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Reimagining the Urban: A Canadian Perspective

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Abstract

This article makes the argument for a reframing and a reconceptualization of the urban–suburban divide which can inform the options and possibilities for transformative practices in urban schools. Drawing primarily from a Canadian, and more specifically a southern Ontario context, the article explores the changing realities of urban within this region; examines the extent to which the suburban and the urban realties have become enmeshed; and explores the educational opportunities that can emerge through that reframing. Reconceptualizing the "urban" is a vital aspect of contemporary and future schooling given the shifting context of actual urban spaces and the people who inhabit them in many of the major city centers of the world. The article also addresses the need for the development of leadership in these urban/suburban school settings that is collaborative, transformative, and moves beyond hierarchical conceptions.

Keywords

urban education, leadership, dialectic analysis

The construction of "urban" and "suburban" as mutually exclusive categories is reflective of the propensity to think in binaries, where one site or idea comes to be known based in opposition to an Other. This is a process that

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I have termed *oppositional subjectivity*, where the identity of one is highly dependent on the identity of the other. The most glaring example of these subjectivities is the relationship between the construction of Blackness and Whiteness, in which the subjectivity of Whiteness is reified through the inscription of the Other (Perkinson, 2002). When the Other was constructed as barbaric, Whiteness became synonymous with civility and culture; with the Other as uneducated, Whiteness became a mark of educational propensity. My argument is that for us to understand the urban, its relationship with the suburban needs to be conceptualized, explored, and analyzed as another mutually constituted relationship.

The urban, I would argue, has never been distinct from the suburban—each site has informed social conceptions of space and engaged in this process of oppositional subjective identification. Suburban folks have historically entered urban spaces in search of various activities, most recently within an ethic of consumption. Suburban residents come to the city in search of "ethnic" foods and cultural performances and through their daily commute to work. The urban is also marked as the site where artistic creations are incubated lying in wait to be discovered. Suburban dwellers temporarily enter these spaces with one primary condition—the urban must never enter the space of the suburban. It becomes chic to consume urban food, music, language, and performances with the assurance that the urban remains contained within that space and those ethnic people remain fixed there as well. Factors that limit the movement of urban dwellers into suburban spaces include the limited availability of transportation and the assumed ethnic homogeneity and exclusivity of the suburbs.

Drawing primarily from a Canadian, and more specifically a southern Ontario context, this article will explore the changing realities of urban within this region; examine the extent to which the suburban and the urban realties have become enmeshed; and explore the educational opportunities that can emerge through that reframing. Furthermore, in reference to educational leadership, I argue that as globalization processes have resulted in changing patterns of human movement across the globe and changing student demographics, similarly constructs of leadership should entail a shift from the traditional top-down concept of leadership to adopt a more collaborative and transformative approach.

Dialectic of the Urban

The dialectic method views reality not as an agglomeration of fixed entities, but rather as a shifting totality of fluid parts, the core of which is a dynamic interaction between human labor and the material world. A static notion of urban is at best illusory; rather a more comprehensive apprehension of the ideological and material reality of the urban most effectively takes account of the contestations that frame our understanding of urban. However, the challenge that needs to be addressed is whether comprehensiveness implies understanding rather than how taking a fuller account may help to shape our understanding. Neither can one assume that comprehensiveness implies a sense of closure regarding how teachers apprehend concepts that are fluid; nor does it ensure the development of socially just practices that facilitate student engagement in urban schools. It is important to move beyond an incomplete or partial visioning of the factors that are embedded in and constitutive of the urban.

The imagery that is attached to urban schools (i.e., schools located within the areas marked as the inner city rings) continues to be mired in deficit constructs and the pathologizing of students, parents, and communities. The very nature of the physical structures in urban settings and schools are designed in ways that serve to create and replicate this experience of deficit (Bettleheim, 1980). The predominant strategies for working in such school districts seldom emerge from the perspective of possibility where future orientations and cultures that are transformational in nature are viewed as sites of strength. Rather, the texts that are purportedly written to enhance educational opportunities remain embedded in the idea of "fixing" the students and the overall communities that are bounded within that geographical and ideological space labeled as *urban*. While there are multiple sources of positive potential, knowledge, and possibilities that are evidenced in urban sites, those potentialities may only emerge when we adopt ideological and constructivist lenses which seek to challenge these notions of pathology and focus instead on a reimagining of life in urban schools.

