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A Tale of Three Cities: Defining Urban Schools Within the Context of Varied Geographic Areas

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Abstract

What constitutes an urban school? This question has confounded social researchers and educators who often limit definitions to population data. H. Richard Milner (2012) suggested a framework for defining urban schools that includes population data as well as the racial and social context of schools. This article applied Milner's model to school districts in New York, Nebraska, and New Mexico which exemplified Milner's categories of urban schools: urban intensive, urban emergent, and urban characteristic. Application of the framework to the districts presents a model for teacher educators to deliver two important components of pre-service preparation. First, the model can assist pre-service teachers to challenge their existing perceptions of urban schools. Second, establishing a framework provides teacher educators the opportunity to guide pre-service teachers to view urban schools through a Critical Race Theory lens. Through this lens, pre-service teachers can begin to realize the impact of systemic racism within education.

Keywords: urban education, teachers, social justice

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Introduction

Within the United States, differences between school environments are quite pronounced. From state to state, city to city, town to town, district to district, each school possesses certain qualities and characteristics, creating unique distinctions between and among schools, students, and their surrounding communities. Even within a specified context of urban schools, there can be wide variance in tales or stories of cities and their public schools systems.

Common definitions of urban schools rely on the school's geographic location and the population of the area. When the definition of urban schools moves beyond a pure population model, schools in a wider range of geographic areas can be included in the developing narrative of what constitutes an urban school. As an alternative to using population-only statistics, other definitions of urban schools concentrate on the social context of an area and consider economic, social, and/or educational factors. This type of definition centers on topics often mentioned in discussions of systemic racism. These include factors such as poverty levels of a school's student population, racial and ethnic diversity, low achievement scores, inadequate facilities, or under-qualified teachers.

So while on the surface defining urban schools may seem a simple task, in reality definitions vary dramatically. Definitions of urban schools based solely on census data of the city in which they are located are common yet problematic. Pre-service teachers who hold this definition are limiting their perceptions of urban schools. Perhaps there is a need for teacher educators to clarify and expand the story of urban schools for pre-service teachers.

H. Richard Milner (2012), a leading scholar in the area of urban education, suggests a framework to redefine urban through a new classification of urban school districts, which is based primarily on population but also considers the context of the surrounding community by recognizing systemic social, economic, and academic factors that impact schools. Milner's approach creates a three-tiered categorization of urban districts: urban intensive, urban emergent, and urban characteristic. This broadens the definition of urban schools to incorporate multiple perspectives of what constitutes an urban school.

If the context of urban schools is considered, it is difficult, and perhaps unreasonable, not to consider issues of race. Critical Race Theory recognizes racism and inequality intersect in a manner deeply rooted within American society, including in the nation's schools. For example, within the field of education, Critical Race Theory has been used to frame issues such as "school discipline and hierarchy, tracking, affirmative actions, high-stakes testing, controversies over curriculum and history, and alternative and charter schools" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 6-7).

This article has two aims. The first is to explore Milner's typology of urban intensive, urban emergent, and urban characteristic schools through the examination of three urban areas in the United States. The tale of these three cities provides a framework to classify urban school districts and expands the definition of what pre-service teachers may consider as an urban school. The framework scaffolds information for pre-service teachers and assists them as they learn how to understand the social context of urban schools. This understanding then creates a foundation on which teacher educators can introduce Critical Race Theory to pre-service teachers, which is the second aim of this article.

It is important for pre-service teachers to be guided through an exploration of Critical Race Theory and how issues of race and inequality are manifested in urban schools. This understanding is critical for both pre-service teachers and their future students because without it, the “lack of shared understanding, definition, and language usage make it difficult for us to advance the work necessary to improve the life experiences and chances of students” (Milner 2012, p. 560-61).

