

“Urban” Schooling and “Urban” Families: The Role of Context and Place

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Abstract

Conceptualizations of urban context and place in research, practice, and policy are relational, ranging from spatial dimensions to cultural practices of children, families, and communities in metropolitan areas. In this article, we focus on the inherent complexity of these conceptualizations and long-standing debates in education and social science research that label *urban* as a point of both identity and designation. We position urban context itself as a genre of thinking and imagining; challenges complicated in research, scholarship, and policy; practice and pedagogy; and public will and political rhetoric, influencing educational options and spanning issues from poverty to schooling.

Keywords

race, identity, urban, social, urban education, parental involvement

References to urban schools, urban students, and urban families are common in the educational lexicon. They typically denote what was once called the “inner-city” and describe large districts located in metropolitan areas. They are as likely to evoke images of low-income students and families of color (images that disproportionately point to deficits or highlight their cultural and social capital), as to highlight the restrictions to opportunity and access that institutional structures

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and social hierarchies impose (Carter, 2005; Lareau, 2003; Lipman, 2011; Mickelson, 2003). Despite these apparently shared meanings, two persistently awkward questions endure in many educational discussions of schools, children, and families: What do we mean by “urban?” How are the issues of families, schools, and place understood as urban context?

In this article, we focus on these questions and long-standing debates in our field regarding the meaning of urban and its use. Such meanings influence, if not define, how researchers, practitioners, and policymakers address the development, school lives, and well-being of children and their families. We do not challenge the significance of the term, which is used widely and regularly, including by the authors of this article, nor do we offer an alternative, which requires broader agreement of a problem than we argue for in this article. Instead, we examine a core of issues associated with the term, *urban*, highlighting three points: (a) conceptualizations of urban context and place, (b) applications of the term to schools and schooling, and (c) the ways in which the term is acted upon to locate and label the educational and social experiences of families and students.

Throughout this article, we position urban context itself as a genre of thinking and imagining; of challenges complicated in research, scholarship, and policy; of practice and pedagogy; and of public will and political rhetoric, influencing educational options, and spanning issues from poverty to schooling. These issues, we suggest, define urban life across multiple dimensions, from geography to culture, and urban context as location, space, and place. We begin with a commentary on two interrelated concepts for which urban is often the descriptor: context and place.

Conceptualizing Urban Context and Place

Urban context and place are understood largely in relation to definitions of urban areas and the rise of urbanization. Definitions of urban areas are relatively straightforward and are both spatially and structurally grounded. As the product of urbanization, they refer to high-density settings such as cities and contrast with less densely populated or distant settings such as suburbs and rural areas (Knox & McCarthy, 2011). As discussed later in this article, schools were the direct products of urbanization and industrialization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, during which there was an influx of immigrants, decreasing opportunities for work in rural areas, and increasing focus on modernization. Urbanization revised the social, political, and economic landscape of the country as people moved from rural to urban, South to North, and outside the United States to the United States. Historians such as J. D. Anderson (1988) in his text on Blacks’ transitions from slavery to the

urban North during Reconstruction as well as Sugrue (1996, 2008) in his depiction of workers in the changing United States offer compelling accounts of the persistence of inequity and inequality as barriers to overcome and of human tenacity, resistance to change, and acceptance/rejection of difference. They draw stark portraits of the construction and movement between multiple contexts over time; the educational, political, and economic shifts that occurred; and the ways students and families navigated their identity and place. The value assigned to education in a community and the quality of schools located in a neighborhood factored significantly into whether residents decided to stay in cities or move, a pattern that has persisted to the present (Johnson, 2011; Ludwig et al., 2011; Sampson, 2012).

Discussions about urban education and urban schools by their very nature must consider how students and their families grow, think, behave, and enact their identities as well as the inextricability of these identities to local context and to locations within place. Urban context in our analysis is wide and encompasses the attributes associated with large metropolitan areas. It embraces human, cultural, and social denotations that constitute understandings and practices within groups and consider the physical structures associated with these denotations (see also Inman, 2009). It determines, in large part, the pathways for children and families and designates how they move through these pathways, that is, who will do what and when. Place encompasses a range of factors: for example, where people spend most of their time, who and what constitutes the spaces in which they live and are nurtured, what their purposes are for the use or inhabitability of spaces, and how people make sense and create trajectories for themselves and their families within and outside of a given site (Cresswell, 1996; Gadsden, 2014). These issues are important not only to the shifting discourses about life and learning in urban context but also to the structure and composition of urban settings themselves.

As place, urban can refer to neighborhoods or communities or be used interchangeably with complementary concepts such as space (though not to be conflated; Tuan, 1977). Place may be constructed as a synonym for urban context, in which the concept of space becomes a subset of place. The concepts of place and space are uniquely positioned in relationship to conceptualizations of neighborhoods, communities, and urban context. Noting the linkages between place and time, Relph (1976) suggests that by

taking place as a multifaceted phenomenon of experience and examining the various properties of place, such as location, landscape, and personal involvement, some assessment can be made of the degree to which these are essential to our experience and sense of place. (p. 29)

The structure associated with place is described in ideas, experiences, and activities associated with individuals' or groups' sense of space.

