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Reframing Suburbs: Race, Place, and Opportunity in Suburban Educational Spaces

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Abstract

Most students in the United States attend suburban schools. However, most education research focuses on urban school districts. This may be in part because many of the core issues that currently drive educational research – issues of race and class inequities, social mobility, immigration, English learning – are believed to be "urban" challenges. In this paper, we argue that the changing nature of suburban schools and communities, and the history of their creation as education spaces, make them advantageous locations for education researchers to study many pressing issues and expand the ways in which we understand the construction of space and inequality. We argue that education scholarship across multiple disciplinary orientations, theoretical foci, and substantive concerns can benefit from a deeper engagement with suburban education spaces and the issues and opportunities they provide.

Introduction

Most students in the United States (U.S.) attend suburban schools, yet the vast majority of education scholarship focuses on urban schools rather than suburban ones. For example, between 2000 and 2018, of the papers published in the top five American Educational Research Association Journals, 80 percent explicitly focused on urban schools, 11.7 percent focused on suburban schools, and eight percent focused on rural schools (Diamond & Posey-Maddox, 2020). Indeed, in contrast to "urban" and "rural" education, "suburban" education is not a keyword option for articles published in AERA journals. This is, at least in part, because many core educational issues – race and class inequities, demographic change, immigration, and English learning – are commonly perceived to play out most acutely in urban (and even rural) contexts instead of suburban schools. Our collective image of metropolitan regions is rooted in a conceptual shorthand that identifies urban spaces with minoritized youth, high poverty, language diversity, and immigration (Milner, 2012; Welsh & Swain, 2020) and suburban spaces with whiteness and affluence (Diamond & Posey-Maddox, 2020; Leonardo & Hunter, 2009; Lewis-McCoy, 2014, 2018; Posey-Maddox, 2017).

These common perceptions of urban and suburban belie the contemporary reality of these spaces. Over the last several decades, there have been significant demographic shifts in the U.S. metropolitan landscape, leading to increased race, class, linguistic and other forms of diversity in suburbs (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012; Frey, 2015; Lacy, 2016). For instance, most Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous people in U.S. metropolitan areas live in suburbs and the white share of the suburban population has declined substantially over the past three decades (Frey, 2015). Additionally, over half of the low-income people in the U.S. live in the suburbs, challenging widely held beliefs about suburban affluence (Lacy, 2016). Finally, recent cohorts of

U.S. immigrants are bypassing central cities and moving directly into suburban enclaves, a change from previous patterns (Hardwick, 2008; Lacy 2016; Li, 2012).

Given these changes, we argue that suburban educational spaces offer immense opportunities to examine many of our most pressing educational challenges. More specifically, these spaces provide locations for the interdisciplinary interrogation of key issues confronting U.S. communities--such as (re)segregation, economic inequality, and white supremacy – and the generation of knowledge that can inform educational research, policy, and practice in the suburban spaces that educate so many young people. In what follows, we briefly assess the state of the research on suburban communities and schools, weaving together scholarly work from the fields of education, sociology, geography, and history. We then discuss gaps in the scholarly literature and build a case for future research studies that interrogate whiteness and white supremacy in suburban education, employ metropolitan and interdisciplinary frameworks, and engage in "desire-based" research (Tuck & Yang, 2014) that examines how minoritized and economically marginalized families, educators, and community members resist, navigate, and seek to re-create suburban educational spaces.

The Creation of Racialized Suburbs

There is no single agreed-upon definition of suburbs, and debate exists about how these spaces should be defined. For our purposes, we draw on a common definition of suburbs as "the physical space beyond a city's boundaries, yet still within the metropolitan area" (Kneebone & Reid, 2013; Lacy, 2016: 370). This definition has the benefit of providing clarity and specificity while allowing room for the various types of suburbs – usually demarcated by residents' demographic characteristics as well as proximity to central cities – that exist in U.S. metropolitan areas (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012; Lewis-McCoy, 2018; Milner, 2012; Orfield, 2002).

The rapid expansion of U.S. suburbs began in the early to middle twentieth century and is a complex process involving an interwoven set of institutional processes and individual actions that resulted in a fundamental shift in metropolitan landscapes. The growth of suburbs was a white racial project (Omi & Winant, 2014), facilitated by multiple levels of government, the real estate industry, banks, and the courts, as well as individual families, neighborhood associations, and communities that worked in concert to create racially exclusionary spaces outside city boundaries (Brooks & Rose, 2013; Rury & Rife, 2018). These separate urban and suburban school districts were firmly established, and court decisions such as *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) as well as ongoing district fragmentation (Holme & Finnigan, 2013) continue to undermine desegregation efforts and maintain many white spaces (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012; Rothstein, 2017).

