EDUCATIONAL EQUITY FOLLOWING THE LARGEST RACE-BASED

SCHOOL DISTRICT MERGER (AND DEMERGER) IN AMERICAN

HISTORY

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Abstract

This paper features a higher education researcher, a charter school founder/leader, and an education philanthropist in conversation about one "place" (Memphis) as they examine the face of educational equity following the largest school district merger in American history. The session will further highlight recent calls for equity research to center "place" as a powerful analytical tool to advance research and practice.

Keywords: Educational equity, school mergers, education in the South

Introduction

This paper includes the voices of a higher education researcher, a charter school founder/leader, and an education philanthropist in conversation about one "place" (Memphis) as they examine the face of educational equity following the largest school district merger in American history. They will further highlight recent calls for equity research to center "place" as a powerful analytical tool to advance research and practice.

This paper is grounded in the social science construct of "place." Rushing (year) states that place is uniquely situated in accumulations of history, culture, meanings, and values. She concludes, "Place is also a site of imagination, constructed through symbolic work" (p. 22). The relevance of Memphis as a place to examine *The Politics of Equity: Navigating a Path for Public Education* has both historical and contemporary underpinnings that provide a powerful framework for the discussion that follows. Memphis has long been considered the economic, cultural, and political engine of the mid-south. At the same time, it has been "typically

marginalized by scholars and underestimated by its own residents" (Rushing, 2009, p. 4). This paradox is just one that is used to understand the power of place and Memphis as a compelling example that has great implications for understanding all public institutions, particularly education.

In addition to the scholarly concept of place and Memphis as an embodiment of this theoretical framework, *Educational Researcher*, one of the key publishers of education scholarship, published an article that further calls for researchers to study the U.S. South (another example of "place"). Authors Morris and Monroe (2009) listed numerous nationally recognized scholars who conduct research on the educational outcomes for Blacks in the U.S.; however, they concluded that "[n]ot much scholarship … focuses explicitly on the U.S. South—historically considered the reservoir of African American culture in the nation as well as the place where most Black people reside—as a significant place to study in developing an understanding of the issue" (p. 22). They further examined the nexus between race and place as critical to understanding public education, indicating the saliency of the south as critical—and neglected—to advancing this understanding.

Three critical themes are identified by these scholars as necessary to navigating future education research on public education, particularly for Black research: 1) The omission of the significance of regional place, 2) reference to the South as an incidental rather than deliberate backdrop to public education, and 3) the need for greater attention to race (Morris and Monroe, 2009, p. 25). This paper takes up the intersectionality of race and place to examine educational equity in the South, particularly Memphis, TN, at a historic moment. It makes historical connections to the American Delta, which is a critically important region for understanding Memphis culture, history, and politics.

The Politics of Southern-Centered Equity and Place

The Civil Rights Project has paid particular attention to the U.S. south in its analysis of equity in education. Reporting on this analysis, the CRP authors conclude, "We have followed the great successes and, in our judgment, the tragic reversals in the region [the South] as integrated schools, flourishing for decades under a court order, now turn back, watching their desegregation efforts dissolved. Separate has never been equal" (Frankenberg, Hawley, Ee, & Orfield, 2017, p. 5). This story serves as an excellent backdrop to Memphis as a place that depicts this sequence.

Memphis occupies an interesting place in understanding the politics of educational equity because of its dynamic and unique story in the historical and contemporary education of Blacks. *Brown v. Board of Education* ended school segregation in the U.S. in May of 1954. At that time, two major school districts operated in Shelby, County, Tennessee: Memphis City Schools, serving students in the city proper, and Shelby County Schools, which served all other students in the county. Both systems operated black schools and white schools. As is true of the rest of the country, these school districts struggled for decades after *Brown* with segregation, desegregation, and resegregation. Kiel concluded of the Memphis context in 2011, "There remained a sense in the community that public education remained very much separate—and that there was a continued racial component to that separation" (p. 788). The evidence supported this sense of separation with 90% of the students in Memphis City Schools being African American while the Shelby County Schools students were predominantly white.

The typical segregation, desegregation, and resegregration story in became a powerful contemporary moment when Memphis City Schools and Shelby County Schools merged in 2013

in what was called a historic merger, the largest of its kind in American history. Only one year

later, in 2014, the suburban, municipal districts that formerly constituted Shelby County Schools

demerged into several small districts. Policymakers asserted the merger and demerger had

nothing to do with race. Conversely, others argued that "[t]he 2014 exodus of six suburban towns

from the newly consolidated Shelby County School System is one of the nation's most egregious

examples of public education splintering into a system of haves and haves not over race and

class" (Bauman, 2017) and that it was "double segregation of race and poverty" (Frankenberg,

Hawley, Ee, & Orfield, 2017). Bauman explains the process succinctly in the following synopsis.