For example, urban planners weigh questions of who is likely to occupy and use the spaces they design as much as they wrestle with the structural designs that result from their planning. They focus on the role of place in determining how to organize spaces and are aware of whether spaces within a single place should be designed for different groups of users (e.g., children or unmarried young and older adults without children vs. adults with children) and whether and how spaces are likely to be lived in and interact with local institutions, including schools (Lewis & Neiman, 2009). They consider as well how their planning revises or reshapes neighborhoods, communities, and the individuals within them over time. They determine whether the space facilitates or challenges the needs of potential residents, such as walkability, community engagement, participation, and the general well-being of residents. In short, they question how social and livable communities are formed and sustained and how they are nuanced in broader definitions of neighborhoods.

Johnson (2011), in a comprehensive analysis of theories on place that draw on neighborhood research, describes increased attention to place in relation to school achievement and the achievement gap and its roots in sociological studies, beginning in the 1940s (e.g., Davis, Gardner, & Gardner, 1941; Drake & Cayton, 1945; Whyte, 1943). Many of the subsequent tensions emerged between economic framings of place in which urban has a particular meaning and ecological theories of space and human behavior. Noting problems in opportunity structure and distinguishing the practices of and problems facing schools in urban versus rural settings, he writes, "If the demands of the occupational structure in fact induced schools to perform its sorting function, then rural schools were forced to comply with vastly different structural needs than city schools." He goes on, "Today, we still find that the quality of rural and urban schooling differs in significant ways and, added to that variability, that a relatively higher quality of school is found in suburban areas" (Johnson, 2011, p. 31). His analysis of neighborhoods and their implication in educational opportunity and outcomes is instructive in disentangling ideas about the ecology of learning, the role of families and communities, normative practices associated with the segregation found in urban schools, and the interplay among these factors in relationship to schools as spaces of negotiation and learning (see also Murnane, Singer, Willett, Kemple, & Olsen, 2009; Sampson, Sharkey, & Raudenbush, 2008).

Pointing to the significance of space, Lefebvre (1991) describes it as socially produced and producing, consisting of human mediated signs, symbols, and codes. For example, in postindustrial urban settings, there is spatial ordering and distinctions between what is socially constituted as downtown

and what is socially and economically constituted as marginalized communities. As a result, space may be organized to enable and maintain educational privilege for some students and families but not for others. In other words, the structure of educational inequality is not limited to the place of schooling but includes all social spaces that create educative possibility. The organization and structure of out-of-school resources, institutions, and programs are spatially organized and symbolically accessible to the socially and economically privileged (Dixon-Román, 2012). The political economy of comprehensively conceived education is both constituted by and contributing to the product and process of urban education and differentiates families' capacities to support their children in school and ensure their healthy development.

Urban neighborhoods and communities represent the most proximal examples of urban context and place. Cartographic modeling and the technologies associated with geographic information systems (GIS) provide us with a sense of how people inhabit space and attempt to project future behaviors and practices, that is, whether relatively little to no change occurs in a space. In cartographic modeling, several thematic layers of the same area are produced, processed, and analyzed to understand the everyday lives of people, while GIS focuses on location, form, space, and relationships among objects and people. These new technologies can and do tell us a great deal about the lines that define the physical place where people live, but on their own are not able to differentiate neatly between the concepts of neighborhood and community, both of which provide lenses to understanding the effects of place and the experiences of students and their families.

Urban as Neighborhood and Community

The terms *neighborhoods* and *communities* are used interchangeably and often to refer to context and place, whether in urban metropolitan or suburban areas. Although the definitions are at best variable, community is generally considered a social unit or space with neighborhood implying local communities that are bounded spatially (Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1996), inclusive residential groupings (Suttles, 1972), or geographic boundaries defined by the Census Bureau or local administrative agencies (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002). Research on neighborhoods focuses heavily on families and the ways that family ecologies (i.e., family structure, parenting, and family processes) are affected by the physical and social dimensions of context (Burton & Jarrett, 2000). Although a full analysis of this work is beyond the scope of this article, neighborhoods and communities are seen as one denotation of place with significant implications for child and youth growth and development (see also McWayne, McDermott, Fantuzzo, & Culhane, 2007).

Teasing apart definitions of neighborhood and community is particularly complex where urban blight has occurred, where families may be divided due to risks, and where alliances are fragile. In their work examining neighborhood effects on children's development, Burton, Price-Spratlen, and Spencer (1997) identify four approaches used to conceptualize neighborhood that resonate with discussions of urban settings. They suggest that neighborhoods may be understood: (a) as sites of activity that include sociodemographic factors (e.g., racial mix and poverty levels) and physical quality (e.g., housing availability and housing density), (b) as perception based on individuals' assessments of the quality of a defined space and differing along gender and racial lines and between parent and child (see also Burton & Price-Spratlen, 1999; Garbarino, 1999), (c) as networks focused on interpersonal relationships that are created, and (d) as culture, embracing the symbolic meanings and rituals of daily life (see also E. Anderson, 1990; Fernandez-Kelly, 1994). Burton and her colleagues (1997) also point to relationships between public definitions of neighborhood and the experiences of children and families who constitute them. Jencks and Mayer (1990) similarly make these linkages by identifying five physical, human, or structural factors within a setting that affect children's well-being: (a) neighborhood resources (e.g., community centers), (b) collective socialization (e.g., the availability of adults, mentors, and role models), (c) contagion or epidemic (e.g., the spread of negative behaviors between and among peers), (d) competition for scarce resources, and (e) relative deprivation in which families evaluate their circumstances relative to those of their neighborhoods.