Between 1940 and 2000 the U.S. suburban population grew from 15.3 percent of the total population to 50 percent (Hobbes & Stoops, 2002). Around this same time frame, the number of municipal governments increased by 15 percent, and the number of school districts and special-purpose governments tripled, contributing to higher economic inequality between cities and suburbs (Briggs, 2005). The work of education scholars, historians, and urban planners demonstrates that this growth in suburbanization was largely a white phenomenon that involved the coordinated effort of white people and white-controlled institutions. This line of scholarship identifies how white supremacy, governmental policies, and the judicial system created fragmented and racialized metropolitan landscapes (e.g., Briggs, 2005; Freund, 2007). Ultimately, these processes *constructed* metropolitan areas and intricately linked educational geographies of opportunities (Briggs, 2005; Scott & Holme, 2016; Tate, 2008).

Critically, however, (sub)urban scholars also highlight long legacies of suburbs that were home to minoritized communities. Most importantly, they illuminate how the white racial project of suburbanization created patterns of removal and erasure of some of these communities, reminiscent of settler colonialism (Keeler, 2016). For instance, scholars illustrate how distinct processes of containment and exclusion impacted racialized communities on the urban fringe, in unincorporated areas, or agricultural communities, and displaced them in the processes of (sub)urban development and suburban expansion, from California to New York (Cavin, 2012; Weise, 2004). More specifically, suburban development required building onto the hinterlands where minoritized communities were confined due to legacies of systematic racism, limited economic opportunities, and racist policies or politics. In the postwar California Bay Area, for example, Mexican Americans were disproportionately impacted when farmlands were annexed by city governments or experienced land rush by real estate professionals, homebuilders, and land speculators. Confined to live in the peripheral zones between farms and the city (*colonias*) as a result of an inherited racialized landscape (shaped by the nation's first racial residential zoning law and Alien Land Laws, amongst others), Mexican barrios experienced distinct processes of containment and displacement through municipal decisions, postwar policies (e.g., highway development and suburban renewal), and changes to the regions' financial industries (Cavin, 2012). Similar patterns of containment and displacement occurred in metropolitan areas in Arizona, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania, among others (Fisfi & Greenberg, 1962; Lukinbeal, Arreola, & Lucio, 2010; Weise, 2004).

This scholarship expands the way we understand suburbanization, the creation of suburbs, and racial exclusion. The research identifies the multiple histories and processes that shaped fragmented suburbs and metropolitan regions, rooted in a dialectical relationship between

settler colonialism and white supremacy (see, Bonds & Inwood, 2016). However, alongside these (sub)urban dispossession processes come long legacies of struggle, organizing, and fights for the right to place. These struggles include civil rights cases against exclusionary zoning, where minoritized communities living on suburban land before the arrival of whites sued for their rights to place, demanding affordable housing in their communities (e.g., *Sasso v. Union City* (1970) and *NAACP v. Township of Mount Laurel I* (1974) and *Mount Laurel II* (1983) (see Cavin, 2012 & Kirp et al., 1997). This historical research creates a framework for studying suburbanization through a metropolitan lens and provides important historical grounding for scholarship that seeks to understand the displacement, dispossession, and resegregation that continue in varied forms into the present, particularly post-Great Recession.

Contemporary Suburban Contexts

Racial inequality is built into the bedrock of suburbia, and thus understanding suburban schooling necessitates understanding how race and place intersect. The growth of suburbs reached a milestone when the 2000 census demonstrated that the U.S. was a majority suburban country (Hobbs & Stoops, 2002). At the same time, suburbs were experiencing major demographic transformations that caught the attention of demographers (Frey, 2015; Orfield, 2002), geographers (Hardwick, 2008), political scientists (Jones-Correa, 2008), urban planners (Lung-Aman, 2017), and sociologists (Lacy, 2016; Lewis-McCoy, 2018). These scholars identified patterns of migration and immigration (as well as federal policy changes such as the Fair Housing Act of 1968), that led to suburbs being home to most minoritized U.S. residents, most of the country's low-income population, and most of its new immigrants.

