

## COMMENTARY

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# Neoliberal Urbanism, Race, and Equity in Mathematics Education

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In a germinal book on urban education, Gerald Grace (1984) argued against the prevailing instrumental “policy science” approach to the study of urban education problems in the United States and United Kingdom. Drawing on sociologist C. Wright Mill’s critique of “abstracted empiricism,” Grace rejected policy science’s “technical and immediately realizable” within-the-system solutions to urban education problems abstracted from the urban context (p. 32). He proposed a “critical policy scholarship” that situates urban education in the social, economic, political, and cultural contexts shaping the city. Critical policy scholarship illuminates the material and cultural struggles in which schooling is located and is generative of social action toward social justice (p. 41). An underlying assumption is that policy is an expression of values arising out of specific interests and relations of power. Grace notes critical policy scholarship requires a multidisciplinary approach that draws on urban studies as well as urban sociology. In a somewhat similar vein, Rury and Mirel (1997) argue, “educational researchers [in the United States] too often accept the urban environment as a given natural setting, rather than one that has itself been determined by larger economic and political processes” (p. 85). What is needed, they argue, is a political economy of urban education that examines the contested dynamics of power and wealth that shape the urban context, its historical dimensions, and how it is articulated spatially. Rury and Mirel propose that we place questions of power, particularly the role of capital and race in structuring urban space, at the center of the education research agenda.

In June 2009, I attended a national conference of grass roots education activists, youth, parents, and teachers. We traded similar stories from Dallas, New York, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Chicago. School districts disinvesting in schools in Black and Latina/o neighborhoods and then closing them, students transferred across the city, increases in violence, charter school expansion, attacks on teacher unions, no real public participation, gentrification of African American and Latina/o working class neighborhoods and families pushed farther out of the city. Our conversations coalesced around similar questions: Why is this

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happening? What is the relationship of school closings and the gentrification and economic polarization of our cities? How can we collectively fight for truly quality education for low-income children of color in this new environment and what would that education look like? It was these questions that compelled me to write *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City* (Lipman, 2011).

Today, at the end of 2012 and four years into the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression, these questions are even more pressing—and more generalized to cities of all sizes. The city of Detroit is “clear-cutting” whole neighborhoods, closing dozens of neighborhood schools and expanding charter schools; Philadelphia’s school district is being transformed into a marketplace of school operators; and African American and Latina/o students in cities large and small face school closings and disinvestment in their communities while processes of gentrification and privatization of public services are the norm. Without a deeper understanding of the political and economic forces influencing schools, we can neither uncover the genesis of these education policies nor effectively advocate for more equitable and just policies and practices. In this short commentary, following from the book, I want to argue that it is necessary to examine the intersection of education policy and urban restructuring in order to understand what is happening in urban schools, and by implication, to assess the possibilities for more equitable and socially and culturally relevant mathematics education.

### **Neoliberal Urbanism, Race, and Education**

Neoliberalism is the defining social paradigm of the past 30 years—a free market strategy to manage the structural crises of capitalism by providing new opportunities for capital accumulation (Harvey, 2005). Put simply, neoliberalism is an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, discourses and ideologies that promote free markets, individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor (by lowering wages and benefits and dismantling unions), and sharp cuts in government responsibility for social welfare. Neoliberals champion privatization of social goods and retrenchment of government from provision of housing, health care, and education on the premise that competitive markets are more effective and efficient. But neoliberalism is not just “out there” as a set of policies and explicit ideologies; it has generated a new common sense about social institutions and social relations. It has reshaped identities—who we are as academics, teachers, students, parents, school administrators.

Many readers of *JUME* know that over the past 30 years, public education in the United States has been radically restructured in accord with a bi-partisan neoliberal agenda. The pillars of that agenda are top-down accountability and

standards, education markets, and business practices and ideologies. It features mayoral control of school districts, closing public schools or handing them over to corporate-style “turnaround” organizations, expanding school “choice” and charter schools, instituting teacher incentive pay based on test scores, and diminishing the power of teacher unions. The most comprehensive manifestations of this agenda are the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind Act and Obama administration’s \$4.35 billion federal education stimulus package known as Race to the Top. This radical restructuring of public education is a rendition of a global project to gear education to “economic competitiveness” and to impose market discipline on all aspects of schooling (Compton & Weiner, 2008; Gutstein, 2010; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). These policies and the contestations over them shape the debate on urban education today.

