Structural racism and the urban geography of education

Pedro A. Noguera and Julio Angel Alicea
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To understand the challenges facing students in big city school systems, pay close attention to who lives where, who moves in, and who is forced to move out.

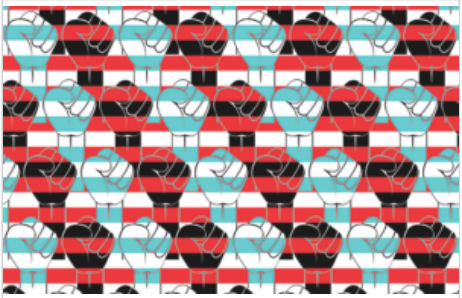
"The American people have this to learn: that where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob, and degrade them, neither person nor property is safe."

– Frederick Douglass, 1886

In the aftermath of the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and the murder of Ahmaud Arbery at the hands of white vigilantes, a movement for racial justice has swept the country. As calls for defunding the police have gained momentum, the movement has also turned its attention to schools. This should come as no surprise: Our society has consistently looked to schools to solve complex social problems. However, more often than not, educators receive little if any guidance on how to do so.

Consider this: If schools had been open when these murders occurred and were being viewed millions of times on social media, would educators have known how to speak to their students about what happened? Would they have been able to use this teachable moment to talk to kids about race and justice in America? Many students are ready for intellectually honest conversations — whether in person or online — about racism in America. But are our educators ready to lead those conversations?

Recognizing that low teacher expectations may be a factor contributing to under-achievement and to unfair discipline practices, many districts have embraced implicit bias training to address problems related to race. However, while bias is a genuine concern (Devine et al., 2012), bias training does nothing to address how, more than 60 years after the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the legacy of racially separate and profoundly unequal schooling endures for millions of American children (Johnson & Nazaryan, 2019). To understand how and why this occurs — and to be prepared to engage in serious conversations about it with their students and colleagues — educators must understand structural racism and what they can do to address it.



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Unlike interpersonal racism and racial bias, which remain pervasive, structural racism is not necessarily premised upon the actions, motivations, or beliefs of individuals. Rather, the term refers to the ways in which the history of racial domination has influenced the organization and structure of society. It is, as sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2017) explains, a form of "racism without racists." Structural racism is evident in public policies that place communities of color at a disadvantage, such as redlining and predatory lending by banks (Rothstein 2017), unequal access to health care, healthy food, and clean water and air (Gee & Ford, 2011; Wallace et al., 2017; Williams & Collins, 2001), school funding policies based on local property taxes (Baker, Di Carlo, & Weber, 2020; Darling-Hammond, 2007), and teacher assignment patterns that result in the least experienced teachers working in the most disadvantaged schools (Fensterwald, 2018).

In recent years, a certain kind of structural racism, related to the ways in which forces such as gentrification and environmental disasters have affected both the physical and social landscape of our cities, has come to have particularly deleterious effects on urban communities and schools. This form of racism must not be left out of the conversation about equity and racial justice in K-12 education.

Race, space, and urban education

Any endeavor to understand the unique needs and challenges of urban education must begin with the understanding that the term *urban* has come to refer not only to a physical location but also a "social or cultural construct used to describe certain people and places" (Noguera, 2003, p. 23). When one considers the "commonsense" use of cousin terms such as "inner-city," "ghetto," "slum," "barrio," or "hood" (p. 23), the pejorative nature of the term becomes clear. This collection of labels undergirds the sociocultural nature of the term, which is tied to the particular history of the "darkening" of American cities.

This darkening resulted from a number of historic changes in how and where people live, including but not limited to the influence of suburbanization/white flight; "great migrations" by Black people moving northward and westward in search of work; court-ordered desegregation of housing and schools, and later, deindustrialization (Haymes, 1995; Wilson, 1987). By the 1980s, most major American cities and other formerly industrial areas around the country became home to a largely non-white and poor population.

While some cities darkened, other cities maintained their "white" spaces. In many cases, relatively wealthy white enclaves are located in close proximity to marginalized communities of color, with boundaries such as freeways, railroad tracks, rivers, and major thoroughfares serving as physical barriers that keep poorer, non-white residents out, while also cutting them off from basic services such as banks, hospitals, grocery stores, and parks. In this way, geographic boundaries and socioeconomic structures reinforce racial/spatial disparities that are so profound that a pair of sociologists referred to the arrangement as "American apartheid" (Massey & Denton, 1993).