Urban planners, geographers, and sociologists contextualize these shifts in relation to 20th and 21st century housing policies and their roles in the (re)segregation of metropolitan

regions (e.g., Pattillo, 2013; Schafran, 2018). They show how new technologies --new iterations of subprime lending and foreclosure processes -- have shaped resegregation, dispossession, and wealth development in racialized and classed ways. For example, scholars identify how subprime lending and foreclosure occurred in previously redlined communities in cities (e.g., Pattillo, 2013), and how subprime lending and foreclosure occurred disproportionately in particular suburbs, specifically suburbs expanding housing on shaky political and economic infrastructure (Schafran, 2018; Schildt, Cytron, Kneebone, & Reid, 2013). Thus, minoritized populations-- pulled by the suburban dream, or desires for affordable housing -- became targets of subprime lending and foreclosure within uneven suburban geographies, or priced out of cities or suburbs pre-and post- the Great Recession due to inflated housing prices, housing speculation, and gentrification (Cavin, 2012; Schafran, 2018). While debate remains about the role of gentrification in displacement (Brown-Saracino, 2017), scholarship nonetheless reaffirms the importance of interrogating the interconnectedness of housing and education in suburbs and metropolitan regions more broadly.

Education scholars have studied suburbs; however, the amount of education scholarship on suburbs pales compared to the work on central cities (Diamond & Posey-Maddox, 2020; Lewis-McCoy, 2018). The extant educational research has provided important insights into the creation of suburbs and how race, class, and opportunity hoarding influence this process (Diamond & Lewis, forthcoming; Domina, Penner, & Penner, 2016; Rury & Rife 2018). It has also examined the various types of suburbs that exist (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012; Lewis-McCoy, 2018), their relationship to each other, and how the characteristics of urban and suburban school contexts are less distinct than once believed (Milner, 2012; Posey-Maddox, 2017). Research on suburban schooling has also documented how racial inequality manifests via

racialized access to high-status academic offerings (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014), race-gendered disciplinary practices and policies (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Posey-Maddox, 2017), and deficit-based framings of students and families of color (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Tyler, 2016). These racial inequities are manifested not simply within suburban schools, but also across fragmented suburban districts (Wells et al., 2012).

The extant scholarship also shows that Black, Latinx, and Asian students and families navigate racialized community and educational terrains within well-resourced, suburban districts. Both working- and middle-class Black students and families confront racism and exclusion in these settings (Carter Andrews, 2012; Posey-Maddox, 2017), and Latinx youth are confronted with racialized social and academic boundaries (Conchas, Oseguera, & Vigil, 2012; Rodriguez, 2020) as well as limited resources devoted to supporting English Language Learners in New Latinx Diaspora suburbs (Lowenhaupt, 2016). Asian American students and families also face microaggressions from white families and community members who view their presence in suburban spaces as a threat to White status and dominance (Dhingra, 2020; Lung-Amam, 2017). These findings challenge dominant framings of suburban schools as places of refuge from many of the issues plaguing urban schools.

Directions for Future Research

Below, we outline a call for future educational research that does the following: a) deeply engages with theory to understand how whiteness and racism shape the experiences of students, teachers, and families; 2) employs a metropolitan and interdisciplinary framework to understand and account for the interconnectedness of suburbs and cities and processes of settler colonialism; and 3) engages in "desire-based" (Tuck & Yang, 2014) research that seeks to

understand how students, parents, residents, and educators navigate, resist, and (re)create

suburban educational spaces.

Understanding Whiteness, Racism, and Education in Diversifying Suburbs

First, we argue there is a need for more educational research that uses both theoretical

and nuanced empirical analyses to understand race, racism, and whiteness in diversifying

suburban schools and communities. While a growing body of scholarship has highlighted the

history and contemporary realities of minoritized students and families in the suburbs, "suburban

schools" are still commonly used as a proxy for white schools in media, policy, and scholarly

descriptions of educational issues and contexts. Race and class are often conflated in these

framings, as "suburban" students and their schools are commonly associated with middle- and

upper-middle-class white students and their families even though the suburban poor are more

likely to be white (Murphy & Allard, 2015). There is thus a need for educational research that

includes precise language (rather than euphemisms) and an in-depth racial analysis of "suburban"

and "urban" educational issues.