Literature Review

Urban Schools

Urban schools are often characterized by their large bureaucratic administrations, poor facilities, outdated textbooks and technology, location in segregated neighborhoods which are in physical decline, teaching staffs with high turnover rates, and students with fragile family structures and who are influenced by negative youth subcultures (Chou & Tozer, 2008; Horng, 2005; Hudley, 2013). The leadership needed to address the above concerns often lacks stability as urban school superintendents tend to have very short tenures and are working within systems increasingly influenced by mayoral or state control (Will, 2014; Zubrzycki, 2013).

For decades, Jonathan Kozol has vividly documented how the education poor urban students receive in America’s public schools is demonstrably insufficient to make them competitive with their more advantaged, middle and upper income peers (Kozol, 1991, 1995, & 2005). Students and teachers in urban schools have greater challenges to overcome in a number of areas compared to their non-urban counterparts, even when the higher concentration of poverty in urban schools is considered. For example, studies on school experiences combining location and poverty reveal:

- Urban schools had larger enrollments, on average, than suburban or rural schools at both the elementary and secondary levels.
- Urban teachers had fewer resources available to them and less control over their curriculum than teachers in other locations, as did teachers in urban high poverty schools compared with those in rural high poverty schools. (National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d.).

Factors such as poverty, parental education, poor housing, access to healthcare, and teacher quality all play a role in a child's learning experiences (Carter & Welner, 2013; Ravitch, 2013). Within in the context of an urban setting, these challenges have the potential to “cast a long shadow over children’s life-trajectories” (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2014, p. 1). This is clearly a complex situation, extending far beyond classroom learning environments and including multifaceted societal issues.

Defining urban schools is not an easy undertaking, even for researchers who study the socio-economic and educational context of urban schools, statisticians who focus on urban population figures, or those attempting to combine an urban school’s broad cultural context with census data (Jacob, 2008; Milner, 2012; Russo, 2004; Watson, 2011). While there are divergent perspectives of what constitutes an urban school, there is agreement that pre-service teachers, if they are to become effective educators, must understand the cultural context in which their students live and learn in these schools. (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2008; Nieto, 2010). After all, “teaching takes place not only in classrooms. It takes place in schools and communities. ...How teachers think about those contexts creates an environment for thinking about teaching” (Ladson-Billings, 2008, p. 163).

Perceptions of Pre-service Teachers

Teacher educators are tasked with developing not only the knowledge and skills, but also the dispositions of pre-service teachers. Dispositions consist of beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of pre-service teachers. Teacher educators are thus responsible to guide pre-service teachers as they shape accurate perceptions of schools and their future students (Freedman, 2008; Simonds, Lippert, Hunt, Angell, & Moore, 2008).

One possible approach for teacher educators to meet this responsibility is to guide pre-service teachers as they filter their existing perceptions of the diverse students found in urban schools. This is a particularly important approach if pre-service teachers have backgrounds dissimilar to those of their future students. (Landsman & Lewis, 2011).

Influencing the perceptions of urban schools held by pre-service teachers is a significant undertaking given the striking demographic differences between pre-service teachers and urban students. Despite indication the future demand for teachers will be greatest in urban schools with diverse student populations (Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, 2010), the majority of pre-service teachers are white, middle class, and from rural or suburban backgrounds (Hampton, Peng, & Ann, 2008; Landsman & Lewis, 2011; Valentín, 2006). Challenges resulting from demographic differences between pre-service teachers and urban students are compounded as many pre-service teachers lack confidence in their ability to teach in urban schools, particularly to teach students from diverse backgrounds (Burstein, Czech, Kretschmer, Lombardi, & Smith, 2009; Desimone, Bartlett, Gitomer, Mohsin, Pottinger, & Wallace, 2013; Whitney, Golez, Nagel, & Nieto, 2002).

As a result, race and class are two important social constructs for teacher educators to address as they prepare pre-service teachers who are likely to teach in urban schools. It is essential for pre-service teachers, most of whom are white and middle class, to realize the

context of many schools includes segregation and inequities based on race, ethnicity, and class (Allen, 2004). This is a difficult task for teacher educators as research suggests non-minority pre-service teachers may resist pedagogies addressing inequalities if they perceive themselves as implicated in the systems causing oppression for others (de Freitas & McAuley, 2008; Hampton et al., 2008).