Although much has been written about this issue, not enough attention has been paid to ways in which education policies, and their contestations, are intertwined with the radical economic, political, and spatial transformations of cities. Building on the work of critical urban political economy and geography and critical analyses of race, I argue that education is both shaped by and deeply implicated in the processes that are reshaping cities and that have produced and intensified inequality and marginalization. These processes coalesce in the neoliberal restructuring of the city, or neoliberal urbanism, and its racialized dynamics (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). In *The New Political Economy of Urban Education*, I look particularly to Chicago as a laboratory for the articulation of education policy and the contested political and economic dynamics of neoliberal urbanism.

### *Neoliberal Urbanism and Race*

[C]ities (including their suburban peripheries) have become increasingly important geographical targets and institutional laboratories for a variety of neoliberal policy experiments, from place-marketing and local boosterism, enterprise zones, tax abatements, urban development corporations, and public-private partnerships to workfare policies, property redevelopment schemes, new strategies of social control, policing and surveillance and a host of other institutional modifications within the local state apparatus. The overarching goal of such experiments is to mobilize city space as an arena both for market-oriented economic growth and for elite consumption practices.

The manifestations of destructively creative neoliberalization are evident across the urban landscape: the razing of lower income neighborhoods to make way for speculative development; the extension of market rents and housing vouchers; the increased reliance by municipalities on instruments of private finance; the privatization of schools; the administration of workfare programs; the mobilization of entrepreneurial discourses emphasizing reinvestment and rejuvenation; and so forth. (Peck, Brenner & Theodore, 2008)

The neoliberal city is an entrepreneurial city driven by market ideologies and the regulatory power of global finance. This is so not only for “global cities,” such as New York, London, and Chicago, but for economically devastated urban centers such as post-Katrina New Orleans and Detroit and smaller cities across the United States. As Peck, Brenner, and Theodore (2008) describe, cities are laboratories for neoliberal economic and social experiments and their attendant polarities of wealth and poverty, centrality and marginality that characterize U.S. society as a whole.

These contrasts, especially sharp since the deep recession of 2008, are on display in wealthy gated communities and policed low-income African American and Latina/o areas, glittering downtowns and disinvested working class neighborhoods, and elite consumers juxtaposed with a new low-wage workforce (primarily women, people of color, and immigrants) and the permanently unemployed (particularly African American males and displaced older workers). Cities are key sites for flexible, unregulated labor, privatization of public infrastructure (e.g., roads, bridges, parks, schools, hospitals), cuts in social welfare, and neoliberal forms of governance. Neoliberal city governments make policy decisions based on satisfying investors and real estate developers and promoting growth in corporate investment and elite consumption (high-end housing, retail, and leisure). They rely on property and real estate taxes and debt financing. Bond rating agencies such as Standard & Poor’s, the gatekeepers of global capital markets, have become the institutional regulators of city governments as municipal debt (in the form of bonds and municipal securities) is traded in the global financial markets (Hackworth, 2007). The new logic of urban government is: Anything that hurts investment is “bad” for bond ratings and thus “bad” urban policy.

The enduring history of racism has been pivotal to the neoliberal agenda (Wilson, 2007). Conditions for neoliberal urban restructuring were set by racial segregation of cities and Post World War II policies that led to White flight to suburbs, disinvestment in “inner cities,” and urban decline. In turn, neoliberal policy has intensified structural inequality based on race. While some people of color gained greater access to education and employment, and a few amassed wealth in the boom years of the 1990s, the vast majority bore the brunt of deindustrialization, cuts in social welfare, attacks on unions, and intensified policing. Racial inequality in income is greater today than 40 years ago, and criminalization and mass incarceration of African Americans and Latinas/os afflicts low-income urban neighborhoods, especially children.

Ideologically, racism is the subtext for insistence on “personal responsibility” and ending “dependency” on the state. Constructing people of color as the undeserving poor (lazy, pathological, and welfare dependent) provides a rationale to restructure or eliminate government-funded social programs and to discredit social welfare (Katz, 1989). The cultural politics of race provide the ideological

framework to privatize urban public institutions, including schools. In particular, public institutions identified with the “inner city”—housing, schools, hospitals—are pathologized by a racially coded discourse of failure and dysfunctionality that legitimates their dismantling and/or privatization. This racialized logic has justified the wholesale displacement and relocation of thousands of public housing residents and closing their schools (Bennett, Smith & Wright, 2006; Lipman, 2011; Greenbaum, 2006). Based on the logic of “deconcentrating poverty,” people have been dispersed and relocated, without self-determination, while their neighborhoods are redeveloped for a new class of residents (Imbroscio, 2008). It is these urban conditions that have given rise to demands for affordable housing, anti-eviction campaigns, and campaigns to defend public clinics.