Despite increasing interest in the effects of neighborhoods on children's development, frameworks designed to understand children and families in urban settings continue to focus primarily on problem-based child outcomes rather than on the role that families play in buffering children and adolescents from problems, mediating negative neighborhood influences, or contributing to student achievement (see Burton & Jarrett, 2000; Sharkey & Sampson, 2010). However, an understanding of urban neighborhood is relevant to families' roles in their children's education and schooling and the implications of place (see Keels, 2009). Urban context is defined by borders that restrict families (e.g., families of color, low-income families, immigrant families) to a designated place, determines their access to resources such as schools within the different spaces that constitute place, and monitors their movement within and outside of it (e.g., police cameras in particular urban neighborhoods). Neighborhoods result from a sense of place, and neighborhood inequality and the segregation of urban schools can be considered both products of and producers of the political economy of urban space. They reflect the differential investments by federal policies of urban and suburban settings

(Anyon, 1997). People can be confined ostensibly to a low-income neighborhood by a number of factors stemming from this political economy, including unemployment and limited employability, low literacy, lack of knowledge about opportunities, poor-quality schooling, and poorly resourced schools, to name a few.

Urban as Human and Social Designation

“Urban” as a descriptor does not simply refer to space and place but is also used to refer to the value designation of human beings, their status in the world, and their potential. This designation, at once, creates options and reduces the ways in which students form and are able to revise their identities. The tensions and controversies associated with it are well known to educational researchers, administrators, and faculty members who are often accused of using the term, *urban*, to cast a wide net for all the ills found in inner cities. One example of this may be found in work on low-income fathers of color, often described as urban fathers. Here, urban is used as an umbrella term, designed to capture the conditions to which a subset of low-income men are exposed and that are associated with limited opportunity and social problems in cities and metropolitan areas, once described as inner-city neighborhoods.

The widespread designation of these men as urban reflects the tendency in academic and popular discourse to link urban-related issues with poverty, hardship, crime, incarceration, and a series of harsh life circumstances and negative characteristics. The broad use of the term to denote the range of young fathers who are poor and minority is emblematic of the ways in which descriptions are narrowed to make them more manipulable for research even when they may not capture fully the experiences of diverse populations (see Edin & Nelson, 2013). Is a Black or Latino boy from a middle-income, educated, mother-headed household, and who attends an elite private school a part of our concept of urban (see Kirkland, 2009, 2010; Wilmer & Bloom, 2014)? Is a White girl from a working class family included in our image of urban? Are families whose children are ostensibly successful in schools imagined in our definition of urban? Much like the use of the term *diversity*, *urban* is an expansive and delicate term with a range of meanings and applications.

The remainder of this article considers the ways that the common use of the concept, urban context, presumes a shared understanding of its constituent features—for example, who inhabits urban settings; what counts as contextual within urban spaces; what ways of doing, talking, and acting in the world are associated with urbanicity; and what distinctions of social, cultural,

and contextual are assigned to learning and human development within urban perspective. With this in mind, we focus on (a) broad issues related to schools and schooling in urban context and (b) the role of families and the opportunities available to them and their children. We then offer closing considerations and suggest pathways for future work in the areas examined.

Schools in Urban Context: What Are Our Assumptions and Expectations?

Urban education, the primary intellectual site for discussions about schools, student identities, and families, is one of the most provocative spin-offs of scholarly and public representations of urban contexts (Tyack, 1974). It melds the sense of place, space, and purpose with perennial questions related to access, equity, and experience (see also Horvat & O'Connor, 2006; Noguera, 2003). Moreover, it converts the still shifting parameters of "urban" into an intrinsic part of how we expect students, families, and communities to behave, that is, in our expectations of how they will embrace change, ensure success, or fulfill prophecies of failure. Attention to urban schools is dominated by language that points out student deficits and schools' limitations in creating pathways to student achievement. The problems facing urban schools are typically inscribed in descriptions and language that note students' lower test scores, the low-quality schools they attend, the limited likelihood that they will attend or complete college, and the likelihood that they will struggle with adversity different from and larger in scope and severity than their peers who live elsewhere (Brown, Anfara, & Roney, 2004; Galliher, Rostosky, & Hughes, 2004; Hannaway & Talbert, 1993; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002).

Recent problems in urban school districts such as Philadelphia, Chicago, Camden, and others are examples of the ways in which issues of funding, parent engagement and community support, students' and teachers' school experiences, student achievement, and the political converge to create a "perfect storm." The indictments of these districts are captured not simply in what happens in schools but also in what happens around them and the resources within the neighborhoods, communities, and homes of students and their families. They raise questions about our assumptions about the quality of and potential for these school districts, schools, and the children and families in them and about our expectations as determined by mandates, imperatives, and practices. Issues of accountability, high-stakes testing, and the capacity of schools are intricately connected.

