators were skeptical of the test from the beginning, and the implementation of the test in large urban districts such as Los Angeles, California, (Raftery, 2005), ultimately led to tracking for millions of diverse students (Tyack, 1974). Students coming from different cultures or low socioeconomic backgrounds were often more likely to be placed on non college-preparatory tracks as they adjusted to the new system's expectations for schooling (Cuban, 1993).

That is not to say that there were no successful aspects of this new American education system. By the 1930s, class sizes decreased, school attendance had increased, and specialized

programs for the gifted, deaf, blind, and other groups were established (Tyack, 1974). Perceptions of teaching had also changed. By the 1940s, "students standing at their desks reciting . . . was replaced by the now-familiar image of arm-waving pupils vying for the teacher's attention" (Cuban, 1993, p. 134). While the 1940s and 1950s were filled with concerns regarding lack of funding followed by domestic and international fears accompanying the Cold War, by the 1960s education was seen as "one of the prime weapons in the war on poverty and a central concern not only of policy-makers, but also of the dispossessed, especially the people of color struggling for a greater share of power in cities" (Tyack, 1974, p. 270). The 1970s also saw stronger levels of community control over education (p. 271). Each shift in the demographics and populations in urban areas was accompanied by eventual shifts in the perception and structure of urban education. A consistent theme, however, seems to be the enduring concern for meeting the needs of concentrated, diverse populations of students.

Framing Urban Education

Beginning in the 1960s, residential shifts caused by White flight and laws concerning desegregation again changed the racial and economic dynamics of urban schools, leaving schools to address the challenges of meeting the needs of a majority minority population. Additionally, school choice (which we will address later in this paper) resulted in mainly White middle-class families leaving urban school settings for homogenous or private school alternatives, which have resulted in increased segregation and decreases in funding (Tolbert & Theobald, 2006) and access to resources (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2013). Simultaneously, perceptions of urban education began to shift. Importantly, urban schools systems, historically, have had times of greater resources, were known to offer wide varieties of curriculum and training not available in suburban and rural schools, and were not always portrayed so negatively (Rury, 2005). In less than a century, perspectives on urban education have shifted from positive images to negative associations of underperformance, as White flight, racism, and deficit perspectives, emerge as core components in framing urban education in the 21st century.

White Flight and Racism

Over the past 50 years, urban environments in the United States have experienced a significant loss of middle-class and White families. Historically labeled "White flight," this movement has highlighted the migration of White families to the suburbs, which has maintained and exacerbated segregation in neighborhoods (National Institute of Education U.S. Desegregation Studies Staff, 1976). This shift in the racial composition of urban environments left urban schools with large populations of students of color—primarily those of Latino and African American descent—with a significant reduction in their operating budget due to deindustrialization (Rury, 2005; Tolbert & Theobald, 2006). With large concentrations of residents with the "fewest economic means" (Tolbert & Theobald, 2006, p. 272-273), urban schools were left to address the multiple challenges facing education with significantly reduced resources and support.

Urban environments have been disproportionately affected by the aforementioned institutional changes. Rather than address the institutional structures perpetuating the status quo, there has instead been an overemphasis on a traditional, scripted curriculum. Current educational policies, which have impacted student populations of color more acutely, often

blame urban education for its failure to adhere to societal standards (Weiner, 1999) in spite of these factors. Consequently, urban education continues to be positioned as the antithesis of learning and is blamed for the demise of American public education. This conveniently subverts the focus on race because it fails to acknowledge the economic and societal inequities that produce systemic problems, such as increased dropout rates and high teacher turnover. Once negative perceptions toward urban students become normalized in society, then urban education's failure is, ultimately, expected. Such deficit perspectives (Delpit, 2012) make it possible—or at least, in terms of the status quo, preferable—for stakeholders to omit discussions of racial and institutional inequities (King, 1991), despite the fact that minority students are concentrated in urban schools, leaving them to address the impact race and racism have on education with little to no support. As Gooden (2012) asserted, if we do not believe the aforementioned to be true, "then why is there no outrage when we see so many urban schools failing?" (p. 72). Ultimately, the normalization of the "underachievement" of urban schools deflects attention from racial inequities and the lack of access that urban students have to scholarship compared to their suburban counterparts.

Deficit Perspectives

Encouraged by the accountability movement and its effort to standardize schools, the normalization of urban education's "failures" has been positioned against suburban schools, while simultaneously neglecting to address inequities in access (Milner, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Additionally, the internalization of "at risk" labels for students of color or students from low socio-economic backgrounds as normal elicits no inquiry as to how the labels are socially constructed (Harman & McClure, 2011). Schools, consciously or subconsciously, have continued to replicate low expectations and place a higher value on societal norms, which is in direct contrast to the academic and cultural needs of urban students' racial and economic make-up (Harman & McClure, 2011). With the normalization of the "failure" of urban education, urban students' strengths are often overlooked. Messages such as "if it's urban, then it's bad" (Milner, 2008, p. 1574) invokes negative images, deficit thinking, and, once again, masks the strengths of urban schools and deflects from addressing systemic and institutional inequities. By viewing urban schools as "liabilities rather than assets" (Milner, 2008, p. 1577), the transformation of urban schools into positive educational spaces will fail to occur, leaving urban education to address reform movements in manners that limit rather than *challenge* the academic potential of urban students.

