

Georgia Education Research Conference 2014  
Proposal

Title:

Race-Neutral Policies, Quasi-Policies and Privilege Related to Zoning in an Atlanta School District

Purposes:

Examine the way “race-neutral” school rezoning practices at an Atlanta area school district were leveraged by key stakeholders to create a decidedly race-based outcome that disadvantaged and isolated Latino students. In addition, I seek to understand how this situation fits into the broader national context and the apparent trend toward public school re-segregation (Bishoff, 2008; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Siegel-Hawley, 2013).

Perspectives/Theoretical Frameworks:

Critical race theory (CRT) provides a useful framework in analyzing this situation—the process, implementation and outcome. This theoretical perspective includes the following tenants: *interest convergence, counter-storytelling, whiteness as property, the permanence of racism, and a critique of liberalism*—which challenges race neutrality, colorblindness, and meritocracy (Horsford, 2011). Critical race theory also embraces a commitment to remedying racial inequity. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on challenging the notion of race-neutrality in policy-making and the permanence of racism. Critical race theory’s focus on institutional, rather than individual acts of racism speaks to the ways that the school district’s presumably “race-neutral” problem formation and decision-making produced such a racially, linguistically, and socio-economically isolating outcome. I argue that this outcome was likely intentional and was buffeted by the district’s established institutional processes and policies. A large part of this process involved input from key stakeholders via open school board forums, letters, emails and petitions to the redistricting committee. These stakeholders include parents, students, educators, area businesses and community organizations. While this process may appear race-neutral on the surface, it is, in fact fraught with racial implications.

Using Omi and Winant’s work, I posit that in reaction to the racial upsurge of Latino/a immigrants, the white area residents undertook a racist “racial project” in an attempt to maintain their economic, social and educational interests (1994). According to Omi and Winant, “A racial project can be defined as *racist* if and only if it creates or reproduces structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race.” (1994, p. 71)

The actions of the white residents may additionally be influenced by beliefs about recent Latino/a immigrant families’ seeming refusal to assimilate. In this case, the chief concern appears to be related to the learning of English. Leonardo and Hunter describe this as “nativist attitudes” (2009). They explain that these types of attitudes lead to a resentment by some at having to accommodate the language (basic communication) needs of immigrants. Some of the complaints leveled by residents concerned the resources spent on teaching English to Latino/a students. I believe that these types of

sentiments reflect the nativist attitudes addressed by Leonardo and Hunter. Efforts to adopt English-only language instruction policies and anti-immigration efforts are another manifestation of these nativist fears (2009).

## Methods

This paper is a work-in-progress, and though I have already initiated a cursory investigation through examining newspaper accounts, policy documents, and considering my own first-hand account, I seek to conduct a more in-depth and comprehensive study via the following methods:

The primary methods I will use in conducting this study are document analysis and interviews. The documents I will analyze are varied and include newspaper accounts, school board notes documenting all public meetings, and the three proposed and final redistricting plans along with GIS generated neighborhood maps and the formal board rezoning policies and procedures. These items will be examined related to content and perspective, and will provide necessary context.

Additionally, the school board notes will identify key vocal stakeholders who may be open to participation in this study. The interviews of these key stakeholders will provide additional valuable data.

Two 45 minute interviews will be conducted with each person. The first will be open-ended with the interviewer asking a general question asking participants to discuss their experience of the events. Other questions will proceed based on their responses. The second meeting will be more specific with the interviewer asking the participants to perhaps elaborate on, and/or clarify comments made in the previous meeting. Each interview will be recorded and transcribed and shared with the participants.

Transcripts of these interviews as well as relevant supportive document content will then be analyzed.

## Implications:

This study has the potential to bring to light a situation, that up until now, has not been adequately investigated or addressed related the district's stated rezoning policy, its implementation and outcome in this case, and the effects of this outcome on the relocated students. The expectation is that the result of this inquiry will bring about more equitable considerations that will benefit *all* of the district's students.

## References

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