### *Neoliberal Urbanism, School Closings, and Gentrification*

I argue that urban education is shaped by, and implicated in, the contested economic and social dynamics that are reshaping cities. Gentrification and the policy to close “failing” neighborhood schools is a clear case (Greenlee, Hudspeth, Lipman, Smith, & Smith, 2008). Gentrification (replacement of working class housing with housing for the more affluent) is a pivotal sector in urban economies (Smith, 2002). Reliance on property and real estate taxes to fund public services and to collateralize municipal bonds makes cities dependent on, and active subsidizers of, the real estate market. Gentrification also drives displacement, shortage of affordable housing, homelessness, and exclusion of working-class and low-income people from the city itself (Hackworth, 2007). Policies to close schools are implicated in the gentrification process. Schools are community anchors, particularly in disinvested communities facing loss of affordable housing, foreclosures, lack of jobs and public services, and overall destabilization. Policies that destabilize schools undermine this important role, particularly as the economic crisis further threatens working-class and low-income students and families. Closing neighborhood schools is a key lever pushing out low-income people. The schools that replace them are refurbished and re-branded to attract a new clientele—stripped of their associations with the low-income communities that were displaced.

In Chicago, Philadelphia, New Orleans, Detroit, and other cities strategies to close neighborhood schools are integral to plans for mega-real estate development projects (Buras, Randels, Salaam, & Students at the Center, 2010; Cucciara, 2008; Pedroni, 2011). Chicago’s Renaissance 2010 plan to close 60–70 neighborhood schools is an example. Planners (city officials in partnership with corporate partners) targeted the first stage of Renaissance 2010 to the African American Bronzeville area where thousands of units of public housing were demolished to make way for a government-subsidized private development of primarily middle-class and high-end housing (Lipman, 2011). New schools were an explicit ele-

ment of redeveloping the area. Rationales to gentrify neighborhoods and close schools are also linked discursively. The pathologization of disinvested low-income African American and Latina/o communities as “gang infested, bad neighborhoods” echoes the pathologization of their schools as “dysfunctional” and having a “culture of failure.” This is paired with the regenerative discourse of gentrification as “rebirth”—minus the people who have lived there. Demonization and deficit discourses attached to young people of color are part of the coercive culture of too many urban schools and low-level academic tracks and are deeply intertwined with the demonization of their communities.

Just as being uprooted from one’s home and neighborhood tears apart the web of human connections that constitute communities and ground lives, so does closing schools that have anchored communities. These schools might have been provided the resources and support to improve. Some have symbolized African American communities’ strength, endurance, and intellectual and cultural achievements. The decision to close schools without community participation is plainly coercive, and racist, and has evoked a storm of protest in many cities. The psychic trauma and insecurity that is the “collateral damage” of these policies (Lipman, Person, & Kenwood Oakland Community Organization, 2007) reverberates in children’s educational experiences and life chances. In urban school districts today, any effort to address educational inequity is frustrated by this reality. This is why opposition to school closings and demands for community voice in school improvement are emerging as a new civil rights struggle, as reflected in the Journey for Justice, a national campaign against school closings led by parents and students from 19 cities (see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HloQUibFREo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HloQUibFREo)).

From the standpoint of equity, the wave of school closings has been devastating, leading parents and community organizations to propose models of community-driven school transformation as an alternative to closing schools. Since 2001, the Chicago Board of Education has closed, consolidated, or turned around (fired all adults and turned over schools to an outside operator) 105 schools. Eighty eight percent of the affected students are African American, and schools with more than 99% students of color have been the primary target (Caref, Hains, Hilgendorf, Jankov, & Russell, 2012). Many experienced years of disinvestment, loss of staff and programs, test-driven narrowed curriculum, and a revolving door of failed top-down mandates, programs, and supervisors (Chicago Teachers Union, 2012; Gutierrez & Lipman, 2012; Lipman, 2004). In Chicago, school closings have led to spikes in violence and 80% of elementary students from closed schools were transferred to schools no better than the ones they left (Gwynne & de la Torre, 2009). During this period, racial gaps in achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress have widened citywide. School closings and turnarounds also result in disproportionate loss of experienced African American teachers (Caref et al., 2012) even as increasing the proportion of

teachers of color is known to be an important aspect of furthering equitable and culturally relevant education.