> The massive changes occurred as a result of a series of chess moves that began in 2010
>
> after voters elected a Republican supermajority in Tennessee for the first time in history. Under
>
> the new political climate, Shelby County's mostly white and more affluent suburbs sought to
>
> establish a special school district that could have stopped countywide funding from flowing to
>
> the mostly black and low income Memphis district. In a preemptive strike, the city's school
>
> board surrendered its charter and Memphians voted soon after to consolidate the city and county
>
> districts. The suburbs—frustrated over becoming a partner in a consolidated school system they
>
> didn't vote for—soon convinced the legislature to change a state law allowing them to break
>
> away and form their own districts, which they did.

This moment represents a powerful one in the politics of equity for the South and for the

rest of the country. Keil (2011) notes:

> This consolidation—or unification, as its supporters refer to it—differs markedly from
>
> the desegregation that occurred in *Brown's* wake. Most significantly, it is not the merger
>
> of racially-identifiable systems, but rather the merger of an urban and suburban district—
>
> a distinction that lacks the constitutional prohibition found in race-based segregation. As

a result, the merger will likely not include any affirmative efforts to integrate city and

county students. The desegregation will not be of student populations, but rather of

administrative responsibilities, accountability measures, and funding streams.

…However, even though the integration pursued is not strictly racial, it certainly looks a

lot like the racial desegregation of the past. There remains a clear racial element to the

current debate that leads the language and arguments to echo those made during the era

of racial integration. (p. 789)

As this story of Memphis segregation, desegregation, and resegregation depicts, "We

want to believe segregation is self-curing and solved by time. In fact, it is strong and self-

perpetuating, with divided schools fostering a divided society" (Frankenberg, Hawley, Ee, &

Orfield, 2017, p. 5). This message is the key enduring thought for the politics of equity as across

the country we navigate a path for public education. What is happening in Shelby County is

occurring across the country where approximately "47 cities have seceded from their larger

school districts since 2000." [cite] This growing trend toward school secession is cementing

segregation along socioeconomic and racial lines and exacerbating inequities in public education,

according to EdBuild. While their report states that Memphis is among the worst examples of

how the combination of imbalanced political power, local funding models, and the allowance of

secession is disastrous for children, it has implications for the broader South and the nation at

large.

The original desegregation of Memphis Schools and the contemporary merger/demerger

story are two sides of the same coin. They are both stories of "power, stratification, and

contestation" (Rushing, 2009, p.35) over race, class, and gender. This theoretical framework for

place will be applied to understanding two critical educational priorities shaping the South:

charter schools and the achievement of African American males. These two examples are illustrative of the powerful intersection of place and race in understanding education in the American South. Further, these understandings from the South have influence on the education of Blacks across the United States.

Black and Southern Run Charter Schools and Education Equity

The Mississippi Delta is a unique setting in the U.S. South and in America. Its history is important to understanding American history, American education, and the convoluted story of American justice and injustice ("The American Dilemma" according to Myrdal in 1944), particularly as it pertains to Blacks. This history of the Delta has contemporary implications for being a school principal in this region because of the intersection of place and race. The story of opportunity, justice, and access play out time and again the in the Delta, essentially as an embodiment of the American story. Understanding how deeply rooted educational inequity is in the Delta facilitates understanding education for Blacks in American cities. Rushing (2009) contends that Memphis is physically modern and simultaneously rural in background because it is inhabited by many migrants from the Mississippi Delta. Thus, the mindset, culture, and aspirations of Memphians have deep Delta roots. And these roots influence ideas about education. That is the core of what follows in explicating the lessons of a school leader in the Delta who becomes a charter school founder and principal of a school in Memphis.

Serving as a school principal in the Mississippi Delta left three powerful and indelible lessons for designing a Black, Southern-run, community-based school in Memphis, Tennessee. These three lessons are: (1) Culture is not the most important thing in education; it is everything; (2) Race is the centralizing, defining demographic above other demographics including

socioeconomic, gender, and other factors; and (3) the Disposition to achieve is both inherent and

can be taught. These three lessons are used as organizers to tell the story of starting a charter

school grounded in Black identity, history, and equity.

Culture is Everything in Education in the South

Memphis has a prolific educational context often described as ground zero for

educational reform because of its approach to student testing, teacher evaluation, turnaround

schools, school takeovers, racial climate, local and state policy shifts, and history. One major

story in this context is the increase in charter schools, particularly those run by charter

management operators (imported from various other cities). Few of the charter schools are

locally based, community centered, culturally driven, equity-minded, or African-American led.