Conceptualizations of the urban and the suburban should not be regarded simply as promontories that exist at opposite ends of a spectrum of social locations; rather they are engaged in a highly symbiotic relationship wherein one cannot be understood without an integrated consideration of the other. Furthermore, a contemporary analysis of these sites emerges more constructively at the meeting points of these social locations, thus facilitating an interrogation of those taken-for-granted assumptions and providing fertile ground for the co-construction of new ideas that can inform practice. Nodes of meaning and understanding emerge at the intersection of these binaries and the contestation of such can activate a more nuanced and intersubjective understanding of these spaces.

Canney (2002) argues that any effective application of the dialectic requires four primary conditions: the appearance of equal status among those involved; examining commonly held conceptions regarding the issue; engaging in critical dialogue; and making connections between the presented ideas. Based on the second notion of examining commonly held assumptions the author references Plato's Allegory of the Cave, noting that, "As Plato makes clear in the image of the cave, the purpose of the dialectic is to be free from the chains and ascend to the light. If the dialectic is to have an emancipatory effect on our minds, then dominant ideas that oppress people must be the starting point of liberation" (Canney, 2002, p. 2). In relation to the urban–suburban divide, if the "inner city" has been conflated with the presence of racially minoritized and poor bodies, what are the implications when gentrification projects foster a change in the population dynamics? Within a Canadian context the changes that have been brought on by the movement of the wealthier (usually White) population into the core of the city provide grounds to challenge the conflation of inner city with the pathological conceptions that have historically marked that space.

In many major world cities the inner core of the city has come to be regarded as the center of high life, culture, and excitement; then how can we understand the shifting reality of the inner city? These shifting meanings raise the following questions: does the inner city exist and, if so, is it a geographical construction or simply an ideological tether that helps people to make sense of their world and structure ideological, imaginative, geographical, and physical limits that serve to contain certain populations? Furthermore, how does our conceptualization of the suburban shift as these diverse populations who are being removed from these inner cityscapes are relocated to the suburban and outer urban rings (James, 2004)? An analysis of these intersections and interactions can produce spaces which allow for the inclusion of multiple voices and a reinterpretation of the urban and the suburban.

To reinterpret the urban and the suburban requires a rethinking of location, subjectivity, and practice. It requires the engagement of leaders at the communal, educational, and political levels who are willing and able to challenge these constructions to facilitate a reimagining. This process of reimagining might be easier in a Canadian context because of the extent to which the conception of the urban–suburban divide continues to be greatly informed by the American media. Options for questioning the facility of these ideas in Canadian classrooms and in schools of education are numerous. Further to this, Canadian investment in the myths of meritocracy and multiculturalism strives to regard this country as a space that embraces diversity and as such may provide more opportunities for dialog.

Recently, while teaching an Urban Education course to Canadian preservice teachers, I asked them to discuss their initial conceptions of "urban" in the schools where they performed their practicum placements. Many students were shocked about the extent to which their ideas were challenged by the reality of life in those schools and communities. They highlighted the role that the American media has played in contributing to this highly skewed image of urban life. When asked to identify the most startling differences the students spoke of the expectation of violence, the disengaged students, and the heavily dilapidated buildings. Instead they found that the level of violence that was present was no greater than in middle class and suburban schools and that to some extent the systemic, ideological, epistemic, and class-centric violence that was present in the suburban spaces was more significant.

The forms of violence that were primarily evidenced in the suburban schools included threats against teachers by the students and their parents in the form of letters from lawyers and the pressure which was put on the teachers to ensure academic success of the students almost irrespective of whether the student had the requisite skill and ability to garner that success. The teacher candidates believed that these practices were evidentiary of an abuse of power by the parents in these areas which was not evidenced on the part of parents in the urban schools. This is not an indication that such practices are squarely a middle-class problem but that the way in which violence is deployed in these areas are buttressed by a capitalist system and more recently a neoliberal discourse regarding educational achievement and opportunity given the level of competition in the global marketplace (Baronov, 2006) that fosters varying forms of violence that are often rendered invisible.