Accountability and Evaluation in Urban Schools

National and state policy-makers have created systems of accountability with the hope that such systems will create incentives for instructional improvement and lead to greater educational equity among districts with disparate resources. As discussed, however, normalized deficit viewpoints impact how policy is formed and how schools respond to and enact accountability policies, leading to *increased* inequities among schools and districts. Often with fewer resources, urban school districts have responded to pressures of accountability by focusing on content coverage rather than depth, and adopting scripted reading programs that center around direct instruction and routine (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Speiglman, 2004; Delpit, 2012; Diamond and Spillane, 2004). This can become problematic, however, when such policies are urban-

based or if urban schools, because of their limited resources, are forced to enact such policies in ways that differ from non-urban schools and "if students are concentrated in different types of schools based on race and social class, they will be impacted by the policy in distinct ways" (Diamond & Spillane, 2004, p.1150). As a result, the most vulnerable students populations have an increased risk of receiving the most prescriptive and narrowed versions of curriculum and instruction. These policies also exacerbate inequity by leading to what Achinstein, Ogawa, and Speiglman (2004) have called "teacher tracking," where teachers in some urban school districts are forced to implement programs that focus on scripts and control, while teachers in suburban districts have greater freedom to exhibit autonomy, creativity, and experimentation in their teaching practices.

Policy-makers have subsequently turned to teacher evaluations to increase instructional quality. President Obama's *Race to the Top* (2009) initiative has encouraged value-added models that "rely on the assumption that teacher effectiveness can be estimated reliably and validly through student achievement tests" (Papay, 2010, p.168). Teachers in urban districts have acknowledged the pressure that comes from being labeled "low-performing" by accountability measures. Administrators have also been under intense district and state pressure to "restructure" schools and "start firing teachers" (Amrein-Beardsley & Collins, 2012, p.18). In this manner, accountability policies have exacerbated deficit perspectives of urban education by creating a culture of fear by using teacher evaluations to either reward or sanction teachers rather than directly focus on improving teaching and learning.

Teacher Qualification and Retention

The current culture of accountability and evaluation and the resulting standardized curricula have become factors in teachers' decisions to seek jobs outside of urban schools (Ng, 2006). Disparities in pay and working conditions, coupled with the pressures of accountability and high-stakes testing, lure teachers and administrators with more professional training and experience to more affluent districts where pressure is lower. Urban school districts, therefore, often have teachers with lower qualifications than their suburban counterparts, fostering educational disparities for urban students (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Rockoff, & Wyckoff, 2008; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). As a result, a "historic pattern" (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003, p. 3) of a maldistribution of teachers has been perpetuated, where schools with the highest proportions of high poverty, non-White students also have the highest proportion of emergency credentialed teachers as well as the least qualified teachers as measured by certification, exam performance, and experience (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Rockoff, & Wyckoff, 2008; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003).

Teacher retention rates follow similar patterns, as schools described as high-poverty, high-minority, and urban have had the nation's highest rates of teacher attrition (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2010; Jones & Sandidge, 1997). Teacher turnover increased by 28% since the early 1990s, but the turnover is not equally distributed among districts and schools (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2010). The data from the Schools and Staffing Survey showed that teachers are moving "from poor to wealthier schools, from high-minority to low-minority schools, and from urban to suburban schools" (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2010, p.19). The high proportion of underprepared teachers, together with the lack of teacher retention in urban settings, has greatly affected the quality of the education students in urban schools receive. High concentrations of underprepared teachers in urban areas, who often have "fast-track" credentials and/or less teaching experience

have made urban schools conducive to narrow, scripted curriculum that is implemented in an effort to give such teachers guidance (Milner, 2013). This, and the prevalence of high-stakes testing, has narrowed curriculum in urban schools and reduced students' exposure to critical and independent thinking (Delpit, 2012).

The Politics of Reform

In response to—and as a result of—the deficit framing of urban education and the changing economic structure of cities over time, the "reform impulse" (Rury, 2005, p. 5) is an ever-present topic in urban education. The unique challenges of urban schools present a variety of opportunities for innovations that attempt to increase equity and achievement for students and bring about change. This has been widely addressed by reports such as *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and federal strategies such as No Child Left Behind and the Common Core Standards (Jackson, 2011; Ravitch, 2010). These reforms target multiple levels, from curriculum and teacher certification, to administration and school culture, to the charter movement and broader educational policy reforms. What many agree upon is that reform movements cannot be approached in isolation, as all of the aforesaid areas are intricately intertwined (Anyon, 2005; Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Ravitch, 2010). Others, such as Jean Anyon, have stressed that "unless we make some changes in the way the macro-economy works, economic policy will trump not only urban school reform but the individual educational achievement of urban students as well" (p. 29). In other words, reform movements in education alone cannot be successful without an understanding and consideration of other economic policies and, when implemented, are often too weak to promote substantial change (Lipman, 2011). Furthermore, as Pedro Noguera (2003) has explained, it is essentially counterintuitive to initiate any reform measures without ensuring that the basic physical and emotional needs of students have been addressed.