Recently, though, many of these urban spaces have experienced rapid change, and the forces at work — gentrification, natural and man-made disasters, and the physical concentration of poverty and its disadvantages — have had especially worrisome effects on the education of children of color.

School closures and gentrification in Chicago

Chicago offers a particularly insidious example of how school closures are inextricably linked to gentrification (Lipman, 2011). Under Mayor Richard Daley's Renaissance 2010 plan, launched in 2004, the city closed a staggering 49 schools, and dozens more were closed under his successor, Rahm Emmanuel (Shedd, 2015). Although the rationale for their closure was that these schools had been designated as "failing," the fact that 88% of the affected students were Black, and that 71% of the schools had a largely Black teaching staff, did not go unnoticed by community activists, who interpreted the move to close the schools as an attack on the local community (Ewing, 2018, p. 5).

Beyond poor performance, a primary justification given for these school closures was that they were under-enrolled. However, sociologist Eve Ewing (2018) connects the closures of schools in Black communities to a dramatic shift in housing policy, which resulted in some of the nation's largest public housing projects being closed in the 1980s and 1990s (overall, the Chicago Housing Authority demolished more than 22,000 units of housing across the city). In turn, this displaced large numbers of low-income Black residents, setting the stage for gentrification in places such as Bronzeville, a historically Black neighborhood on Chicago's South Side.

As Ewing and Pauline Lipman (2011) have described, school closures and the declining availability of public housing were mutually reinforcing. When Bronzeville families were forced to move, local school enrollments fell rapidly. In turn, this was used to justify the closure of schools, and the ensuing shortage of schools was used to justify reductions in public housing. Both scholars also note that school district leaders and city officials insisted that their policies were data driven and race neutral, and they chose to ignore local opposition and dismiss longtime residents' concerns as nothing more than a misguided reaction to change, much like the "not-in-my-backyard" mentality (or "nimbyism") that often arises in communities when newcomers arrive.

Ewing, Lipman, and others (e.g., Shedd, 2015) have described Chicago's housing problem as a "manufactured" crisis, and we believe the description to be apt. While there is ample evidence that many of the city's public housing projects needed improvement in the 1980s and 1990s, local policy makers devised no plan to upgrade and strengthen the housing stock available in the affected communities. Instead, they implemented a strategy known as "accumulation by dispossession"

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(Harvey, 2003) — part of a worldwide trend toward the privatization of public assets, often in the housing sector — that effectively removed a significant portion of the city's Black population and made the space available for purchase by wealthier, whiter residents.

As schools were closed, not only were community ties ruptured, but many students were forced to enroll in schools in other neighborhoods. According to the sociologist Carla Shedd (2015), an immediate result of the closures was that 16,000 children now had to travel at least six miles to get to school (p. 11), which often meant crossing gang boundaries that had been in place for years. Geographer Ruth Gilmore (2007) offers an even starker warning, connecting market-driven social policies (such as efforts to dismantle public housing) to rising levels of violence, which contributes to high rates of "premature death" (p. 28) among members of dispossessed populations. Likewise, Ewing (2018) argues that the loss of a school is often experienced within a community as a kind of "social death." Writing about the school closures in Bronzeville, she found that many families were forced to separate and disperse across the greater Chicago area, an especially harmful outcome given the essential role that kinship networks have long played in ensuring Black survival in the face of oppression (Stack, 1974). The decision to demolish public housing and close nearby schools, Ewing writes, represents nothing less than a "a referendum on the history, legacy, and future of Bronzeville and on the right to [B]lack educational self-determination" (p. 44).

Again, there's no evidence that the "data-driven" decisions made by city officials and school system leaders were animated by personal biases or hatred. The racism here is structural, baked into policies that their advocates believed to be race neutral, but which led to the dispossession of Black residents. A population long described as "disposable," at least once their labor was no longer needed by the formerly thriving manufacturing sector (Wilson, 1987), Chicago's Black poor continue to face an unrelenting — if rooted in structural forces, rather than personal animosity — assault on their homes, hoods, and hopes.

Disasters, natural and human, and the remaking of schools in New Orleans

In a particularly incisive example of "disaster capitalism" (Klein, 2007), policy makers at federal, state, and local levels worked in sync to rework the geography of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005. For charter school advocates in particular, Katrina served as an opportunity to dismantle the existing public school system and replace it almost entirely with charter schools.