As urban districts are asked to demonstrate their accountability, and their accountability is based largely on student test scores, the question that persists is accountability for and to whom and for what short- or long-term

agendas. In other words, what were the original purposes and goals of the systems and with what potential? Tyack's (1974) analysis of the evolution of urban school systems paints a clear picture of the movement from village school to urban systems, examining the ways in which concepts of community education morphed into single school systems, and by extension revised ideas of place and space. Tyack writes, "to many bureaucrats the ethnic or religious or party loyalties of pluralistic urban groups were irrelevant distractions from the chief task of building a universal, efficient system" (p. 79). The movement toward a single school system was intertwined with the idea of urban, diversity, and pluralism. It was also tied to the realities of race and cultural differences, immigrant status and language, histories, and perceptions of change, issues that continue to dominate contemporary debates and to be positioned as problems to abate.

The increasing significance attached to test scores also fuels assumptions that address the nature of experience and the manipulation of space. They rely on comparative racial models that dwell on the risks to which students are exposed and that ignore or minimize the strengths and cultural support that many bring to the classroom and the act and processes of learning (Gadsden, Artiles, & Davis, 2009; Gutiérrez & Dixon-Román, 2011; Mickelson, 2003; O'Connor, Hill, & Robinson, 2009). We have significantly less information about who the students are, apart from or in relationship to how they utilize the resources available to them to achieve, or how they manage in the midst of real and perceived barriers to opportunity. In a similar turn, teachers are described on one hand as overcoming or taking on the challenges of students in urban schools; on the other hand, they are castigated for their failures to make students from low-income homes and neighborhoods just like children in more economically advantaged communities (see Milner, 2012). Parents and families may be seen as the source or repository of student success or academic underachievement (Gadsden, 1999).

When schools' accountability is limited to test scores, then, the diversity and pluralism, which Tyack describes as fundamental to the concept of urban schools, is at best compromised and at worst ignored. Hill and Celio (1998), and researchers before and since (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2010; Murnane et al., 2009), suggest that in trying to improve the performance of their public schools, the leaders in large, urban school districts in particular face difficult intellectual and political problems, given the gulf (geographic, political, and cultural) that exists typically between state governments that have increasing control and urban districts. Even in efforts around *Race to the Top*, the question is what constitutes the top in urban schools and what educational scholars can contribute to both the articulation of need and the processes of change. The intellectual problem is the absence of a guiding philosophy for reform

that is responsive, steadfast, and flexible; the political problem is developing and sustaining a coalition long enough to effect change and negotiate resistance to change; and the practical problem is making a difference in the everyday learning of students (Ladson-Billings, 2010). Independently and taken together, the problems are in search of a way of constructing and living the possible—whether in the individual development and learning of students or in the collective experiences of families and communities.

Given this backdrop, we suggest that the process of schooling in urban contexts might be aligned with four assumptions or propositions that address issues of context, place, and multidisciplinary (Gadsden, 2004). The first argues that urban communities, schools, and school systems are not parallel or obtuse constructs but indigenous features of a singular structure of community in which differences among individual neighborhoods, institutions, constituencies, and stakeholders are reconciled through a shared commitment to students.

Each feature must be studied with the recognition that all features are inextricably tied together. Thus, those who conduct research on cities, families, communities, and the economy and those who conduct research on urban schools share responsibility for increasing opportunities and the potential for opportunities. In addition, researchers across specializations in education and across disciplines who study urban settings share a common purpose with practitioners in school and community-based programs. Although the landscape has changed dramatically with increased focus on practitioner inquiry (see Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), researchers and practitioners long have struggled with efforts to collaborate but have a relatively unimpressive history of success or observable or measurable change. University-school-community partnerships, while holding potential for change, address only a small subset of the issues and may lead to enhanced relationships among the three, with little observable change for schools, students, and families. These problems are perhaps most articulately recorded in reports about and analyses of school reform and the ability of most reform efforts to work with parents and reach into communities (see Darling-Hammond, 2010; Duncan & Murnane, 2011, 2014).

The second assumption is that the traditional focus on schools as the source and receptacle of all problems and possibilities for children requires re-visioning and revision of the public's understanding and recognition of the location and responsibilities of schools.

Schools are situated collectives and nested small learning communities. They are part and parcel of larger cultural and social communities where learning and teaching communicate and represent how children and adults interact with each other. Neighborhoods and families do not just happen to

surround schools nor are cultural practices, social and political history, and community folklore external to them. Teachers and school administrators have the ability to make choices about the degree to which students' experiences in schools reflect, criticize, respond to, represent, or are oppositional to their surroundings; how well they respond to the needs and problems of the families and communities that constitute schools; or whether they understand and build upon the knowledge, strengths, and expectations of families and communities to ensure that children not only learn but excel.

