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The "Beating Heart" of a Community:
Redefining Neighborhood Schools as Real Utopias
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Introduction

Over the last 60 years, the link between schools and neighborhoods has been progressively weakened by increasing school choice. Discussions of school choice tend to focus on race, class, and academics (as measured by test scores), framing neighborhood schools as a last resort for desperate families. However, neighborhood schools were never completely abandoned by families and have a unique potential to provide stability within their communities. **This project looks at how some parents are redefining the "neighbor-hood school" experience by prioritizing space and community, challenging capitalist ideas of schooling.**

Race	Percent
White	61%
Non-white	39%

Gender	Percent
Female	95%

Class	Percent	Definition
Working	14%	No college, unskilled job
Lower Middle	20%	Some college, semi-skilled job
Middle	41%	Four-year college degree, white collar job
Upper Middle	25%	Graduate/professional degree, highly professional job

Figure 1. Demographic characteristics of participants.

Methods

1. Passive recruitment through posts in community Facebook groups
2. 44 semi-structured interviews lasting 1-2 hours, conducted via BlueJeans
   - Conducted by Margaret Tebbe (28) and Marion Standefer (16)
   - Participants received $50 in compensation
   - Philadelphia residents with children in grades K-8 during the 2019-20 school year
3. Participants checked interview transcripts and short analytic memos for accuracy
4. Transcripts coded inductively using Atlas.ti

Results

Journey to School

- Anchor parents and children in space and help them feel ownership over the city
  - Expressed through autonomous movement, sense of safety
- Build relationships with other people in and outside of neighborhood
  - Daily travel creates new opportunities to interact

"It shrinks their world into a digestible size and scope, right? If you think about the scale of cities, and being human friendly, for a kid **to have a couple blocks radius that they feel familiar with, ownership of,** *it gives them buy in to the physical and social environment. […] that's a really powerful thing and autonomous development."*

"There is this whole generation of people who live in this neighborhood who know who we are […] **They know us as the people who walk."**

"The whole school meets in the upper yard […] at the end they all go through the school creed […] then they all point to a random person and sometimes it's like a kindergartener pointing across the yard at like an eighth grader and they go, 'and you will have a phenomenal day at RL Wright School!'"

*"*_You do get to know people in a very organic kind of way_ *[…] they're not necessarily your friends, your kid's friend, they're not necessarily in the same grade."*

Pick-up and Drop-off

- Shared rituals create collective effervescence: builds sense of community
- Regular, informal contact builds parent relationships across boundaries (i.e. age)
- Clearly defined role and space for parents
- Important caveat: working parents are sometimes excluded

Shared Values

- Collective orientation and reciprocity
  - School provides for community: gathering space, resources (food)
  - Community provides for school: improving infrastructure, volunteering time
  - Parents care for each other's children

"Like there's people that are volunteering in the school right now, they're building the school library and it's all volunteers of people that are retired that live in the community. And I think that speaks a lot, **just that people believe in the school."**

"I believe that a public school […] **should be a place of community, not just for the kids who are currently there but for the surrounding community as well** *[…] a central location, to have it be a place where people go for community events."*

Framework

Real utopias (as defined by Erik Olin Wright) are projects that challenge structures of domination and present possibilities for real change.

Capitalism **destroys place** by removing meaning from space, transforming it into a product defined by exchange value. This frames schools as interchangeable rather than deeply connected to their neighborhoods.

Capitalism **corrodes community** by encouraging people to act only in their own interests. This makes education a zero-sum game where schools only have an obligation to provide for their own student and the community has no obligation to the school.

The **right to the city** challenges capitalism by calling for a city where all residents are in community with each other and can take space and make it their own.

Figure 2: Mosaic outside of Barclay Elementary that reads: "When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world." (Photo by author, September 2020)

Conclusion

Life in capitalist cities is characterized by alienation from space and isolation from other people. Combatting this is a key task of both social scientists and everyday residents. A growing group of urban parents are accomplishing this by choosing to participate in neighborhood schools. In making this choice, they create the beginnings of a real utopian project that prioritizes the school's role in creating a sense of community and ownership over urban space.

Real utopias are evaluated on three criteria:
- **Desirability:** This project combats the alienation and isolation of urban life.
- **Viability:** This project already exists in some schools, although more research on the inclusion of marginalized families is needed.
- **Achievability:** COVID-19 has drawn attention to the spatial and social impact of schools, creating "cracks in the system" that can be used to affect change.

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