Much of the extant scholarship on minoritized groups in suburbia has focused on Black

people's schooling and community experiences living in mostly white suburbs (Ispa-Landa &

Conwell, 2017; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Posey-Maddox, 2017). However,

Black suburbanization in recent decades has been concentrated in the southern U.S. with middle-

class Black enclaves existing in suburban Washington D. C. and Atlanta (Ascher & Branch-

Smith, 2005; Lacy 2016). Likewise, there exists a long history of minoritized residents in

suburban areas (Cavin, 2012; Keeler, 2016; Wiese, 2004). Our scholarship would be enhanced

by more attention to these historical and contemporary suburban spaces. While recent work has

begun to examine the contemporary experiences of other racial groups (Jiménez, 2017; Park,

2020; Rodriguez, 2020), more work is needed that pushes beyond the Black/white binary to examine the experiences of Latinx, Asian American, and Indigenous people in rapidly transforming suburban contexts. For example, we know that while suburban schools have become more racially and linguistically diverse, the teachers, administrators, and school boards in these schools remain overwhelmingly white (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012). In fact, white teachers make up 69% of teachers in city districts compared to 82% of suburban teachers (U. S. Department of Education) and many lack the racial literacy to be effective teachers of minoritized students (Lac, Diamond & Velazquez, 2020) as well as the skills and training to support the language needs of immigrant students (Jones-Correa, 2008; Lowenhaupt, 2016).

We also need deeper theorizing on whiteness and racism to better understand how whiteness creates barriers for minoritized youth and families and how white supremacy and settler colonialism function in different suburban locales. How, and under what conditions, are white families afforded privileges (e.g., the assumption of belonging) in their everyday lives and the institutional and community spaces they traverse? How do educators, school administrators, and civic leaders in diversifying suburbs respond to the efforts of white homeowners and parents seeking to hoard opportunities via surveillance and the policing of district boundaries (e.g. "residency checks")? How does whiteness shape the lives of working-class white families, and white students surviving poverty in suburbia? Racial discrimination and exclusion continue to shape the lives and mobility of the Black middle-class in real estate and homeownership and wealth accumulation (Brown & Smith, 2016; Pattillo, 2013). Research also shows that most U.S. suburbs have fewer social service programs that can provide material resources and assistance to low-income families when compared to urban census tracts with similar poverty rates (Murphy & Wallace, 2010), and even when suburban social support organizations exist low-income

residents often have trouble accessing their services given transportation challenges in suburbia (Murphy & Allard, 2015). Studies that examine the intersections of race and class are thus needed in future explorations of student access and mobility, suburban school funding, and social supports for children and families. How does white supremacy operate, for example, in "majority-minority" suburban districts in which there are few or no white people? In what ways are white supremacy and whiteness challenged in these settings, and how are they supported and reproduced? While demographic data helps map the suburbanization of poverty and the growing numbers of minoritized groups in many suburbs, there is a need for research (using multiple methods) that interrogates how white supremacy and settler colonialism, functions in contemporary suburbia. We need educational research that treats race as a social position and not just as a variable (Diamond, 2018), especially given trends over the last two decades that show that a "diversity explosion" (Frey, 2015) does not automatically translate into desegregation and equity in suburban schooling (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012; Lewis-McCoy, 2014).

Using a Metropolitan and Interdisciplinary Framework

Second, we need more work that uses a metropolitan focus to understand suburban schools and districts. Racialized geographic patterns of opportunity are social and economic consequences of "deliberate policy decisions regarding transportation, education, housing finance, land use, and taxation and expenditures across all levels of government" (Briggs, 2005, p. 18). While a significant body of sociological scholarship has examined policies and initiatives aimed at expanding opportunities and promoting integration across cities and suburbs through housing choice and inter-district transfers (e.g., METCO, Moving To Opportunity, and Gatreaux) more interdisciplinary work is needed to interrogate the opportunity hoarding and policymaking that created these exclusionary suburban districts in the first place and the fundamental

inequality minoritized and low-income families are required to navigate in traversing geographic, socio-cultural, and municipal boundaries (Ispa-Landa, 2013). Studies of segregation and inequality in education commonly focus on ways to increase minoritized students' access to whiter and wealthier suburban schools through student assignment policies and zoning, despite how elusive integration, and equal opportunities, have and continue to be. We have a lot to learn from the work of geographers, urban planners, and historians about our contemporary realities, and the vital role education played in shaping the suburban/urban divide and fragmented competition between suburbs. Our reading of this scholarship suggests that educational researchers need to pay more attention to connections across urban and suburban -- and even rural -- spaces and attend to their linkages as space and opportunities are constructed relationally.