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory emerged in the 1980s as the Civil Rights Movement in the United States began to stagnate. At that time, scholars such as Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado sought ways to challenge covert forms of ingrained institutional racism in social structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Milner, 2008; Ortiz & Jani, 2010). In 1994, Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate first applied Critical Race Theory to examine systemic racism as a “salient factor” in the field of education (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006, p. 4).

Since Ladson-Billings and Tate’s introduction of Critical Race Theory to the field of education, others have suggested it be used as a tool to surface issues of race for pre-service teachers since it provides a lens to examine individual, school, and district policies and practices (Milner, 2008; Vaught, 2008). When teacher education programs encourage pre-service teachers to reflect on the “complexities of race in the teaching and learning process” future teachers are more likely to become racially aware and sensitive (Milner 2003, p. 193). Critical Race Theory may further assist pre-service teachers to view the challenges and inequalities faced by schools with high numbers of racial minorities as a “logical and predictable result of a racialized society” (Ladson-Billings & Tate 2006, p. 11).

Applying Critical Race Theory to Milner’s framework of urban schools leads to a discussion of some challenges and inequalities faced by cities across the country. In the largest

cities and smallest towns, racism and stereotypes associated with urban schools are a reality. Examining the needs and challenges of these urban public schools through the lens of Critical Race Theory provides a clear picture of the current educational experiences for many urban youth. Equally important, this examination poses a challenge to pre-service teachers who will instruct in these settings to remain balanced in their perceptions and perspectives of the students, schools, and communities in which they teach.

Two of the six tenets of Critical Race Theory as outlined by DeCuir and Dixson (2004), counter-storytelling and racial realism, are examined here. Both constructs have direct implications within the field of education.

Within Critical Race Theory, “counter-storytelling is a means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27). Stereotypical representations of urban schools and urban students abound (Kincheloe, 2010). Presenting multifaceted stories of urban schools is one method to dispel the social constructs ~~that~~ contributing to these stereotypes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). This is important for pre-service teachers who may be particularly “vulnerable to the social representations” of urban settings (Kincheloe, 2010, p. 11).

Racial realism asserts issues related to race and racism are significant, permanent, and pervasive in the United States and in American public schools (Bell, 1992). Two commonly cited examples of educational racism are the over-representation of racial minorities in special education programs (Harry & Klinger, 2014) and discipline referrals (Skiba, et al., 2011).

Urban schools, which enroll high numbers of students who identify as racial minorities, are challenged in many ways. Funding, resources, as well as systemic racism, all contribute to an inequality clearly evident among urban school environments. Yet, pre-service teachers must

realize there is no single definition of an urban school, as one definition limits the scope of understanding these challenges. To stereotype all urban schools can be a disservice further marginalizing the voice of urban students and teachers and leads to a narrowed single story of urban schools and the students who attend them.

A Framework to Broaden the Definition of Urban Schools

Milner (2012) provides a framework to deconstruct the often ambiguous and at times conflicting definitions of urban schools by creating three comprehensive categories recognizing the multiple aspects common to urban schools. He considers the population of a city as well as the socio-economic, racial, cultural, and academic context of the location.

The most widely recognized category of urban schools, those Milner termed as urban intensive, refers to districts located in large cities with populations over one million.

Demographic data indicate these densely populated urban areas are home to a large number of minority and immigrant children as well as children who live in poverty (U.S. Census, 2012).

Milner's second category of schools, urban emergent districts, are located in cities with fewer than one million residents. While these schools differ from urban intensive districts in that their population base is smaller, they mirror the diversity in the student demographics found in urban intensive districts.