Another difference between these teacher candidates' prior conceptions of urban school environments and their actual experiences was the extent to which they were unaware of how social and institutionalized structures affected life in urban environments. The students made the assumption that all public school students had the same level of access to education. What they failed to understand is that although all students may have access to schooling, there are various institutional, physical, ideological, and social factors that can impact on the quality of the schooling that is afforded to the students which will affect the outcomes. Based on the readings and in-class discussions, as well as their personal experience of urban settings, the students were able to identify factors such as limited economic activity in these areas; the attitude of teachers toward the students and their parents; and the irrelevance of the curriculum that contributed to the continued disengagement of some of the students in these schools. The ability to remove blame from individual students in city schools and locate it in the broader structural inequities in the system is integral to this notion of reframing the "urban."

Urban in a Canadian Context

The conception of the urban–suburban divide in Canada is heavily influenced by the American media, despite the fact that the reality of the "urban" in Canada has not experienced similar demarcations and characterizations (except in relatively few spaces). The distinct forms and markers of "urban" portrayed in the American media, including abject poverty of the inhabitants, dilapidated homes, schools and buildings, and images of racially minoritized bodies marauding the "urban jungle" (as well as the violence that is levied at Whites who enter those spaces) has not been a Canadian reality. American visitors are often surprised at the realities of urban spaces in Canada—the availability of subsidized housing that, though in some state of disrepair, is relatively clean and ordered. Interestingly, however, because Canadians have more access to American media than local content, the portrayal of American cities becomes the frame that is employed in developing their conceptions of urban—resulting in what I would argue is the creation of a mythical "urban crisis" by appropriation.

Bettelheim's (1980) arguments about how the physical structure of spaces impact on the mental health of occupants are relevant with regard to how "urban" is conceptualized, particularly in an American context. For example, the buildings in urban housing projects tend to be constructed in patterns that produce structures of containment. The roads that provide entrance to and exit from the buildings are often circumscribed (i.e., they seldom follow the standard patterns of streets but rather limit options for unrestricted access to the housing complexes). Similarly, Bettleheim argues that urban schools mimic the design of factories and prisons, essentially preparing the students in those schools for a future in factories and prison systems. The core of Bettleheim's argument is that the practice of physical containment and control is imprinted on the psyche of the students thereby preparing them to become what has been referred to as "docile bodies" (Foucault, 1995), or those members of society who can be easily controlled with limited investment in actual policing.

The urban reality in Canada, particularly in Ontario, is an interesting mix of contrasts regarding long-held conceptions, many of which are highly racialized. In Ontario for example, lower income or government housing projects are often located within suburban settlements. This was an intentional strategy of the government in an attempt to avoid the creation of urban "ghettos" and create mixed-income neighborhoods. It is common to see apartment buildings that blend into the overall landscape, nestled among single-family dwellings. The housing developments that are located in the urban centers are similarly built within larger city spaces and have often, at first glance, been indistinguishable from the surrounding buildings. While the racial composition of those spaces is undeniable, the explanations that are put forward again reinforce the Canadian myth of inclusion. These housing developments are often regarded as the starting point for new immigrants; however, what fails to be addressed are the social and economic limits that lead immigrants to settle in those areas for generations, in other words long after they have ceased to be immigrants.

Based on the results of a 30-year analysis of data on neighborhoods in Ontario, Canada, Hulchanski (2007) argues that "there has been a 34% drop in the proportion of neighbourhoods with middle incomes between 1970 and 2000. The low and very low income neighbourhoods increased from 19% to 50% of the city over the same 30 year period" (p. 5). The research indicates that the proportion of poverty that is evidenced in suburban neighborhoods has increased significantly, albeit hidden. According to this report, the presence of people living in middle-class houses and suburbs which promotes the illusion of financial stability belies the reality wherein people are forced to make a choice between purchasing food or paying the mortgage and utility bills. This research underscores the need to begin to reconceptualize our understanding of urban to include perceptions that move beyond the notions of geography, space, and social class exclusivity, with a clear recognition that urban issues are not spatially contained, and that suburban spaces are not protected from the infringement of issues that have historically been constructed as inherently "urban" such as poverty, unemployment, and ethnic and racial diversity.