The third assumption is that schools in urban settings beset by poverty, crime, and social ills have the difficult role of matching the realities of family and community life for a high number of students with the expectations of teachers, parents, communities, policymakers, and society, particularly in relationship to opportunities to learn and performance on high-stakes tests (Dixon-Román, Everson, & McArdle, 2013; see also Milner, 2012). The problem of poverty has been well-articulated in several papers and texts (e.g., Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Reardon & Bischoff, 2011). In an informal survey with teachers and administrators in some of the most financially impoverished and embattled neighborhoods, many stated that they are strained by the range and severity of human and developmental problems faced by the students they teach (informal interview with Vivian Gadsden in 2008). They suggest that they are so overwhelmed by these problems that they may fail to meet their professional responsibility to provide the best teaching, ensure high performance for all children, or raise test scores that lead to higher state and national rankings of the system. In addition, they reportedly seek appropriate and effective ways to address this professional dilemma that typically crosses the boundaries into their personal expectations and sense of social responsibility.

Finally, any review or commentary on urban contexts, urban schools, and urban schooling must consider the intersections between and across race, gender, culture, immigrant status, and poverty. By necessity, it would examine the ways that historical social hierarchies have both persisted and worked against the well-being and welfare of multiple groups of African Americans, Latinos, and other people of color, and students and families in low-income homes and communities. In large cities, where gentrification is widespread and growing, a harsh divide often exists between the haves and have-nots and where long-term residents have been moved out of place (displaced) or pushed out from economically, if not racially, transformed urban places to other low-income neighborhoods. Such movement and shifts in the experiences of children and families are likely to affect the pathways available for children to grow and succeed.

The salience of context and place is captured in these discussions, with questions about the physical structure of schools, protective conditions, and geographic location of schools being studied (Everson & Millsap, 2004; Sampson et al., 2008; Stevenson, 2001). Reports on the state of urban centers and school systems (Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2012) reinforce long-standing arguments that the diversity of populations, cultures, and historical problems in urban schools makes it difficult to isolate one or a single cohort of critical issues facing them. There is little doubt that different urban contexts have different resources and that many of the children and families living in the most economically challenged neighborhoods are increasingly vulnerable, not simply by the day-to-day complexities of navigating their worlds, and often multiple worlds for students in non-neighborhood schools, but also by the intergenerational legacies of unemployment, hardship, inadequate resources, crime, strained family and community life, and a range of other circumstances, resulting in poor health and well-being (Gadsden, 2014). The issues are plentiful, widespread, and multifaceted. Schools may be seen by children or remembered by parents either as centers for and of learning, places of safety, community resources, gathering spaces, and sources of caring or as unfriendly buildings, spaces of discontent, sources of cultural discontinuity, or places for failure. Families contribute to and/or mediate the experiences of students in school and may be positioned within, alongside, or in opposition to them, depending on class, race, education, access, and matters of equality and equity.

Families and Urban Context

Research on families focuses as well on context as critical to understanding what and how variables unique to a given space contribute to or constrict learning and growth. It examines larger cultural and social contexts or may seek to unravel the relationships across different factors that describe both physical context and those who live in it—for example, race, class, gender, immigrant status, employment, and parents and parenting. It addresses how societal contexts set conditions for children's development. For example, poverty and social disadvantage are not seen literally as contexts but as "social addresses" that signal or summarize a set of correlated contexts and experiences (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983).

Poverty is not simply low income or absence of materials goods. As Huston and Bentley (2010) suggest, context is part of an interrelated net of circumstances that can include single-parent families, low levels of education, and belonging to a minority or immigrant group.

Developmental psychologists have offered a range of explanations and perspectives on context and human development. Bronfenbrenner and Crouter's (1983) work on social ecology provides the most widely ascribed framework to examine context in social and cultural perspective. They argued that the child is embedded in an expanding set of contexts, with the environmental context being "any event or condition outside the organism that affects or is affected by a person's development" (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983, p. 359). Recent articles have reinforced the significance of contexts and their importance to the study and understanding of human development and to policies that will affect children and families (McCall, 2009).

Bronfenbrenner's model is dynamic including contexts with which children have direct contact (microsystems) and those that affect development (exosystems and macrosystems).

An extension of this work more recently highlights the ways in which contexts combine or intersect. Huston and Bentley (2010) describe the relations between the developing child and the context he or she experiences as reciprocal and transactional. In their 2010 work focused on poverty and children's development, they identify five proximal contexts that influence child well-being: (a) parents and family; (b) physical conditions such as food, shelter, and pollutants; (c) out-of-home settings such as preschool; (d) schools; and (e) neighborhoods and peers. They note that all of these contexts differ as a function of poverty and socioeconomic status (SES) and have interactive effects.

Many of the critical issues in urban school systems concern the lives of children outside of school, the ways in which the problems within families and communities intersect with students' ability to attend and learn in school, and the problems of structural barriers in society that reduce access and opportunity. They have less often focused on factors such as health and child welfare (Adam et al., 2011; Gadsden et al., 2009). One long-standing critical problem in urban centers is the persistence of poverty and isolation for low-income families of color and academic risk among many children in those families. Several sociologists (e.g., Massey & Denton, 1993; Quillian, 2007; Reardon & Bischoff, 2011; Sharkey, 2008; Wilson, 1987) point to the effects that racial stratification has had on children and families in urban settings for generations and the barriers that stratification creates for students and families of color. The problems are further highlighted and elucidated in well-known qualitative work (E. Anderson, 1990, 1999, 2012; Wilson, 1996), which offer critical analyses of how discrimination and the exodus of business from the inner-city created increased hardship for families and communities.