Milner's third category of urban schools, urban characteristic schools, are located in areas that many people would not consider to be urban. In fact, they may be located in suburban or rural areas with relatively low populations. However, like urban intensive and urban emergent districts, they are also experiencing the same demographic "shifts and realities seen in much larger districts" (Howard & Milner 2014, p. 202). These trends include increased racial, linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic diversity in their student enrollments.

By expanding the definition to include urban emergent and characteristic schools, the model underscores the value for pre-service teachers to consider why understanding urban schools is important (Howard & Milner, 2014). Milner's categorizations broaden the definition of urban schools and provide a scaffold teacher educators can use to help pre-service teachers gain a more comprehensive understanding of the context of urban schools - a context that often includes race and poverty.

If pre-service teachers are to develop into effective urban educators, it is crucial for them to "acquire the essential knowledge, skills and dispositions that are uniquely situated for working in urban schools" (Howard & Milner 2014, p. 200). This includes gaining a "deep understanding of students of color and in poverty as individuals with complex up-bringsings and life circumstances" (Abbate-Vaughn, Frechon, & Wright 2010, p. 190). Once this foundation is established, pre-service teachers are then poised to develop skills which are critical to urban settings such as the ability to: 1) build effective relationships with students; 2) connect classroom content with the day-to-day experiences of urban students; 3) communicate with students and families in a culturally responsive manner; and 4) counter the pervasive stereotypes embedded in educational systems (Abbate-Vaughn, Frechon, & Wright, 2010).

Intersecting Milner's Framework, Critical Race Theory, and Pre-service Teacher Perceptions

To illustrate how teacher educators might guide pre-service teachers understand the context of urban schools, Milner's urban school categorization is applied to three public school districts in the United States. The districts are located in three cities: New York City, New York; Omaha, Nebraska; and Farmington, New Mexico.

Each district was intentionally chosen because it represents one of Milner's three urban school categories. Even though the enrollment sizes of the districts are quite varied, each district is contextualized as urban by applying Milner's urban categorizations. Through this contextualization, the definition of urban schools moves beyond enrollment size as the single defining factor. When the categorizations are intersected with contextual factors such as race and socio-economic status a more complex definition of urban schools emerges. This intersection also provides an opportunity for pre-service teachers to reconsider their own perceptions of urban schools as well as the long-ingrained and often unrecognized racial and social inequities existing in these schools. Critical Race Theory can frame their process of reconsideration as Milner's categories reveal the pervasiveness of racism and classism and the impact of these on the perceptions of schools.

The populations of the three cities are quite different from one another. New York City is the largest city in the United States and anchors a number of other large eastern seaboard cities such as Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington DC. Omaha, is considered urban by those who live in the surrounding region which is dominated by agriculture. It ranks 59th in US metropolitan statistical areas (US Census Bureau, 2012). Farmington is located in the desert southwestern region of the United States and is not considered a metropolitan statistical area by the US Census Bureau (2012).

The public school districts within the three cities also differ in size. New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) is the largest public school district in the United States, exceeding the next largest district by nearly 400,000 students. Omaha Public Schools (OPS) is in the largest 100 districts in the United States, ranked 97st in student enrollment. Farmington Municipal

Public Schools (FMPS) is not in the top 100 largest school districts in the United States (Sable, Plotts, & Mitchell, 2010).

To demonstrate the importance of Milner's urban school categorization, public school districts in the three cities are examined. Relevant socioeconomic information and population data related to these schools in New York City, Omaha, and Farmington, were drawn from sources and summarized in Table 1. The data includes population statistics as well as contextual information regarding the socio-economic and cultural aspects of the schools. The districts are further contextualized in a brief narrative description.

[Table 1 near here]

NYCPS represent urban intensive schools. Even prior to reviewing Table 1, most pre-service teachers would readily identify NYCPS as an urban school district simply because of the large population of New York City. NYCPS has 1,800 schools and a student population of approximately 1.1 million children. With 43,359 employees, NYCPS is the largest school district in the United States (NCES, n.d.; NYCDE, n.d.). Its origin dates back to 1843. The socio-economic, racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity present in the schools is immense.