Sassen (1998, 2000) employs two concepts that I believe are important here for understanding the construct of the urban. She uses the terms valorization and devalorization to explore the ways in which global cities emerge. According to her argument, urban or cityscapes become valorized spaces that are marked by significant financial transactions; when they increase in property values, greater emphasis is placed on catering to a global consumer thereby resulting in the development of upscale stores and residences which are accompanied by a change in the ethnic and racial composition of those spaces. She argues that the cost of housing in those areas serves to push the immigrant populations to the periphery of the city, into small pockets within the city, or more recently, into the suburbs. This shifting racial and ethnic pattern leads to a change in the conception of the "inner city" which becomes urbane (i.e., a site of "high culture," wealth, and cultural consumption) rather than marked by the stereotype of the pathological urban space (Sassen, 1998).

The gentrification projects within the city increasingly result in repeated displacements of lower income populations to suburban spaces to facilitate the housing and consumption needs of the higher income workers. These gentrification projects create upscale neighborhoods that place the cost of housing out of the reach of the vast majority of the population. In the Canadian context, to fully understand the impact of these gentrification projects may require ongoing and longitudinal research. In the inner core of Toronto, a government housing project named Regent Park has been the focus of a major gentrification project. This area has been historically marked by significant poverty; however high levels of community engagement and support along with various community organizations have provided support to members of this community. The gentrification project has resulted in the movement of families that have resided in these neighborhoods for generations, many of whom have been relocated to suburbs a significant distance from the downtown core effectively separating them from the nodes of support and interactions that have been important aspects of their life. This relocation to the suburbs, which has been primarily financed by the government, has had several impacts that are relevant to our understanding of "urban" and the practice of education in Canada.

There have been limited, if any, attempts to provide stable employment support or education retraining for these families to enable them to support a more expensive lifestyle in the suburbs. This creates a social-economic dynamic that runs the risk of replicating their experience of poverty, but this time in a house rather than an apartment. Suburbs have historically had limited transportation systems thus requiring increased use of personal transport to attend school or work or to complete basic tasks such as shopping. The financial constraints that have accompanied these families to the suburbs limit their options for access to work and their "regular dietary foods." Additionally, the increased cost of food in the suburbs adds another level of expense for these families which can result in ongoing health concerns. In such instances, families may be forced to make choices between maintaining their shelter and eating.

The organizations that have provided unprecedented levels of assistance to these families are not located in these suburban neighborhoods, therefore the options for academic, personal, and social services as well as culturally relevant counseling which could support their effective transition into Canadian society have been curtailed.

Multiculturalism and the Urban in a Canadian Context

Another factor that creates a unique context for Canada's reading of "urban" is multiculturalism. While America has been regarded as a melting pot, Canada has marked itself as a multicultural mosaic (Bannerji, 2000). The official multiculturalism policy which was instituted in the late 1980s has provided Canadians with not only a sense of moral superiority over the Americans when issues of diversity are discussed, but it also serves to create a false identity of Canada as a "good and tolerant" place to live. Whereas America has worn its racist history and development on its sleeve, Canada has essentially kept its past covered with members of the society expressing disbelief at the extent to which racism has been embedded as part of the constitutional fabric of the nation (Shadd, 1989).

Canadians have all too effectively excised the history of racial injustices that have occurred in our nation. As Nelson and Nelson (2004) note,

> This disavowal is often mediated through a dichotomization of Canada with the United States, which is made to bear the full burden of the collective sins of North America. Operating under the national myth of racial tolerance and inclusivity, Canada has been constructed as the victim of racism that originates elsewhere. . . . To be fair, vilifying the United States as a place of extreme (dis)ease is all too easy with its histories of explicit racial violence, segregation, oppression and, significantly American frankness (which) . . . can only be achieved if Canada's colonial histories are ignored, minimized, or denied, and if contemporary issues of race and racism are ignored within its borders. (p. 3)

The treatment of the First Nations' peoples and the existence of slavery and the Ku Klux Klan in Canada are polished over with a sheen of multicultural tolerance and stories of the Underground Railroad which was regarded as the passage to freedom for many Blacks seeking a safe haven from the ravages of slavery in the United States (Henry & Tator, 2006). These sanitized versions of history also erase the experiences of immigrants from Eastern Europe, the marginalization of South Asians (Henry & Tator, 2006), and the clearly racist immigration and settlement policies that were intended to cull the "Yellow menace"—the Chinese—thereby preventing the "infection" among White Canadians (Chan, 1983). The more recent internment of all Japanese during

World War II, as well as the head tax that was imposed on Chinese immigrants (Retallack, 2004), are all aspects of Canada's history that are eclipsed by the notions of tolerance and acceptance and the trope of multiculturalism.