*Neoliberal Urbanism, Education Markets, and Corporate School Reform*

Turning over public goods and public services to the market is the dogma of neoliberal urban governance. On the assumption that the private sector is more efficient and productive than the public sector, city governments outsource public services to private operators, often eliminating public sector unions in the process. Selling off public assets is a key source of city revenue, and privatization has escalated with the economic recession and budget shortfalls faced by over-leveraged city governments. Under Mayor Richard M. Daley, Chicago privatized bridges, parking meters, public parking garages, schools, hospitals, and public housing. The city also outsourced trash pick-up service and some police functions to private companies and privatized parking at O'Hare airport, city parking enforcement, street resurfacing, engineering, purchasing, vehicle towing, and delinquent tax collections. Education is a key arena of urban privatization with charter schools, vouchers, and privatization of education services constituting a huge investment opportunity (Burch, 2009; Saltman, 2010). Backed by Gates, Walton, and other venture philanthropies, charter schools have become the central vehicle to open up public education to the market and to weaken teachers unions. Although in the early 1990s charter schools were developed as laboratories for educational innovation and teacher and community control, the charter school strategy has been exploited as the pathway to education markets and rearticulated to the interests of education entrepreneurs, venture philanthropists, investors, and corporate-style charter school chains. While charter expansion is national, the focus is urban school districts where disinvested, inequitable, and unresponsive public schools are fertile territory for education markets. In Chicago, many elementary students have limited access to physical education, arts, library/media instruction, science laboratories, computer science, and world language classes; 160 Chicago public elementary schools do not have libraries (Chicago Teachers Union, 2012)—most are in low-income neighborhoods of color. At the same time, charter schools are subsidized by corporate philanthropies and, in some instances, the state. Under Chicago's market-based Renaissance 2010, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) closed over 100 public schools and opened 100 charter schools plus a number of selective and magnet schools. The goal is to make one-third of the district charter.

In the urban change/regeneration discourse there is no alternative to market-driven restructuring of schools, housing, neighborhoods, and downtowns. As Renaissance 2010 rolled out in 2004, Chicago's mayor-appointed School Board President (a real estate developer) characterized opposing parents as people "who don't want change." President Obama evoked this trope when he contended criti-

cism of Race to the Top “reflects a general resistance to change. We get comfortable with the status quo” (Obama, 2010). In the face of an historically compounded “education debt” owed African American students (Ladson-Billings, 2006), neoliberal policies become the only option to “fix” urban schools, co-opting the discourse of “change” and “reform” to contain debate about the kind of change needed and who should participate. However, research indicates charter schools tend to exclude “difficult” students (Miron, Urschel & Saxton, 2011), reinforce inequality (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley & Wang, 2010), are mostly non-union, and have high teacher turnover and more inexperienced teachers (Caref et al., 2012). The experience of this reality is beginning to take the shine off charter schools, yet a public/private “portfolio” of schools is taken for granted in urban districts.

The contention over education markets and other aspects of corporate education reform is about more than schools. It is about reshaping identities of students, parents, and teachers and how we envision society and our participation in it. The post-World War II period of (limited) social welfare framed people as “citizens” with civil rights and the state as responsible for a level of social wellbeing. Although women, people of color, non-English speakers, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities, and so on had to fight for inclusion, there were grounds to extend civil rights and economic justice. Claims could legitimately be made on the state to better our social condition. In the neoliberal social imaginary, rather than “citizens” with rights, people are “empowered” as individual consumers in the marketplace of schools, healthcare, individual retirement accounts, and more. One improves one’s situation by becoming an “entrepreneur of oneself,” cultivating the image and resume that enhances one’s competitive position in the marketplace of “human capital.” Schooling is organized around productivity (high test scores) and preparing a globally competitive workforce, not human development and social responsibility. Schools are to be run like businesses, teachers treated as employees, education as a product, and school leaders as managers (increasingly recruited from the business world by the Broad Foundation’s corporate school leadership institute).