Few have improved results producing educational achievement for their students. Most enroll

African-American students. Many have demonized the communities in which the schools reside,

labeling the families and neighborhoods as crime-ridden, poor, and not caring about their

children. These claims are not based in fact and are used to circulate a missionary imagery

around the promises of the imported charter schools. These charter schools are here to save the

children, the families, and the neighborhoods from themselves. The charter operators taking over

and running schools not only have little understanding of the massive assets these neighborhoods

possess and how these assets can contribute to educational achievement, but they also participate

in the denigration of these communities to justify their takeovers. They depend on the power of

their missionary promise and rhetoric to present themselves as turnaround sites. In response to

the data that depicts their inability to turn around schools, stimulate competition across all

schools, model success in operations and success, and save neighborhoods, they often blame the

families, students, and neighborhoods. To these school operators, culture is the problem not an asset. They pathologize the local culture, a mistake that eventually will surface as a key strategic roadblock in sustaining their presence.

Race is the Centralizing, Defining Demographic in the South

A major premise of charter schools is that they drive competition through their successful educational outcomes. The idea is that they will have stunning success quickly (in Memphis within five years), and this in turn will stimulate traditional schools to reform themselves and subsequently perform better, even though nationwide this has not proven to be the result. The African-American principal from a Mississippi Delta school, equipped with the lessons learned as a school leader there, opened an African-American, community-based charter school not only to demonstrate success but also to identify the essential and underground variables sustaining the failures of charter schools to African American students, families, and communities. He understood what many scholars are now reporting: that African American children are enrolled in charter schools "characterized by highly rule-ordered and regulated environments…with rules enforced through continuous streams of reinforcements and penalties" (Goodman, 2013, p. 89.) In fact, these schools are overrun with monitoring and controls, harsh punishments for minor behavior infractions to give the impression of tight control, penalization of children for not self-regulating themselves in choice making, and the blaming of students for not following orders, thus fostering impoverished self-images (Goodman, 2013, p. 93). These instances raise great concern both culturally and racially about charter schools as their roles in neighborhoods become increasing troubling. The promise of competition to stimulate all schools to perform better was driven by corporate theories of competition—African American students

were increasingly being viewed and used for corporate profit. It was clear that the profit of

charter schools was appealing in African American communities. The plans for these corporate

enterprises never mentioned race; however, they all located in Black places and spaces. The

notion of corporate market ideas has not actually stimulated high performing schools in either the

charter or traditional setting. Conversely, not only have schools not performed better, they have

had additional troubling impacts on communities. For example, "Markets have not solved

segregation; they have often made it worse" (Frankenberg, Hawley, Ee, & Orfield, 2017, p. 5).

Further, they have not improved academic achievement but have instead performed worse than

traditional schools.

Beyond re-inscribing segregation, charter schools have also participated in the

neoliberalistic takeover of cities. In the *New Political Economy of Urban Education:*

Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City, Pauline Lipman (2011) explains how

Neoliberalism encompasses various economic and social policies that promote the interests of

venture capitalists and the economic prosperity of the middle class and support the values of

white supremacy (Lipman, 2011). These policies were developed from the idea that capitalism

and its competitive markets are much more efficient and effective than governmental

intervention for the public welfare. The stated assumption is that the corporate class have a better

understanding of how to make the markets work for the public good. As Lipman put it, "private

is good, public is bad."

According to Lipsitz (2011, p. 29), neoliberalism has developed and implemented the

ideals of "White Spatial Imaginary" as the new social norm to "Return" the city to its rightful

owners the (White) middle class: "This is about a broken system of laws that fail to protect the

most vulnerable students. This is the confluence of a school funding system that incentivizes

communities to cordon off wealth and the permissive processes enable them to do just that"

(Bauman, 2017). "The Tennessee legislature rewrote state laws to help wealthy constituents

secede" (EdBuild, 2017), land use policies grant the wealthy the rights to the city for their

benefit, and other neighborhoods are continually marginalized.