These sanitized versions of Canada's history have served to complicate discussions of race and difference. Some White parents in Canada expressed significant and at times violent intentions when the possibility of integrated schooling with Black children was considered as an option (Winks, 1969). Today, the forms of segregated schooling are less overtly racist; however, social, institutional, and geographical practices serve to create forms of exclusion that contain the vestiges of the past and reinscribe racist strategies in the present and possible future. Multiculturalism plays a central role in reinforcing those segregations and locating the problems of urban schooling squarely on notions of meritocracy, community attitudes to schooling, and levels of parental involvement.

Many teachers invest heavily in the multicultural ethic and fantasy. The primary manifestation of multicultural education in Canada continues to center around the celebration of cultural performances involving dance, food, and ethnic costumes. These "carnivalistic performances," in addition to replicating constructions of the mythical and Orientalized other, avoid the need for a critical analysis of systems of power and provide teachers with a sense of accomplishment around inclusion. The naming of racism and social difference around race is regarded as "creating a problem where there is none." A recently edited collection of essays titled *The Great White North* (Carr & Lund, 2007) explored practices of racialization within educational arenas in Canada. Although the book was relatively well received within academia, the authors were also subjected to various forms of harassment by members of the public who regarded the book as simply creating controversy. This response by those who criticized the book's content as inflammatory reinforces Shadd's (1989) earlier comment regarding Canadians' penchant for clinging to a partial visioning of society. Attempts to provide a more complete view of Canadian reality, as in the case of the Carr & Lund book, result in heavy resistance to that particular vision which can serve to unsettle the taken-for-granted innocence of Whiteness and White history. It becomes significantly more challenging to remain mired in the myth of color blindness when the realities of social inequality are laid bare.

A chapter in this book by Solomon and Daniel (2007) which examined teacher candidates' conceptions of race and Whiteness indicated that these preservice teachers were so heavily invested in the notions of multiculturalism that any attempt to shift the conversation to antioppression discourses such as social justice, critical pedagogy, or antiracist epistemologies resulted in significant levels of discomfort. This was true not only for the White preservice teachers, but also for the racially minoritized teacher candidates who were also invested in constructs of tolerance and racial parity which fail to implicate systemic issues regarding the experiences of urban students.

Canadian teachers' images of urban schools primarily emerge from the media, most specifically the films that portray urban students as violent, racialized bodies who are underfunctioning in harsh environments. Further to this, the protagonist is usually a White teacher who braves the urban jungle to "civilize the barbarians." This imagery replicates the colonization ethic in which the colonizers attempted to civilize the savages. The modes of survival, patterns of communication, and the behaviors of students are demonized and the only seeming route to humanity is to ensure that the "savages" are taught to mimic the colonizer. Unfortunately, this salvation is constantly replayed within the confines of teacher education classes. The teacher candidates are primarily White and female, seemingly replicating the role of Lady Bountiful, the missionary. These teacher candidates enter the classrooms armed with years of media portrayals of urban students and expect to see these behaviors replicated in their practicum placements. Any attempt on the part of students to create an identity that differs from this externally imposed marking is often met with additional resistance by the gatekeepers of the education system. The work of various authors (Daniel, 2007; McCaughtry, Martin, Kulinna, & Cothran, 2006; Smaller, 2007; Solomon & Allen, 2000; Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 2003) highlights the importance of ensuring that teacher candidates as well as aspiring school leaders spend a significant period of time in urban communities to challenge the construction of urban sites as simply receptacles of pathology. This research highlights the wealth of knowledge, history and experience that is contained within these urban sites and pushes aspiring teachers and principals to question their long-held ideations regarding urban students. As Kincheloe (2007) notes,

> Any effective discussion of urban education must work to help teachers avoid the prejudiced view of poor urban students as dangerous criminals incapable of learning or, at the other extreme, as communicants who may be reformed by the gospel of white culture as pedagogy. (p. 12)

Addressing urban educational issues in a Canadian context requires movement beyond the multicultural myth and a comprehensive examination of Canada's investment in highly exclusionary discourses around race, gender, sexual orientation, and social class status.