Research on the local ecologies of families throughout the 1990s examined the impact of family structures (e.g., household composition) and

processes (e.g., child management strategies) on the relationship between urban neighborhoods and child and adolescent development. It was during this period that welfare reform was implemented, and attention was drawn to increases in single-parent households, father absence and child support, teenage pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, incarceration in the inner cities, and high school drop-out rates. There were shifts in the number of people of color in the United States: the influx of immigrant children and families, family compositions and constellations, and gender and racial challenges to the status quo. How we defined families, how we understood the problems faced by children, how we selected from among the strengths of children and families, and how we enacted the possibilities for positive change were among the questions being raised in education and the social sciences.

Neither the full range of risks nor the full range of resources to which children and families are exposed within urban communities is known. This has led researchers to question whether traditional theories of development are appropriate for studying the lives of minority children and adolescents growing up in high-risk urban neighborhoods. As Burton and Jarrett (2000) suggest, "children and teens in these settings may attach different meanings to their roles and behaviors than do their mainstream counterparts" (p. 1118), calling for more work that integrates traditional normative approaches to development and contextually relevant approaches. There is ample documentation of the risks to the well-being of children. Some of these (e.g., poverty and immigrant status) are mutable and may change over time; others (e.g., race and ethnicity) are not.

We discuss in the sections that follow multiple interpretations and analyses that focused on families and students' schooling and development. Much of the literature used draws from work on children and families in urban context and focuses on poverty and race, not exclusive to urban settings, but often used as a way to frame the problems of urban settings. We focus on the discussions of families with particular attention to the ways that urban may define the experiences of students and families. We begin by discussing family influences and student academic achievement, a topic that has framed almost every conversation regarding students and families in large metropolitan districts, often described as urban schools.

Family Influences

Family influences have long been studied in relation to child and adolescent outcomes, student achievement outcomes, achievement gaps, and opportunities available to children and families. However, as Burton and Jarrett (2000) write, while there is debate regarding the "place" of family, that is, "the

precise domains and paths of family influences on the relationship between urban neighborhoods and child outcomes,” families are “in the mix” of considerations and research on neighborhood effects and child development. Family influences cover a range of factors that are thought to be associated with child and adolescent outcomes. Although several influences have been identified, for the purposes of this discussion, we focus on two that are often discussed in relationship to urban families: family structure and residential mobility.

Family structure has been the focus of research from the 1960s to present that focused on the status of Black families during the Civil Rights Movement (see Moynihan, 1965; Coleman & others, 1966; Kerner & others, 1968). From the 1990s to present, much of the attention has focused on mother-headed households, the perception of their threat to child well-being, father involvement, and the need to collect child support from low-income men. Most studies involved African American and non-Hispanic Whites and examined whether neighborhood or families were better predictors of child and adolescent outcomes.

As a policy and popular issue, family structure has been used to explain almost every problem facing poor children in urban context and urban schools. We would be hard-pressed to find analyses that do not include family structure in some way. Studies have found an effect for family structure (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1997; Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997) on children’s cognitive and behavioral development as well as their school participation and achievement. Most of the measures used, however, rely on traditional normative approaches rather than contextually relevant approaches which include access and engagement of kin networks or the fluidity of family structure such as childbearing, marriage, and the timing and persistence of a family’s economic and social resources relative to neighborhood risks and opportunities (see Burton & Jarrett, 2000).

Family residential moves also have received increasing attention in determining approaches to and patterns of family involvement and child outcomes (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1997; DeLuca & Rosenblatt, 2010; Reynolds & Ou, 2011). Families make decisions to move from one residence to another for several reasons, including financial reasons.

However, in several studies, parents’ (typically mothers’) primary reason for moving has been to ensure the safety and well-being of their children, including the opportunities for their children to attend better schools (e.g., Ensminger, Lamkin, & Jacobson, 1996; Keels, 2009). However, these parents’ assessments of “better” may be more perception than the evidence for actual improvement indicates, since low-income families are often moving between comparable neighborhoods (Solon, Page, & Duncan, 2000).

Family Income

While not limited to income, family influences typically also examine family socioeconomic factors. Research over two decades suggests that family income has a substantial effect on academic achievement and accounts for a meaningful proportion of the score differences between Black and White test-takers on most achievement measures (Blau, 1999; Dixon-Román, in press; Dooley & Stewart, 2004; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Orr, 2003; Phillips, Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Crane, 1998; Rothstein, 2004). Mayer (1997) argues that low-income parents may differ from middle or high-income parents with respect to social adjustment, enthusiasm, dependability, academic skills, and motivation. In other words, she argued, it is these parental social and emotional differences, rather than differences in family income, that account for the differences in children's academic achievement outcomes.