For example, we need research that takes up the history of dispossession, erasure, and resistance that characterize the creation and development of suburbs and broader metropolitan regions. The relationship between suburbanization and redlining (Pattillo, 2013; Schildt et al., 2013); desegregation and white flight; urban/suburban boundaries and district fragmentation; and suburban demographic change, gentrification, and the growth of mostly white exurbs are all relational processes that could benefit from a reconceptualization that moves away from a rigid urban/suburban divide and toward a *metropolitan* framing (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012; Orfield, 2002;; Reich, Stemhagan, & Siegal-Hawley, 2014; Scott & Holme, 2016). For example, Scott and Holme (2016) argue that the deterioration of city infrastructure, schools, and housing -- as a result of the politics and policies of the urban-suburban divide --enabled the "ripe conditions" for market-reforms (e.g., characterization, accountability, etc.). Likewise, eroding tax bases in many suburbs contribute to Black suburban communities' over-policing as a disciplining and revenue-generating enterprise (Rios, 2020). It is thus essential to consider issues

of the political economy of education within a metropolitan framework. Connecting this examination of schooling to the contributions of (sub)urban scholars and the histories of place, displacement, erasure, succession, and entrenchment of wealth can help us interrogate issues in schools more deeply across the urban/suburban divide.

In light of the growth of school (re)segregation in suburban districts prompted by legal, political, and demographic shifts, interdisciplinary and metropolitan-focused analyses are also needed to address the interconnectedness of the educational issues facing city districts with the succession and "locally-motivated district fragmentation" of predominantly white suburban areas (Frankenberg et al., 2017). Moreover, we need to consider differences across districts with rigid city/suburban boundaries and county districts that include city and suburban spaces in the same school system. Several studies illuminate the critical role that legal and political decisions--and specifically those decisions related to school district boundaries--play in supporting or disrupting opportunity hoarding and segregation by race and class (e.g. Frankenberg et al., 2017; Green & Gooden, 2016). Future work can also consider how these political and legal decisions shape students' and families' "on-the-ground" meaning-making and identities. How, for example, do students and families in predominantly white districts created via recent succession (like those in Shelby County, Tennessee) understand their local schools' whiteness and affluence? How does the prioritization of local control shape students' and parents' understandings of entitlement, value, and the "public" in contexts where the public schools are often seen as one of many suburban goods or amenities available to economically advantaged families? How do the formal barriers created via governance, finance, and enrollment policies shape schools and neighborhoods' socio-cultural contexts in and across suburbs and within broader metropolitan regions?

We also need interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary work to understand the multifaceted lives and learning of children and families in suburbia and metropolitan regions. Suburban residents regularly move across municipal boundaries due to employment, family ties, childcare, access to material goods and consumption, religious institutions, etc. Whereas much of the attention to mobility and transportation has focused on urban areas, we need more educational scholarship that attends to families' social/familial, economic, religious, political, and racial relationships between cities and suburbs, across suburban municipalities and even rural spaces. We need work that gleans insights from multiple disciplines and draws on each perspective's strengths to understand the complex issues facing suburban schools and communities.

Moreover, suburban schools do not exist in a vacuum, and education and learning also occur outside of school walls. Future educational research could more closely attend to links between schools and their contexts. That includes students' experiences outside schools in neighborhoods, community spaces, homes, families' economic realities, and the infrastructure that supports education in communities. Therefore, we argue that more work on suburban education needs to examine what happens outside of schools, and particularly in the community-based education spaces (Baldridge, et al., 2017; Park, 2020) that play a crucial role in students' learning beyond the school day.

Understanding Resistance and (Re)creation

Lastly, there is a need for "desire-based" (Tuck & Yang, 2014) educational research that seeks to understand how students, parents, residents, and educators navigate, resist, and (re)create suburban educational spaces. While a growing body of scholarship has identified the vast inequities that exist within and across suburban schools and communities, few studies attend to how students, families, and community members navigate, organize, and resist these unequal

terrains and policy contexts. How, for example, do minoritized youth use and "claim space" in suburban contexts? What are children and youth learning in out-of-school spaces, and where (e.g., parks, homes, neighborhoods, local businesses, etc.)? What possibilities exist for youth workers and community-based learning in suburban districts? How are young people and community members organizing around and resisting suburban inequalities related to housing, education, transportation, etc.?

In this paper, we have argued that suburban educational spaces offer important opportunities for educational research that are often missed because of our disproportionate attention to city schools. As the site of major demographic transformation, suburbs are dynamic contexts for studying race, space, inequality, and immigration that provide the opportunity to sharpen our theories and transform educational practice. However, to reach this potential, we need work that: interrogates whiteness, white supremacy, and settler colonialism; draws on multiple disciplines, situates suburbs in their broader metropolitan contexts, and examines resistance to oppressive systems that undermine educational justice. We also need work that understands education as connected to broader systems shaping metropolitan space, from macro-economic processes and federal and state policy to local community resources outside of schools. The time is now for educational research to reframe "suburban education" by critically analyzing the relationship between race, place, and opportunity in suburban and metropolitan education spaces.

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