Importantly, reform movements in education cannot be effective without addressing the amount of underprepared teachers in schools hard-to-staff urban schools. Rather, teacher education reform needs to address multiple levels, including teacher retention (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). Teacher certification programs within several universities are looking to improve teacher retention by changing the ways teachers are prepared by explicitly focusing on urban environments and giving teachers the support they need to succeed and remain in schools with underserved student populations. Rather than teachers accumulating decontextualized methods that may be irrelevant to their students' cultures and backgrounds, coursework should include conversations about the political context of schooling (Freedman & Appleman, 2008) and structural inequalities in the school system in terms of race and class and students should complete their fieldwork in high-poverty schools (Olsen & Anderson, 2007). Research has shown that teachers with such coursework are more likely to continue to teach in high-poverty, urban schools longer than teachers in more traditional programs (Freedman & Appleman, 2008; Quartz, 2003).

Many school leaders and administrators have also recognized that involving parents and community members in school reform efforts is more effective than working alone. Ishimaru (2013) and Warren (2011) studied community organizations that increase communication between parents from low-income, urban neighborhoods and teachers and administrators, holding schools accountable for implementing reform. Shared school leadership among administrators, teachers, parents, and community members can work to challenge the cultural

beliefs and stereotypes held by teachers and administrators, combine diverse forms of social capital as resources for school reform, and sustain the episodes of reform that come into a state, district, or school (Ishimaru, 2013; Warren, 2011). Business leaders have also contributed to educational reform by providing access to resources, financing reform programs, and sharing corporate strategies with school decision-makers. Mitra and Frick (2011) described how two Rust Belt cities used collaboration among local business leaders, administrators, and teachers to improve the failing economic system of both the cities and the schools. Community-based organizations showed that "professional" and "community" groups do not have to be at odds or have opposite agendas (Ishimaru, 2013; Noguera, 2003).

Fueled by competition through privatization of education, additional trends that have spread nationwide—but have frequently targeted urban areas—are charter schools (Lipman, 2011), privatization, and school choice (Apple, 2004). There are several camps defending the pros and cons of the charter and school choice movements. The advantages of charter schools, to speak in general terms, lie in the opportunity for traditionally underserved students to have increased access to rigorous schools and charter schools have greater organizational and financial flexibility (Payne & Knowles, 2009). Consequently, charters are able to have greater authority over hiring practices and immediately fund specific projects, potentially stimulating innovation and achievement. Many charter schools are outperforming public schools, but there are also charter schools that are not performing as well and are even shut down. Likewise, while charter schools offer access to a quality education for certain underrepresented students, they are also frequently criticized for their admissions policies and are often plagued with high rates of student attrition (Payne & Knowles, 2009; Ravitch, 2010). Even successful charter schools are faced with the dilemma of extending small-scale successes beyond the school level. In terms of urban education, however, as in the case of New Orleans, for example, charter schools have led to the displacement of students of color (Buras, 2011; Lipman, 2011). Additionally, school choice and accompanying voucher programs that are designed, at least in theory, to allow parents to subsidize their tax money and apply it to tuition at a private school, do not tend to function in such a manner. As Michael Apple (2004) argued:

> There are now increasingly convincing arguments that while the supposed overt goal of voucher and choice plans is to give poor people the right to exit public schools, among the ultimate long-term effects may be the increase of 'White flight' from public schools into private and religious schools and the creation of conditions where affluent White parents may refuse to pay taxes to support public schools that are more and more suffering from the debilitating effects of the financial crisis of the state. (p. 68-69)

Such a statement is reminiscent of the "White flight" that occurred in the mid-20th century and reflects Anyon (2005) and Noguera's (2003) emphasis on urban schools as inextricably linked to the urban environments they are a part of. Moreover, it reiterates the importance for urban school reform measures—and urban education policies in general—to consider the potential implications for students who have already been marginalized within the education system.

Conclusion

A glimpse into the current state of urban education illustrates both historic patterns of concern in terms of underprepared teachers (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003), "low-achieving" students (Delpit, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006), and a general fixation on urban "social problems," such as violence and drugs (Noguera, 1996). Conversely, current movements

in urban education have also sought to illuminate areas of progress and hope (Jackson, 2010; Noguera, 2003) as we continually search for ways to serve the needs of diverse populations of students as many attempt to "rekindle educators' belief in the vast capacity of their urban students and to restore their confidence in their own ability to inspire high intellectual performance by these students" (Jackson, 2010, p. 1). These conversations are filled with complexities and tensions, but as history has shown us, urban demographics will undoubtedly continue to shift, and so too will urban education as scholars, policy-makers, and educators continue to search for ways to expose and eradicate inequities and improve urban schools.

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