Multicultural discourses also dominate the curricular landscape in Canada. In Canada's classrooms, teachers primarily address notions of inclusion through special projects, or more commonly, weekly or monthly celebrations. Although Black History and Asian Heritage months have become more commonplace in the larger and more diverse cities in Canada, there is continued resistance to the inclusion of those histories. Many teachers and administrators indicate that there is no "White History Month," and they question the equity inherent in including these months that are dedicated to specific groups. The inclusion of these histories are not mandatory in schools, but dependent on the whims and fancies of the administration or the individual teacher. Multicultural posters or reading material in the classroom are often proffered as examples of inclusion in the curriculum. These attempts at inclusion fail to acknowledge the fact that White histories have become so normative and central to the experience of schooling that a White reality is evidenced on a daily basis whereas the inclusion of other groups are highly tokenistic or at best superficially addressed.

Given the changing population demographics in Canadian urban (and suburban) spaces, a superficial inclusion of these diverse heritages is problematic. The dropout rate of Black students in Ontario (more than 40%) has been cause for alarm and has recently heralded the development of an Africentric Alternative school. This rate of school failure, whether one locates the blame on individual or structural factors, is clearly indicative of significant challenges in the education system. Another emerging conversation in Canadian cities is related to the failure rate among other immigrant and minoritized groups. For example, the negative experiences of First Nations students in the school system have been extensively documented. Recent data indicates that 42% of Portuguese and 39% of Spanish children in Toronto are also experiencing significant levels of school failure (Toronto District School Board [TDSB], 2010). These statistics necessitate moving beyond a superficial analysis that reintroduces notions of racial hierarchy and instead involves an examination of the existing social systems, practices, and processes that lead to such staggering rates of failure in urban communities.

If we are provided with a comprehensive picture of school failure that implicates multiple racialized groups, how might that influence the discourse of failure and pathology that is levied against Black communities? This line of reasoning questions the common conception of Black resistance and failure to adapt as well as the "model minorities" because academic concerns are emerging regarding the academic outcomes of these student groups as well.

In Canada, the outer urban rings or the areas that are marked as suburban have increasingly become the geographical site of diversity and difference. Given that the term “urban” can be regarded as a text unto which meaning is inscribed, a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which the term “urban” gets deployed as the context changes is central to identifying how teachers and school personnel can work effectively in urban–suburban schools and communities. One of the central concerns that should be targeted in these sites is leadership.

Reconceptualizing Leadership in a Canadian Context

The need to reconceptualize leadership in both urban and suburban schools has been informed by increased immigration precipitated by globalization. Historically, Western concepts of leadership have primarily replicated a hierarchical pattern; however, the changes in populations and cultural norms which challenge the individualistic nature of society have also precipitated notions of leadership that are more collaborative and designed to include multiple voices.

I argue for a notion of urban–suburban leadership that moves beyond the concept of individualized, hierarchical or positional leadership. For example, Beckman (1993) notes that leadership can be defined as “the ability to get others involved in solving problems, to recognize when a group requires direction, to interact with a group more effectively and to guide it to the accomplishment of a task” (p. 401). A focus on leadership can facilitate an increase in productivity among staff and students; develop a shared vision for the facility; and engage all stakeholders in the process of urban school improvement (Muchmore, Cooley, Marx, & Crowell, 2004). Muchmore et al. (2004) note that collaborative leadership is a more effective leadership style for urban sites given the myriad of intersecting and sometimes competing interests that would garner limited benefits from a more traditional hierarchical leadership structure.

Dantley and Tillman (2006) would argue that this reconceptualization of urban–suburban leadership should be transformative and focused on social justice practices. Their conception of moral and transformative leadership “investigates and proposes solutions for issues that generate and reproduce social inequities” (p. 17). Their notion of transformative leadership is also “committed to a pedagogy of freedom that labours to see democratic practice and equitable treatment of all members of the learning community regardless of race, gender, class, ability, age, or sexual orientation” (p. 22).