The Disposition to Achieve is Both Inherent and Can Be Taught

Lipman describes how venture capitalists accumulate land in prime parts of the city by

preemptively creating the need to fix broken schools, which then leads to creating a fabricated

cry for the market to assist in this dilemma. The simultaneous fix is a combination of charter

schools (using public dollars for private ventures) and land acquisition (using public evacuated

school land for, for example, private enterprises). First the capitalists have to convince the public

that public schools are broken and that those in them have some inherent lack of ability to

achieve, which they can fix and "turn around." They then use tactics such as TIFs [define] as a

public funding source to fund private mixed-income development. The development of land and

the reorganization of area schooling options make this area of the city ripe for reacquisition by

the neoliberals. Lipman identifies how neoliberals create polices and ideals that work in tandem

to reaccumulate land in the city. Invisible urban space accumulation requires the devaluation of

the image/perception of the area schools. In plain view of the public, TIFs and tax increment

financing are implemented to support the acquisition of those spaces. TIFs reallocate funds from

property taxes by freezing the allocations to schools' libraries, parks, and other social goods at

their levels as of the start of the TIF. Typically issued for 23 years, the amount received from

property taxes on these areas remain constant. Any increased tax revenues collected because of

an increase in property values then go into the TIF fund. This fund is used for the development of the area by private developers.

These are two of the "hidden mechanisms" identified by Lipman that neoliberals use to reaccumulate land in the city. As Fiske (2016, p. 230) puts it, "The power of the power-bloc is the power to control its own visibility" to ascribe certain people as unable to achieve in existing schools and unable to perform. Exposing this power play is critical to understanding the role of charter schools in African-American communities driven by operators rather than local African-American interests. The education of African-American children becomes the interest of the power elite rather than of the communities through this neoliberal strategic approach. TIFs are sold to the public under the guise of revitalizing blighted areas. However, TIFs are public/private partnerships created to facilitate market-driven developments that ultimately benefit private interests. Regardless of how they are packaged, TIFs clear the way for the reacquisition of the land by the (White) middle class since these blighted areas are often revitalized, but members of the exiting communities are forced to relocate and seldom return to the revitalized area.

African-American Male Achievement

This section addresses the concerns of a Delta native about the role of philanthropy in the Nation's education imagination (Lipsitz, 2017).

Lipsitz (2017) stated, "We live under a regime that is worse than Plessy, because both law and practice today produce a society that is unapologetically both separate and unequal. This is particularly true for African American males." This quote is excerpted from an interview with Dr. Lipsitz in which he connected Plessy vs Ferguson, the Obama presidency, and the killing of Michael Brown. This section of the paper presents a strategic approach to stimulating an intentional, action producing city-wide education opportunity and equity for African-American

males. It takes up the examination of the various efforts, conversations, and plans that have derived from a city-wide focus to improve the educational opportunities and outcomes for African-American males as a key demographic of education statistics and concerns in Memphis.

The ideology of apartheid lives in the current state of America's public schools. What has to happen to help a vulnerable population succeed? What has to happen to guarantee that success, while neutralizing systemic obstacles that seek to limit the opportunity of that same vulnerable population? To advance racial equity, in any system, is a complicated task. Its advancement, within colorblind education reform, makes it even more difficult when you consider that the language of this reform claims to "help ALL students."

Far-reaching initiatives that guarantee the success of all students have fallen short of doing so. When a reform effort lacks deliberate and intentional approaches to reach the most vulnerable students, this is the result. There exists a hope that progress will develop among vulnerable populations, black students in particular, as a logical corollary. If we are being honest with ourselves, the needs of students of color are being counted under colorblind academic goals because it gains the approval of the predominantly white citizenry.

My father and mother, both Baby Boomers, count themselves as part of the last generation to work in the cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta. The children of sharecroppers, their educational lives, from K-12, were often interrupted by the demands of harvesting and planting the cash crops of the region. To make matters worse, when they were able to attend school, they did so in the most meager of conditions. My mother attended a one room church-school from kindergarten to 6th grade. I remember being told these stories, thinking that my parents and their peers were victims of localized discrimination. As I grew older, I quickly

learned that my parents, and even myself, were the real-time participants of a centuries-old disparity that evolved with each generation.

While much of the discussion in American public education focuses on an achievement gap, in a 2006 address to the American Educational Research Association, Gloria Ladson-Billings proposed that we have an education debt owed to black students. The achievement gap looks at gains (or losses) from year to year. The education debt, however, looks at the "historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society" (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Ladson-Billings points out that, historically, the education debt begins with the forbidding of education for slaves, freedmen's schools designed to create a servant class, black students receiving hand-me-down textbooks, a 4-month school year for rural black students, and black students not experiencing universal secondary schooling until 1968. From an economic standpoint, white students and majority white school districts have usually received greater funding than black students and majority black school districts. Exclusion from the civic process and other decision-making mechanisms (i.e. voting, running for elected office) is the most prevalent example of the sociopolitical debt. Lastly, the moral debt "reflects the disparity between what we know is right and what we actually do" (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Critical to the conversations about African-American achievement is the achievement and opportunities for African-American males. Through the philanthropic voice and often the positional power that is given to philanthropists as knowledgeable and informed, a series of community conversations have occurred focused specifically on education for African-American males. Speakers including Donna Ford, Shown Dove, Ivory Toldson, Shawn Harper, and Christopher Emdin have all spoken in Memphis to stimulate a deep conversation and action to address this "vulnerable population." Each addressed education leaders, elected officials,

community activists, and frequently students. Additionally, each encounter resulted in producing

some ideas of what needs to be done to address the education needs and aspirations of African-

American males.