Duncan, Huston, and Weisner (2007) find that earnings supplements in fact matter for children's academic achievement in poor families. In a random assignment study, they evaluated the effect of the New Hope Program that provided poor families with an earnings supplement, subsidized health insurance, subsidized child care, and a temporary community-service job while searching for employment. Their evaluation found that, on average, children in the program scored higher than children in the control group. These findings speak to the nonspurious effects of income for poor families, and the possible meaningful effect of poverty on academic achievement. Moreover, poverty is known to be related to poor nutrition, exposure to lead poisoning, low birth weight, attention deficit hyperactive disorder, learning disabilities, lack of health insurance, poor-quality housing, poor-quality schooling, school-per-pupil expenditures, parenting practices, high school equivalent or lower parental education, parental unemployment, and single-parent homes (Fass & Cauthen, 2008; Lee & Wong, 2004), any one of which could increase the risks to students in school (Reardon & Bischoff, 2011).

Several studies have also found evidence of the effect that grandparent social and economic resources have on grandchild achievement over and above the parent's (Dixon-Román, in press; Mandara, Varner, Greene, & Richman, 2009; Sharkey & Elwert, 2011). Phillips and colleagues (1998) find that maternal grandparents' education was positively associated with child Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test scores while also accounting for performance differences between Black and White children. Mandara et al. (2009) find that particular parenting practices, such as school-orientation at home and adolescent decision making, had meaningful direct effects while also meaningfully mediating the effect of grandparent SES via mother's

achievement and via parent SES. Their overall model accounted for all of the ethnic differences in adolescent achievement. Presenting robust findings of grandparent (or parental conditions of growth) effects, Sharkey and Elwert (2011) examine the effects of neighborhood poverty over multiple generations. Using the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, they found that the neighborhood conditions in which parents grew up had a larger effect on the grandchild's test performance than the neighborhood conditions in which the grandchild grew up. These multigenerational neighborhood effects indicate the substantial lagged effects of neighborhood poverty and the multigenerational importance of place.

Family Practices, Cultures, and Race

Wherever they live in urban, rural, or suburban contexts, families provide a range of supports to children and contribute knowledge that children use to situate themselves and their identities in and out of school. This suggests that the very framing of family contributions needs to be realigned and refined to represent the different constellations of family and the ways in which families form cultures, ways of engaging and interacting in the world based on a range of factors, from gender to sociopolitical histories (Gadsden, 1999). A broad view would suggest that continued focus on the nuclear family—as father, mother, and child—limits our understanding of the multiple family forms, cultural dimensions of families, the ways that they form and enact their identities as a unit or as individuals within a unit, and the social practices of engagement and support that are used (Gadsden, 2004).

Several studies have focused on culturally diverse families to demonstrate the ways that they use long-standing cultural and social practices to support their children. For example, in a study on family literacy practices, Mui and Anderson (2008) provide a useful analysis for situating the ways in which families take on responsibility and the potential misunderstandings that may result when the cultural ways of the family are not familiar to educators in schools. Rather than a single parent or two parents taking responsibility, the student's grandparents, uncles and their wives and children, and siblings live in the same household took joint responsibility for the finances and child rearing. If neither of the student's parents is available for parent-teacher meetings, one of the extended family members attended.

Research on young children and early childhood programs has provided multiple examples of the ways in which families and parent involvement serve as a protective factor for young, low-income children's positive development. Research studies have long focused on the ways that families serve as buffers to adversity and hardship for children in urban settings that are

seen as unsafe. For example, several studies of families in Head Start in urban schools (e.g., Fantuzzo, Gadsden, & McDermott, 2010) identified a range of ways in which parents and families positively influence the experiences of children, from providing a supportive home learning environment to having direct involvement in school-based activities and direct communications with school personnel. What we know, from Mui and Anderson (2008) and others, is that different members of the families, not just parents, serve as protective factors for children, particularly young children, and that such protection takes a number of different forms that have not been well-chronicled.

Families and the urban contexts in which many live create interconnected networks. Families form relationships within neighborhoods and communities that become networks and rely on extended family and kin networks, sometimes loosely formed with biological and nonbiological relatives, connected by marriage, adoption, friendship, caregiving relationships. These extended kin networks are not limited to urban contexts, and some would argue that urban settings themselves sometimes make these networks difficult, as issues related to the workforce, transportation, and housing may reduce opportunities for regular interaction and support. They are often instrumental in ensuring children's education, health, safety, and well-being, helping them navigate sometimes difficult institutional interactions and creating pathways to opportunity. In *All Our Kin*, Stack (1990) shares the compelling story of the ways in which these networks functioned in one northern urban context where family members moved back and forth between the northern city and southern rural and urban settings to provide for themselves and their children. Several other accounts provide similar findings—for example, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines' (1988) study of literacy and Small's (2004) account of families in Boston.

In all of these discussions, the question that is posed concerns whether these families, (living in urban settings, disproportionately African American, Latino, and immigrant, and low-income) bring the necessary cultural and social capital for their children to be successful in school (Dika & Singh, 2002). The concept of social capital has gone through various evolutions beginning with Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) and Coleman (1988). Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as follows:

The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (p. 21)

The value of one's social capital is contingent on the size of their social networks and the value of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital they possess. In contrast, Coleman (1988) was more interested in the kinds of social ties that exposed individuals and families to the social norms of dominant institutions such as schools. He referred to the "closure" of social networks and describes them as social networks that define the social and cultural norms across generations (i.e., between the parent and child) and within generations (i.e., between two different sets of parents and/or teacher) of the same social/educational setting. While both describe individual forms of social capital Bourdieu's conceptualization was more focused on the status and resources in the social networks, Coleman seemed to be more focused on the kinds of social relationships that lead to social congruence in social norms that can enable the support of agents' ability to better competently navigate dominant institutions. In both conceptualizations, the family can be and is a source of social capital.