Urban–suburban school leaders who are transformative and socially just must find ways to engage their school staff in diversity initiatives. In their research with aspiring urban teachers, Solomon, Campbell, and Allen (2007) found that social justice initiatives in urban schools emerged most effectively when "ownership" of the initiative was distributed among "interested" teachers who had a commitment to equity issues. The teacher candidates who participated in this study valued school leaders

> who moved beyond mechanistic and bureaucratic management that focused on the technical, procedural, rule-enforcing, and efficiency-maximizing approach to embrace a knowledge-based, committed, and authentic participation in equity initiatives within schools. (p. 215)

Urban–suburban school leaders must also negotiate how to relate to multiple communities. The multiple interests and subjectivities that are inherent in urban geographies limit the effective deployment of the term *community* which is often assumed to represent the historically located, shared, and contextualized meanings and ideologies (Daniel, 2007). However, the diversity of urban (and increasingly suburban) spaces makes it difficult to identify which communal factors should be privileged. In such instances, the employment of the term *educational collectives* in which there are clearly identified goals and objectives that are designed to enhance the quality of life for the members of a geographically demarcated spatial location becomes a more viable way of encouraging diverse participation. The majority of parents are interested in the safety, well-being and educational opportunities for their children. Privileging such shared aims along with the recognition that those aims cut across color, class, ethnic, and religious boundaries removes the power struggles that may be evidenced in the enactment or development of notions of community. I believe that it is this conception of community that would be most effective for principals and teacher leaders to employ in working toward transformative and actionable projects in their schools.

In Dantley's (2003) view, transformative leadership also "demands that educational leaders critically assess the asymmetrical relations of power in the organizational context and deconstruct, through a critical hermeneutic, those practices and cultural artifacts that engender an anti-democratic discourse" (p. 2). He further argues that "[I]t forthrightly engages the existence of race, class and gender inequalities present in schools as an agenda for institutional change" (p. 1). In a Canadian context, however, the ongoing failure to examine and to name constructs of difference as central sites of interrogation severely curtails the possibilities for transformational leadership. The ongoing ethic of politeness and political correctness relegates conversations of race, specifically, to private spaces, and labels those who openly name it as "trouble makers." This failure to name the specific sites of oppression and the constant erasure of problematic race relations serves to maintain the technologies of marginalization that replicate inequitable relations of power.

Urban–suburban school leaders must also learn how to practice "leadership across the color line." In a Canadian context the reality is that there are significantly fewer racially minoritized teachers and principals for placement in diverse urban schools. A recent study by the Toronto District School Board indicates that their student body is made up of 75% visibly racialized students while the school staff continues to be more than 80% White. Rather, the challenge that emerges is finding ways to support the engagement of White teachers and administrators with socially just discourses and practices. An additional challenge is altering the derogatory discourses and perceptions of the "urban" so that all educators can envision the possibilities and promise of working in urban and (increasing diverse) suburban schools.

An explicit recognition and naming of inequities based on race, gender, and class relations would necessitate that teachers and principals change their practices and has the potential to unsettle relations of dominance. The ongoing investment of Canadian educators in tropes of color blindness and multiculturalism provide them with the security of a partial vision of Canadian society while simultaneously ensuring that social relations remain the same. It is this desire for an imagined Canadian past of tolerance and the romanticized story of hard work and success which limits the possibilities for transformative leadership in urban–suburban schools. It also means that leadership must move beyond the figurehead concept (one person in charge) to ensure that educators throughout the school feel a responsibility to "lead" with socially just practices. Leadership in urban and suburban schools cannot rest solely on the shoulders of the principal while the teaching staff engages in efforts to maintain a Canadian story which erases the histories and current realities of racially minoritized groups.

Conclusion

This article has examined the importance of reconceptualizing notions of urban and suburban in a Canadian context. I explored the uniqueness of Canadian social and institutional structures that have created an urban reality that, though replicating some of the markers identified with urban in an American context, is not a mirror image. This fact has necessitated a way of framing the urban and exploring opportunities for teacher and leadership preparation that are unique to Canadian societies. The existence of multicultural discourses in education as well as the shifting of racialized bodies from urban to suburban spaces has resulted in a radical shift in the demographic of suburban spaces while a number of Whites return to the inner core of the city, thereby challenging the conflation of urban with inner city. This article has employed the notion of the dialectic as a framework that can be employed to understand the forms of resistance to a reconceptualization of the urban–suburban divide as well as providing a lens that can facilitate those shifting conceptions. Specifically within an educational context, I have argued that the necessary changes in urban and suburban schools will have to appropriate adequate space for a re-examination of leadership that is collaborative, transformative, socially just, and moves beyond the hierarchical construction of the individual leader role.

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Bio

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