In addition, the city is building on hosting the COSEBOC conference (sponsored by

School Seed), the Mayor's Inspiring Men of Color Initiative, and the Shelby County African

American Male Initiative 2014 Board Resolution. The following represent some of the

actionable outcomes for Memphis as a result of these considerable efforts. These ideas have been

compiled into a Framework for the Educational Attainment of African American Males in

Memphis. It includes:

- Review the existing literature from the Campaign for Black Male Achievement.
    - *Building a Beloved Community: Strengthening the Field of Black Male Achievement* (published May 2014)
    - *Quantifying Hope: Philanthropic Support for Black Men and Boys* (published 2015)
    - *The Promise of Place* (2015-2016 City Index)
        - Measures the commitment of cities toward black male achievement on a scale from 0-100; Memphis is scored as a 46
- Utilize the African American Male Initiative at Oakland Unified School District as a blueprint.
    - Considered the gold standard for how a school district intentionally and deliberately addresses black male achievement; it has won awards and procured foundation dollars to sustain the work.
- Identify and address our work internally before leading it externally.
    - Align our internal work with black males with the external work around black people in Memphis (Chamber of Commerce, City of Memphis, health systems, etc.).
- Be deliberate and intentional in what we intend to do (like Oakland United School District). Can't be reluctant to say we're helping black males. Let's also look at black males BEYOND a criminal justice lens.
- Lead the movement in Memphis and inspire other entities to follow or join; possibly create and lead a consortium of entities dedicated to black male achievement.
- Name the work (some examples to pull ideas from).
    - Pipeline to Promise (in direct opposition of the school to prison pipeline)
    - Black Male Re-Imagined (change negative perceptions – largely created by local media – of black male students)
    - Black Male Investment (develop institutional practices across the district that support black males)

Creating this knowledge base of theories, thoughts, and practices around equity for Black males is foundational to imagining how the city can move forward systemically and with purpose. This contribution by a philanthropic organization positions them in the conversation as a thought partner in addition to financial supporter of the work.

The following five Recommendations for Advancing Black Male Achievement are being considered.

1. The city needs to make a sustained declaration around this work. How do we get to a place where we are calling out race and gender?
2. Continue to forge strategic partnerships. Make sure this is not a one-off meeting; create an ongoing round-table discussion for black male achievement in Memphis.
3. Invest in the leadership development and sustainability of organizations that are committed to this work.
4. Get maniacal about the data; measure and promote what works. Disaggregate the data to help state the case for why this is important.
5. Sustain the work. This is not a short game; it's a long game. We didn't get to our current state overnight. A termed campaign will not shift the outcomes. Look at this for the long run.

There is, of course, much to learn about and hope for within this work in Memphis. At the same time, the struggle for place, identity, voice, and opportunities for African American Males is a long struggle in the South and in America. Surely advances have been made, and at the same time the marginalization, suppression, and scope of opportunities still need to be challenged. Advances have not overshadowed the enduring societal, systemic, and pernicious impacts on opportunity.

Conclusion

The conceptual framework for "place" is clearly evident as the analytical core of this paper. In particular, Memphis as "place" is powerful to understand in both its historical and contemporary existence. Rushing articulates the Memphis paradoxes centering on identity, power, development, innovation, and traditions. These played out explicitly in the school district merger and demerger, in the play for schools and land, and the struggle for equity for African American boys, youth, and men. It is evident that the stories of Memphis as a place are complicated with disruption and continuity of people, turning points, forward movements, resistance, and stabilization.

Clearly these struggles will continue in Memphis as they will across the country. The South has many advantages it could draw on to face new complex challenges, such as having more Black teachers than any other region of the country, along with a historical understanding of how racial segregation has harmed its communities (Frankenberg, Hawley, Ee, & Orfield, 2017).

The discussion of this paper at the Southern Education Foundation convening on the Politics of Equity Forum will be captured and used to add to this conclusion based on the thoughtful lessons learned and interactive conversations with participants around these key equity issues.

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