These two early articulations have led to at least three working uses of the concept. One of these uses, Portes (1998) suggests, was a source of family-mediated benefits. For instance, social capital has been used as an asset of children in intact families (Portes, 2000). Several other researchers have demonstrated the relationship between parental strong social relationships and student achievement (see Bank & Slavings, 1990; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Dixon-Román, 2013; Garnier & Raudenbush, 1991; Goddard, 2003; Jones & Maloy, 1988; Lareau, 1987; Lee & Croninger, 1994; Sui-Chu & Douglas, 1996). Goddard (2003) finds that social capital (as measured by relational networks that connect parents and community members and trusting relationships among students and parents) is meaningfully associated with increases in students' odds of passing both assessments. Second, Lareau and Horvat (1999) in their ethnographic study describe how social and cultural capital becomes raced in and through the differential responsiveness of school service providers to Black parents, even Black middle-class parents. In effect, the differential treatment produced different orientations and additional social practices by the Black parents to ensure/advocate for the equitable treatment of their children.

Schools and families share both the possibilities for success and multiple points of vulnerability that are interpreted as deficits, inclusive of race, class, immigrant status, and a range of demographic factors that determine how children experience schooling and life and that may dictate the future of schools and families. When schools are seen simply as structures to inhabit with students and families are simply those who need to be served, the imperative to promote the best options for children, families, and communities is essentially lost, forfeited to short-range planning, reductionistic thinking, and reductive

approaches which the importance of place is ignored. Place encompasses then the multidimensionality of spatial organization; it includes the social acumen that makes neighborhoods and community alliances critical and that are likely to determine how schools fare, whether and how families are respected and engaged, and ultimately how children are valued and treated.

Closing Thoughts

Several questions persist both in our definition of urban and the ways that we seek to understand the diversity of students and families within different metropolitan settings and local contexts. Some of the perennial questions concern the ways in which schools engage students. Others challenge our conceptualizations of achievement and schooling as well as the conduct, analysis, and quality of research on these issues. In writing about the utility of research findings about academic achievement, well-being, and local urban contexts, researchers have noted the inextricability of time and place. For example, Balfanz (2000) underscores the limitations of statistical analyses in capturing the historical contexts of relationships within a city or school district, noting that such analyses do not control for the “geographic, social, and political environments in which schools are situated” (p. 41). Burton and Jarrett (2000) note similar limitations in our ability to isolate or gauge the effects of urban context, pointing to the dilemmas in determining the unmeasured effects of families versus neighborhoods on child outcomes. Some of these dilemmas have resulted in the over or underestimation of other traditionally measured family influences (e.g., family structure or income) due to their omission from statistical models (Dixon-Román, in press), while others have attempted to disentangle powerful child, family, and economic factors affecting children in urban and nonurban sites alike (e.g., child neglect; Gadsden, 2014).

Throughout our discussion, we position place as having different locations and spaces, for example, families, homes, economic factors, cultural and political backgrounds, to name a few. At once, urban contexts include both families who have economic and social privilege and those who do not as well as those who have significant resources to complement those provided by schools and those who rely heavily on urban schools to prepare their children academically. These groups have increasingly come together to create alliances to save schools, particularly in large, municipal school districts confronted with state takeovers, loss in funding, and school closings. They have collaborated often across racial lines and social class, across the well-educated and those who struggle in school, and across parents and families with school-age children and those with adult children. They focus on the larger issues of school district solvency, yet struggle with whether and how to

ensure that all children have good schools to attend and in which to learn. Where and how their identity as members of urban contexts is defined is mapped against multiple factors unique to their goals, purposes, experiences, and expectations.

In closing, we raise two questions that are likely to persist in both private and public discourses in our field: Is the label, urban, a problem, or is the issue whether and how we assign importance to place in research on children, families, schools, and communities in metropolitan settings? What possibilities for learning and teaching are tied to everyday lives in urban contexts? What counts as cultural and social capital in urban settings and in what ways are questions of race, class, and difference configured and issues of access and equity addressed in comparative research frameworks?

The power of the descriptor, urban, to define context is demonstrated in the many references to urban schools, children, families, and communities in educational and public discussions. These references are rarely neutral. They have special meanings that may increase the potential for marginalization on one hand or, in more problematic terms, add to real or perceived risk for children and families on the other hand. We pose these and other issues as long-standing and ongoing matters for research, practice, and policy that attempt to study urban contexts and to address questions of who constitutes urban and the ways in which children and their families negotiate place, time, and space. They are intricately interwoven into our sense of and sensibilities about meaningful change, the preparation and support of teachers and researchers alike in urban settings, and our willingness to engage parents and families in crafting sound pathways for students. In other words, they help us both understand and imagine the role of place and the potential for transforming urban spaces into richly evolving sources of and repositories for learning, teaching, and schooling.

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