Between 2003 and 2013, NYCPS made significant gains in reading and math scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). However, NAEP scores for NYCPS remain below national and state scores (NYCDE, 2013). Five mayoral appointed school chancellors have held this role in the last 10 years (NYCDE, n.d.). Current New York City Mayor, Bill DeBlasio, appointed Chancellor Carmen Farina. Farina's leadership is delegated through 32 community-based superintendents.

NYCPS specifically recruits teachers who are willing to teach in high-need schools, which often have high percentages of students who are from low income neighborhoods, do not

speaking English as their primary language, and/or qualify for special education services.

Specifically schools in “central Brooklyn and the Bronx, are often classified as high-need because of their difficulties in attracting large numbers of applicants” (NYCDE, n.d.).

OPS represent urban emergent schools. The district has been providing education to the children of Omaha, Nebraska for over 150 years. While Omaha is the largest city in Nebraska and one of the largest cities in the upper Midwest, it may not immediately come to the mind of a pre-service teacher when referring to urban schools. OPS educates approximately 50,000 students and employs 3,300 classroom teachers (NCES, n.d.). The student demographics represent a wide variety of racial, socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. It serves Nebraska's largest special education population and features magnet schools in math, performing arts, languages, communications, economics, technology, science, university partnerships, engineering and international studies.

District test scores exceed the national average for large school districts (OPS, n.d.), but OPS scores fall below state averages on the Nebraska State Accountability tests in reading, writing, mathematics, and science (NDE, n.d.). For 15 years, the district was led by the same board-appointed superintendent, John Mackiel. Following Mackiel’s retirement, and a one-year interim superintendent, Mark Evans has served as superintendent since 2013. OPS recruits and employs teachers from all 50 states, as well as teachers from other countries who support the vision of OPS which is to prepare every student, every day to be successful. The teaching staff hold degrees from more than 340 different colleges and universities (OPS, n.d.).

FMPS, in Farmington, New Mexico represent urban characteristic schools. Located in the Four Corners region of the Southwest, the district consists of slightly fewer than 11,000 students and 1,200 staff members (NCES, n.d.). Few pre-service teachers may consider FMS an

urban school district if only population and district enrollment were considered. Even within New Mexico, it is not the largest school district in the state but does fall in the top ten in terms of student enrollment (NMPED, n.d.). However, as the information in Table 1 illustrates, the racial, socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of FMPS certainly follows a similar pattern to urban intensive and urban emergent districts.

FMPS scores on the 2012-2013 New Mexico Standards-Based Assessments were consistent with those reported by districts throughout the state, with the exception of FMPS mathematics scores in grades 6 through 8 which were substantially lower than state averages (Great Schools, n.d.). District leadership has remained stable for over 10 years. The current superintendent, Janel Ryan, has been in office since 2004 (FMPS, n.d.).

In the above examples, NYCPS, OPS, and FMPS exemplify Milner's three categories of schools. These specific examples illustrate to pre-service teachers and teacher educators the broadening nature of what is considered an urban district. Adding race and class further defines urban. Additionally, presenting the issue of systemic racism allows pre-service teachers to create a comprehensive picture, which may enhance their effectiveness in an urban classroom. Keleher and Johnson (2001) described this type of racism as "...subtle, unintentional and invisible, but always potent" (p. 24). If systemic racism is pervasive yet invisible, it is essential for teacher educators to guide pre-service teachers to become more aware, which may increase their readiness and confidence to teach students in urban settings.

Implications for Pre-service Teachers and Teacher Educators

If pre-service teachers and teacher educators limit their view of urban schools only to urban intensive districts, they will fail to prepare themselves or the students enrolled in their programs to work in a variety of urban schools. As a result, they may minimize the importance

of understanding social context and rather direct their efforts to teach content knowledge and/or pedagogical practices.

Likewise, pre-service teachers may fall prey to stereotypes of urban schools and discount efforts or opportunities to learn more about teaching students from diverse racial, social, cultural, linguistic, or economic backgrounds. “It is common for teachers to report that they wish to teach in rural or suburban districts, and these teachers believe their decision shields them from challenges teachers face in urban emergent or urban intensive environments” (Howard & Milner 2014, p. 202).

Counteracting these common perceptions and stereotypes held by pre-service teachers should become a central task within preparation programs. Teacher educators must realize traditional multicultural educational approaches fall short of addressing systemic racism. Too often preparation programs consider a course on cultural diversity or teaching diverse populations as sufficient preparation for pre-service teachers. Rather, teacher educators must intentionally guide pre-service teachers to the realization that, “understanding the context in which they teach, and questioning their knowledge and assumptions are as important as the mastery of techniques for instructional effectiveness” (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 181).

Expanding the definition of ‘urban’ by reviewing multiple profiles through the counter stories of Critical Race Theory, teacher educators can emphasize the importance of context in coursework and field experiences. This may help pre-service teachers to develop the skills to reach highly diverse groups of students. It also demonstrates the need for teacher education programs to intentionally incorporate the expanded definition of urban into their programs.

Furthermore, racial diversity within the student population is a constant between the three types of urban schools. By examining specific urban settings, teacher educators create the

opportunity to examine racial realism as it relates to varied educational settings. For example, discussions regarding over-representation of racial minority students in special education programs and disciplinary referrals can be framed in terms of the functions or conduct of systems rather than the performance or behavior of individual students. In doing so, pre-service teachers may be less likely to attribute educational challenges to a specific school or to a large inner-city school system and more likely to view these issues through the lens of Critical Race Theory and systemic racism.

Before pre-service teachers can understand urban schools and the students who attend them, they must first be aware of the multiple profiles of urban schools. However, if the complexity of urban schools confounds experts, pre-service teachers are likely to be intimidated by the conflicting nature of information about urban schools. Pre-service teachers may also be particularly vulnerable to accepting stereotypes of urban schools if they do not know how to filter and contextualize their existing information or where to get additional information to broaden their understanding. This is concerning due to the potential for pre-service teachers to develop a *misunderstanding* rather than an *understanding* of urban schools. Misunderstandings may cause them to discount urban schools as future places of employment and be dismissive of attempts by teacher educators to prepare them to work in urban settings.

By definition, “understanding” implies pre-service teachers need the ability to make their “experience intelligible by applying concepts and categories” (“Understanding”, 2014). This can be accomplished within a carefully scaffolded teacher preparation program that: 1) guides pre-service teachers as they acquire knowledge about urban schools; 2) supports multiple experiences within urban school environments; and 3) encourages critical reflection on the impact race and poverty have on the teaching and learning in these settings.

Teacher education programs are likely ineffective in delivering this type of guidance if they rely on a single lecture or class related to urban education to build the knowledge base of pre-service teachers. Nor will one observation or one visit to an urban school provide pre-service teachers adequate experiences. The complexity of urban schools is far too great for this approach to be successful. Rather, teacher preparation programs must create opportunities during which pre-service teachers repeatedly examine and reexamine their current understanding of the context of urban schools.

Conclusion

Milner's framework provides guidance to assist pre-service teachers in developing an understanding of urban schools. Teacher education faculty should consciously provide information representative of a wide range of perspectives regarding urban schools. This should include the demographic, racial, socio-economic, cultural, and educational context of urban schools. If pre-service teachers are encouraged to examine urban schools through the lens of Critical Race Theory, they may begin to understand how deeply racism is embedded in schools and society. Pre-service teachers are then continuously revising their existing perceptions of schools, teaching, learning, and social context. This allows them to develop an increasingly complex understanding of urban schools.

The complexity of urban schools creates the best of times and the worst of times. Guiding pre-service teachers to understand the multifarious nature of urban schools is challenging. However, in doing so there is great opportunity to prepare future teachers who will apply this awareness to improve the profession as well as the learning in their classrooms.

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