One immediate result was the removal of hundreds of Black teachers — historically one of the most stable, middle-class jobs for the city's college-educated Black population. By 2014, more than 100 schools had been shifted from the local district to a state-run Recovery School District (RSD). In the process, all 7,500 teachers and staff in the local district were fired, and 78% of students were enrolled in charter schools (Huff, 2013). Half of the teachers fired have not worked for a public school in the state since, and the percentage of Black teachers in New Orleans dropped from 71% before Katrina to 49% roughly 10 years after (Barrett & Harris, 2015). Interviewed years later, one Black teacher called the decision to redesign the schools the "death of my career" (Mitchell, 2015).

Students also suffered as a result of the reorganization. Not long after the changes began, a group of local parents hired lawyers and filed complaints asserting that their children with special needs were not being adequately served, since the schools were increasingly incentivized to enroll and keep only students who received high scores on standardized tests (Perry et al., 2015). These complaints were eventually supported by a 2010 lawsuit led by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), which found evidence of denied services and protections for students with disabilities (Perry et al., 2015). Five years after the SPLC case, the Louisiana Department of Education agreed to address the systemic issues.

Unquestionably, the transformation of the city's school system also undermined local democratic institutions (including the locally elected school board and the teachers union), yet it was applauded by the Obama administration, with Secretary of Education Arne Duncan declaring the hurricane to be "the best thing to ever happen to schools in New Orleans" (Heitz, 2010). He later apologized for the callous implications of that comment. Overall, though, his statements in the aftermath of the disaster encouraged the large-scale privatization of a large urban and minority-serving school system.

It was not just the public schools that were affected by post-Katrina policies. Entire areas of New Orleans, such as the Lower Ninth Ward, were treated as though they were beyond salvaging. For years, little redevelopment occurred. The hurricane provided a "natural," seemingly race neutral, cover for what amounted to a land grab, transfer of wealth, and the permanent displacement of large numbers of Black residents (Buras, 2011). Considered the "most socially and physically vulnerable" (Lascell & Baumann, 2015, p. 31) neighborhood in the city, the Lower Ninth had long faced conditions reflecting a "'plantation tradition' of racial

domination and selective neglect" (Keegan, 2020, p. 6) — historically, white planters had claimed the highest (and less prone to flooding) ground near the Mississippi River for themselves. And, to avoid school desegregation, they cut themselves off from Black residents even more sharply in the 1960s and 1970s (BondGraham, 2007).

Before Katrina, the Lower Ninth Ward was 97% Black, with 50% of households reporting incomes of less than $20,000 (Lascell & Baumann, 2015). Further, it was boxed in by a combination of levees and railroad tracks, and one-third of residents lacked access to a car with which to drive across the few roads connecting it to other neighborhoods (Lascell & Baumann, 2015). After Katrina, however, housing prices surged by 43%, as the housing stock was transformed from cheap public housing projects to lower-density units, with no plans to provide affordable options for longtime residents (Lascell & Baumann, 2015). As a recent study confirmed, there was a positive association between census tracts damaged by Katrina and those tracts' eventual gentrification (van Holm & Wyczalkowski, 2019).

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Any discussion of recent school reforms in New Orleans ought to take into account these dramatic changes. And yet, some reformers have pointed to increases in test scores and graduation rates at some of the newly created charter schools as proof that their reform strategy has worked (Harris & Larsen, 2019). It's impossible to provide a fair and accurate assessment of K-12 education in New Orleans post-Katrina without addressing the scale and scope of the city's demographic turnover — and many research studies have failed to do so.

In short, post-Katrina reforms have transmogrified New Orleans into an entirely different place altogether. For one thing, it has become significantly more affluent. The proportion of the city's residents living in extreme poverty decreased by 9% during the post-Katrina years of the Great Recession, from 2007 to 2009, even while other cities saw their poverty rates increase (Berube & Holmes, 2015). Before Katrina, New Orleans had the second highest concentration of poverty of any big city in the U.S.; at the end of the Great Recession, it had the 40th highest concentration of poverty (Berube & Holmes, 2015). That doesn't reflect an improvement in the earnings of long-term residents, however — if poverty rates decreased, it was mainly because large numbers of poor people, including many children who had been enrolled in the public schools, had no choice but to leave the city.