The contradictions generated by closing public schools and degrading teaching and learning have given birth to resistance nationally and to a new anti-neoliberal, equity-centered “social movement unionism” in Chicago. It was these contradictions that coalesced in the Chicago teachers’ strike of 2012, which was about much more than wages and benefits (the only demands the union could officially strike over). Teachers had had enough of disrespect, test-prep curriculum, school closings, and education inequity. And so had parents and students. Picket lines at schools and mass rallies of over 30,000 that took over downtown Chicago were joined by parents and students demanding art, music, school counselors, psychologists, no school closings, and an end to charter school expansion. The

connections between an inequitable and privatized city and an inequitable, privatized school system are quite clear.

### *Neoliberal Urbanism and Equitable Mathematics Education*

The contested space of neoliberal urbanism is the context within which efforts to enact equitable and socially just mathematics unfolds. Curricular and pedagogical reforms have to contend with not only broader education policies but also the raced, classed, and gendered economic, social, and spatial effects of actions to remake the city with which they are intertwined. I am not a mathematics educator, so I defer to mathematics education researchers and practitioners to elaborate the implications for mathematics education in urban schools. But I would like to end with a couple suggestions.

First, as the city becomes more inequitable, more unliveable for those at the bottom of the economic and racial hierarchy, the conditions of poverty and insecurity and violence faced by so many students acutely affect urban schools, broadening the need to pursue equity beyond curriculum and pedagogy to issues of poverty and housing and healthcare and justice. The intertwining of education and urban policy requires us to take a “critical policy scholarship” approach, to think beyond our fields, and to “connect the dots” between what is happening in mathematics reform and larger economic and social agendas. This calls for mathematics education researchers, faculty, and practitioners to engage the literature on the broader urban context and to examine how processes of neoliberal urbanism are unfolding in specific cities and their implications for public education, and mathematics education specifically.

Second, we have to ask, what is the relationship between specific mathematics education policies and “reforms” and broader structural and social changes in the city. Is access for some students to more challenging curricula and more funding for mathematics education actually a move toward greater equity? To take an example discussed by Gutstein (2010) in this journal, the emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education and the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CSSI) is driven by U.S. economic competitiveness goals. Urban school districts support this agenda as part of marketing the city, through, for example, specialized math-science academies. But Gutstein points to inherent inequities in this agenda in the context of a highly stratified and racialized labor force in which low-wage, low-skilled labor is the largest growing sector. This labor stratification and the growth of low-wage jobs is a central aspect of the economic and social inequalities of the city. Moreover, he argues the emphasis on STEM and CSSI runs counter to a liberatory education that is mathematically rich and rigorous and helps students use mathematics to think critically about the issues of inequality and injustice that plague the city. In my opinion, it is this sort of approach—connecting urban conditions, broad social and educa-

tional policy, and what is actually taught in schools—that is needed in mathematics education research, teacher preparation, and practice.

Finally, as public schools are closed, urban school systems are turned into “portfolio” districts, and “productivity” is the end goal of schooling, the space to discuss equity in public education is narrowed. Parents are positioned as shoppers in an educational marketplace rather than members of society who deserve a quality, relevant education in their neighborhood and need to work collectively to realize it. Teachers are subjected to the competitive pressures of performance pay for productivity gains (raising achievement), fear of school closings, and the expansion of non-union charter schools. On the other hand, the contradictions of neoliberalism and the emergent social movements they are engendering, create an opportunity for a more robust, broader, more *radical* (going to the root) struggle for educational equity—one that joins socially and culturally relevant, rich mathematics with the defence and transformation of public education itself. This suggests that mathematics educators committed to equity can not afford to stand outside the debate over education markets, marketization of public schools, and movements of parents and teachers to transform, rather than close them. Moreover, it is not possible to separate the kind of urban schools—and the kind of mathematics education—we have from the kind of city we live in. This is an opportunity as well as a challenge for mathematics educators at all levels.

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Urban education and its contexts have changed in powerful ways. Old paradigms are being eclipsed by global forces of privatization and markets and new articulations of race, class, and urban space.Â Table of Contents. 1. Introduction 2. Neoliberal Urbanism and Education Policy 3. Dismantling Public Schools, Displacing African-Americans and Latinos 4. Politics of Mixed-Income Schools and Housing: Moralizing the Poor, Building the Neoliberal City 5. With Cristen Jenkins: Venture Philanthropyâ€”From Government to Governance 6. Choice and Empowermentâ€”The Cultural Politics of Charter Schools 7. Education and the Right to the Cityâ€”Another World is Possible and Necessary. Author(s) Bio.