As New Orleans has become wealthier, it has also become significantly whiter. Since Katrina, it has lost 97,000 Black residents (Johnson, 2015), and the population has gone from 67% Black to 60% Black. But it wasn't just the poorest Black residents who left. Because many middle-class residents moved away as well, the Black community experienced declines in average household income, even while the city's average income increased overall. Thus, not only did Black New Orleans suffer the trauma of displacement in the short term (Fussell & Lowe, 2014), but those who stayed also saw a fracturing of heterogenous social networks.

The accumulation of disadvantage in Los Angeles

The drumbeat of education reform has been incessant in urban schools, yet the remedies have more often than not failed to live up to their promise. To understand why so many reform efforts have failed to deliver, we turn to a recent report documenting the state of Black children in Los Angeles County (Noguera et al., 2019). In an effort to explain why Black children continued to perform at lower levels despite district and state reforms, the report documented how conditions outside school — including high rates of homelessness, pollution in the environment, poor nutrition, and food insecurity — interacted with conditions within schools to produce adverse effects among Black children.

The report drew attention to the fact that South Central Los Angeles, a community long underserved and over-policed, also has the city's highest percentages of children with asthma, children who have experienced trauma, and children who have been placed in foster care. This *accumulation of disadvantages* has contributed significantly to pervasive underachievement in local schools.

Although the report focuses exclusively on L.A., it sheds light on the factors influencing the achievement of Black students throughout California and in much of the country. Further, its findings mirror those reported recently by the Social Science Research Council (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2017), which found that the human development index — a combined measure of outcomes related

to health, living standards, and education — tends to be lowest in neighborhoods where Black children reside. That report also found that South Central L.A. had the highest rate of disconnected (not enrolled in school or working) youth in the county, more than double the county average of 11.8% (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2017, p. 13).

Under such conditions — again, an example of structural racism, in which historical trends led to the concentration of poverty, pollutants, homelessness, and other disadvantages in Black neighborhoods — it is hardly surprising that the test scores of Black students would be so low, in spite of school improvement efforts. And yet, many school reformers continue to focus exclusively on what's going on within the schools themselves, failing to ask, *What kinds of place-based, structural changes are needed to improve social and academic outcomes for this group?*

Responding to racism with protest, creativity, and collective agency

Once we recognize that structural racism shapes and reshapes many of our urban environments, with important consequences for children and schools, it becomes easier to talk about these things with our colleagues and students, and to see new possibilities for struggle and resistance. Indeed, countless community activists in Chicago, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and other cities have organized themselves in response to policies that result in the displacement of longtime residents, the closure of schools, and the placement of chemical plants and waste disposal facilities in Black neighborhoods. And while there is no guarantee that such organizing will lead to positive change, it can alter the relationship between the powerful and the powerless.

Because schools operate in a semiautonomous relationship to the state and the economy, the education sector often provides fertile ground for collective action and local agency. Three decades ago, for instance, Martin Carnoy (1994) showed that the greatest strides toward racial equality in American education had been made during and immediately after periods when social movements were most active. Some of that progress (for example, gains in school desegregation and affirmative action) has been reversed, but other important advances (such as Head Start, the National School Lunch Program, and investments in universal preschool) have come to be taken for granted. Collective action made these policy changes possible, and it serves to protect them over time. For those who work in and depend upon urban public schools, the pace of change is often too slow, and the progress achieved through collective action too uneven. But while impatience and frustration are understandable, real possibilities for change do exist.

Although prominent school reform efforts often adopt a race-neutral approach, an explicit commitment to racial justice can help reformers stay focused on critical questions that educators often try to avoid, even though they are key to school improvement. For example, whose cultural background and behavior do teachers and staff take to be "normal," and whose forms of thought and expression do they view as inappropriate? How should staff be prepared to support children who come from communities that face enormous economic and social challenges? And how should teachers be expected to engage with parents and other caretakers whose racial and cultural identities are different from their own?

All too often, education reformers ignore the structural barriers to change. For instance, they ask teachers to boost student test scores, but they offer no guidance as to what to do when those students and their families are struggling to meet basic needs. Or they design and implement improvement plans based on abstract *theories* of school change, without adapting them to the needs and priorities of the particular community. Yet, educators, scholars, and policy makers can learn to pay closer attention to the structural racism affecting the neighborhoods, cities, and towns where they work. When they do so, they are better equipped to help improve the lives of their most vulnerable students, and when those young people ask them to talk about race and social justice in education and society, they are much better prepared to lead that discussion.

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Pedro A. Noguera | Julio Angel Alicea

PEDRO NOGUERA (@PedroANoguera) is the Emery Stoops and Joyce King Stoops Dean of the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles.