

Community-School Partnerships as Racial Projects: Examining belonging for Newcomer Migrant Youth in Urban Education

Urban Education

1–32

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DOI: 10.1177/0042085920959126

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Abstract

The article conceptualizes community-school partnerships (CSP) as racial projects. Drawing on data from a mixed-methods study of how CSPs increase belonging for migrant youth, the article reveals existing tensions in CSPs from migrant youth ($N=63$) and stakeholder perspectives. Viewing CSPs through a racial project lens allows researchers and practitioners to identify, in both design and implementation, spaces of tension where attempts to disrupt the existing status quo and structure opportunity can ultimately reproduce inequality, especially given the “commonsense” logic of racial projects and coherence of neoliberal ones about belonging and immigrant integration. Implications for understanding CSPs as racial projects are discussed.

Keywords

community-school partnerships, immigrant students, urban education, newcomers, racial projects, public libraries

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Introduction

In the face of neoliberal reforms, competitive school choice policies, charter proliferation, and high-stakes testing accountability, urban school districts continue to struggle to provide equity-oriented academic and social-emotional programming that increases belonging for minoritized youth, especially language learning populations such as the newcomer migrant youth in the present study (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018; Cammarota, 2011; Kirshner, 2009; Lipman, Vaughan, & Gutierrez, 2014; Noguera & Cannella, 2006). Urban districts and their schools are challenged by enduring problems such as poverty and a lack of political capital that stifle reforms for low-income communities of color (Warren, 2011). While the impact of neoliberal reforms is certainly documented in previous scholarship, efforts to understand alternatives to neoliberal reforms including the impact of community-school and community-based reform strategies and models are needed. In addition, these alternative models are powerful and promising when collective mobilization at the grassroots level occurs, including parent voice, minoritized youth perspectives, and designing pro-programming based on community needs (Ishimaru, 2019). At times notions of community and democracy are leveraged in contemporary education policy discourses and reforms, but to what end or degree these discourses actually generate systemic and sustainable change is uncertain. This is in part because scholars, researchers, and practitioners do not define community, or if they do, community often becomes the will of those with the most powerful voice (Fendler, 2006). The present study acknowledges that a lack of trust and fraught racial dynamics have led to urban education reform's superficial and episodic nature at the school and district level (Warren, 2011). The populations that urban districts serve have little capital and power, which sustains a lack of urgency or incentive to change these schools.

While community-school partnerships (CSP) have often occurred between schools (and districts) and community-based organizations, this study engages differently with the notion of community-school partnership and offers a perspective of a school district-library partnership as a case example. This partnership involved an after-school and summer program as the central intervention to increase newcomer migrant youth social belonging.¹ Through an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, social belonging was defined from youth perspectives as relational. Additionally, the aim of the CSP was to develop a program for newcomers that increased

social belonging through a civic-minded curriculum rather than narrowly focus on English language learning. A tension emerged, however, because stakeholders' perspectives of belonging were rooted in commonplace neoliberal ideologies about immigrant assimilation, learning English, and becoming economically useful (Goodman, 2015). Acknowledging this tension prompted the inquiry in this article, which relates to how CSPs function as a racial project that can simultaneously structure opportunities (for social belonging) and perpetuate inequality (Conchas et al., 2020).

Relatedly, questions emerged through this study about what *belonging* meant for youth and for project stakeholders, and how belonging was a contested concept, in part due to the discrimination migrant youth face upon entering U.S. schools and societal contexts of reception (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009). The article documents the origins and intentions of the CSP in this study, and with a critical eye, also describes its limitations. More specifically, I draw on the concept of racial projects (Omi & Winant, 2014), and using the partnership in Hartford, CT as a case example, explore the tensions of a *racial project* such as the CSP. This CSP sought to increase social belonging and appeared to have coherent political and social integration aims of neoliberalism (Conchas et al., 2020). The article refers to existing tensions in CSPs that aim to structure opportunity and create sustainable change but simultaneously reproduce and maintain inequality. While some educational scholarship has conceptualized schools and education (choice) policies as racial projects (e.g., Conchas et al., 2020; Rodriguez, 2017; Staiger, 2006) to explore how micro and macro structures become tangible and racial meanings are enacted, less work has explored how alternatives to neoliberal reforms, like CSPs, work through what are often conflicting aims.

This article illustrates, on the one hand, that the CSP intended to centralize newcomer youth voices about the meaning of belonging and provide a space where they could express their humanity and dignity. On the other hand, the article also shows how these aims were inherently troubled and challenged by the pull of broader racialized assimilationist logics that only saw them as belonging through their acquisition of English and “productive” skills (Rodriguez, 2019). Viewing community-based partnerships through a racial project lens allows researchers and practitioners to identify, in both design and implementation, spaces of tension where attempts to disrupt the existing status quo and structure opportunity can ultimately reproduce inequality, especially given the “commonsense” logic of racial projects and coherence of neoliberal ones about belonging and immigrant integration (Conchas et al., 2020; Rodriguez, 2017).

Centralizing Belonging in a CSP and Purpose

The story of Hartford, CT is one of promise, as school district personnel and community stakeholders came together to identify a community need related to newly arrived high school aged migrant students (hereafter: newcomers) from a variety of countries in Central and South America and Africa. Newcomers were in the U.S. 0 to 30 months. But much like Warren (2011) highlighted, enduring challenges continue to plague sustainable transformation in urban districts, especially in managing newcomers' sense of belonging to schools and society. Part of the difficulty relates to how community partners perceived meanings of belonging, and how the racial dynamics that are part of the immigrant integration experience manifest in a program and partnership. The CSP intended to support newcomer youth belonging and integration but also reified particular ways of desired belonging (i.e., ability to speak English as a marker of belonging). Given the racial dynamics related to migrants, it is important in this critical analysis of community-school strategies to examine how such efforts structure opportunity and also reify or perpetuate inequality. To this end, the article examines the CSP here through the lens of Omi and Winant's (2014) seminal work about racial projects.

The CSP aimed to address newcomers' needs by providing a program to increase social belonging to the community and schools. This article analyzes newcomer youth and community stakeholders' perceptions of the CSP, how it functioned as a strategy for reform, and its impact on newcomer migrant belonging. This unique CSP with a public library, and first of its kind program to date, has not been without challenges. The article also discusses the degree to which belonging was fostered and sustained by drawing out the racial dynamics and hierarchies of deservingness that are evident as migrant populations learn English and participate in school and society (Rodriguez, 2018).

Through stakeholders' voices, the article explains the promise and problems of community-school efforts that target language learning migrant populations, and how a well-intentioned, democratic, equity-minded reform can still fall victim to neoliberal, assimilationist ideologies. To get at the various and competing ideologies in this project, it became important to consider the racial dynamics and perspectives toward migrant youth. To this end, the article connects the literature on urban schools, community-school partnerships, and racial projects to contemplate how "community" structures opportunity or further reifies inequality for newcomers. The concept of racial projects (Omi & Winant, 2014) helps make sense of the complex nature of urban school districts and larger community-based organizations such as the public library in this study. Despite limitations of the CSP, the significance of this

project is that it builds case knowledge about a unique CSP as a strategy of reform for increasing social belonging for newcomers. Implications and lessons learned are also discussed. Next, I discuss relevant scholarship and the conceptual contributions in this article.

Review of Relevant Research

To build on previous research on urban education and CSPs, this project is situated within research on urban education reform in order to offer the background in which the CSP here operates, and the role of CSPs as potential opportunities for increasing social mobility and educational access for low-income and minoritized youth such as the newcomers migrant youth in this project. While the challenges in urban education reform are not new, this CSP, with its progressive, asset-based intentions related to migrant newcomer youth social belonging were, and yet tensions emerged. This review of the literature suggests that while critical perspectives on community-school efforts have emerged, they have been limited in analyzing the racial and power dynamics within CSPs.

Enduring Challenges in Urban Education Reform

Scholars have long noted the challenges of urban schools, especially as urban centers grew rapidly in the latter half of the nineteenth century, in part due to the influx of migrants in larger urban cities (Rury, 2012). With great social and cultural differences in cities, schools, once intended to be sites of democratic socialization and commonality, became spaces that maintained or disrupted inequality across diverse groups in urban cities. Continued dilemmas occurred as schools became more about social mobility and status, especially at the high school level, rather than shared or democratic equality aims (Labaree, 1997). Additionally, struggles at local levels related to curriculum, graduations rates, school resources, and supports remain (Rury, 2012). Even with school improvements, schools still struggle to serve low-income communities of color and immigrants living in poverty (Warren, 2005).

In addition to historical challenges to urban education reform, scholars note that neoliberal reforms related to school turnarounds, magnet and other forms of selective enrollment and charter proliferation have further divided communities (Rodriguez, 2017). Often, what is happening in school is disconnected from the communities that local schools are serving. Indeed, market reforms have contributed to and maintained inequalities in many urban communities in the name of “choice” (Cucchiara, 2013). For instance, Lipman (2015) describes how neoliberalism—the

transference of market forces in economics to all aspects of life—diminishes equity and access to resources in many urban communities. Relying on the logic of the market, urban school systems create winners and losers in education, and often marginalized groups in low-income urban communities are at the bottom of the rung with regard to accessing educational goods. Orfield and Frankenberg (2013) describe market theory as a model built upon the belief that what individuals choose, based on the options available, will drive the quality and production of a good or service. Orfield and Frankenberg (2013) argue that choice is palatable and “Americanized” as it centers on capitalist ideas of freedoms, creativity, markets, and competition—if people have been conditioned to believe these ideals are fundamental to democracy and now all aspects of life, then these practices logically apply to educational settings, as well (p. 4). Market theory within education however comes with limitations and contributes to the decline in urban cities and their school systems (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013).

Embedded in the challenges of urban education reforms is the lack of attention to racial dynamics and inequities. Recent scholarship suggests that neoliberalism serves to safeguard and reinforce white supremacy under the guise of a market ideology providing equal opportunities to all and predicated on a “race neutral” and “colorblind” discourse (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Gillborn, 2014; Lipman, 2015). While to date, community-school initiatives have been studied as alternatives, if not antidotes, to market reforms, they are not without racial inequities and dynamics similar to those ignored through market logic. As this project shows, newcomer migrant youth, who are also language learners, remain a racialized population, and their status as such is often exacerbated by their language minority status. Even in this project that focused on increasing newcomer migrant belonging, challenges emerged in relation to racial and language inequities. This tenuous dynamic of simultaneously promoting belonging, and thus educational opportunities, while structuring inequality is the subject of this article and the heart of a critical approach to studying community-school initiatives by examining how they function potentially as racial projects.

In the current study, the program for newcomers through the community-school partnership aimed to increase social belonging by centering youth voices, but stakeholders challenged these goals by focusing on English language instruction and instilling in newcomers notions of grit, hard work, and career readiness. On the surface, these colorblind notions appear to offer opportunities, but in reality challenges emerged when such “colour-blind language dismisses the saliency of race-specific analyses” (Gillborn, 2014, p. 27). Instead, racial discrimination occurs through

assigning these colorblind individual predispositions (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Leonardo, 2007). Additionally, because individuals under neoliberalism are judged principally by their profit-making capacity and contributions to the market economy (Baltodano, 2012), individuals or communities that are perceived as financial ‘liabilities’ are also seen as “less deserving” (Rodriguez, 2018, p. 11). This is critically important in a political landscape that blames migrants for “stealing jobs,” while paradoxically being a drain on the economy (Rodriguez, 2018). In the context of this project, newcomer experiences of belonging were prioritized but unintended consequences in urban education reforms remained, instilling in them a need to be of use to the American economy through curricular activities and English-language learning.

Community-School Partnerships as Strategies of Reform

One antidote to the enduring struggles mentioned above is community-school partnerships. These partnerships provide many supports for children living in poverty in urban centers, including access to health care, nutrition, and mental health services and leadership development. In addition to providing key resources, they can provide networks of support (social capital), relational power, and political organizing opportunities (Warren, 2005). Another key aspect of community-school partnerships is that they take many forms. Oakes et al. (2017) explain that, “community schools vary in the programs they offer and the way they operate, depending on their local context. However, four features—or pillars—appear in most community schools: (1) Integrated student supports (2) Expanded learning time and opportunities (3) Family and community engagement (4) Collaborative leadership and practices.” These scholars note the importance of integrating these pillars, which remains a challenge in urban schools. Warren (2005) explains additional ways communities and schools become linked. He describes how scholars have used terms such as community-school partnerships, relations, strategies, or initiatives. In analyzing efforts to overcome the “disconnection” between communities and schools, Warren shares three types of community school collaborations: the service model, the development model, and the organizing model. The service model relates to the full-service community schools model in many states. The development model refers to community sponsorship of charter schools and the organizing model relates to school-community organizing.

While each of these models serve marginalized communities, problems exist with each. For example, the development model and its focus on choice and revitalization has had mixed results in terms of how it has improved

educational outcomes for minoritized groups (Cucchiara, 2013). Relatedly, with full-service and organizing models, who/what constitutes “community” when studying community-school partnerships remains a nebulous concept due to the complexity and variation in stakeholders, power dynamics, and effective models that lead to transformation (Noguera & Cannella, 2006). Yet, CSPs in urban education are vital to belonging and learning, especially for immigrant students. Further, Warren, Mapp, and Community Organizing and School Reform Project (2011) have examined the work of community organizations in low-come urban communities. These scholars argue that community development and community organizing models can be fruitful strategies for educational reform. Fine and colleagues make the case for deepening theoretical lenses to assess “spaces of community-based educational sites” (p. 131) because they offer “recuperation, resistance, communal and personal identity work” (p. 132). While community-school relations facilitate belonging, positive identity development for minoritized youth, and are often an alternative to the high stakes testing and accountability regimes in schools that disproportionately disadvantaged students of color and immigrant students, there are systemic and racial inequities that persist. Additionally, these models do not capture the myriad of partnerships that are formalized in urban districts.

These contributions of community-school efforts to increase belonging are critical in this CSP. Relying on the ideal that urban districts are by and for the democratic public, equity was a central aim in this project (Trujillo, 2012). It was believed that through a unique community-school partnership, involving the public library and school district, belonging and access to resources could be more equitably distributed. Even with these noble aims, power and race dynamics manifest, and stakeholders who occupy positions of power, especially those leading the implementation efforts related to the partnership have a greater voice (Trujillo, 2012). Ultimately, the newcomer youth do not have decision-making power even though their voices were sought and built into the program that was developed and evaluated in this project. This was a major tension, and contributed to the tenuous nature of this CSP as a racial project; this CSP program that sought to centralize newcomers’ voices and increase their sense of belonging but then racialized them through assimilationist logics and particular types of ideologies about belonging in the U.S. This article engages in a productive and reflexive critique of community-school efforts that target marginalized groups. To date, critical perspectives on community-school efforts have been limited in analyzing racial and power dynamics with few exceptions (Ishimaru, 2019). This article demonstrates how this CSP constrained youths’ voices about what it meant to belong through its emphasis on English language acquisition and other

“productive” skills. A racial projects lens reveals the tensions and broader racialized assimilationist ideologies that eclipsed the aim of increasing social belonging, and disquietingly shaped youths’ understanding of themselves.

Conceptualizing Community-School Partnerships as Racial Projects

The critical perspective in this article draws from sociologists Omi and Winant’s concept of racial projects, which is part of their larger theory of racial formation in society. Omi and Winant (2014) argue, “Racial formation emphasizes the social nature of race, the absence of any essential racial characteristics, the historical flexibility of racial meanings and categories, the conflictual character of race at both the ‘micro’ and ‘macro-social’ levels, and the irreducible political aspect of racial dynamics” (p. 4). They underscore the contentious relationship between the macro policy level, the meso organizational level (such as the school district or school level), and the micro interactional dynamics (i.e., adults or stakeholders and newcomer youth). Omi and Winant (2014) and others (Bonilla-Silva, 1997) argue that racism is a form of dominance that manifests in social practices and interactions at macro, meso, and micro levels. They urge that race be analyzed at the macro-meso levels through analysis of “institutional arrangements, organizational structure, and group relations” (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 92) as well as micro-level interactions, including how those affected by policy respond. A key concept in this analysis is the racial project, which Omi and Winant (2014) use to describe the process of connecting “what race means in a particular discursive or ideological practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon that meaning” (p. 125). For example, the label of “at-risk”—a label often applied to marginalized groups such as the newcomers in this project and one that is also leveraged as a rationale for community-school efforts—not only assigns a racialized meaning to an individual student and influences their (self-)perceptions, but it also enables specific constructions of educational interventions and programs at an organizational and institutional level.

Furthermore, Victor Ray (2019) notes the salience of racial practices in organizations such as schools, churches, and individual workplaces. He says that organizations link racial schemas—generalizable assumptions, often unconscious, which influence actions and behaviors—with the distribution of resources. Ray’s (2019) argument is that race, racial constructions, and racial formations exist as schemas that are linked in and through organizations in ways that produce unequal distributions of resources. For instance, the

distribution of resources such as wages, job titles, and positions within the organizational hierarchy can be traced to racial schemas or patterns that exist across society. Race, Ray argues, can be studied as “the background in which organizations operate” (p. 29). The point is that in any project, program, or organization, resources are distributed across racial lines, and linked to neoliberal logics; schools are systems that are set up to produce winners and losers in education (Cucchiara, 2013; Labaree, 1997). But, rarely are the winners addressing the debts owed to minoritized communities. Instead, the onus to put oneself in the winner category is projected as an individual burden rather than a structural problem, which is also consistent with the logic of racialized social systems (Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

Omi and Winant (2014) discuss the notion of a racial project as a “building block” of racial formation in society (p. 13). Racial projects consist of an institutionalized process or practice (e.g., community-school partnership) and its meaning (i.e., how individuals make sense of it). In other words, racial projects are mechanisms, processes, or practices that allow for the ideological and practical work of constructing racial identities. Racial projects link racial signifiers (ideological, racial meaning, or ideas about race) with social structures (mechanisms, processes, and practices). In a racialized social system, the racial formation process produces real consequences for people of color because racial projects contribute to how resources are distributed across racial lines (Omi & Winant, 2014). Conchas and colleagues (2015) explain that racial projects connect what race means in particular practices and can influence how everyday experiences are racially organized and highlight that “every racial project serves to reproduce, extend, or challenge the broader constellation of race relations” (p. 22). It is important to note that conceptualizing racial projects, and the tensions embedded in them as part of understanding the impact of CSPs on newcomer belonging, reveals the varying degree to which racial projects influence educational equity and access to opportunity.

The notion of racial projects allows us to precisely pay attention to competing meanings of race, as they work through institutionalized practices and social relations, manifest themselves in community-school partnerships which have as their express aim the goal of putting the needs and voices of marginalized communities first. Moreover, Omi and Winant (2014) suggest that racial projects are also intimately tied to questions about immigrant integration and how integration is defined. Narratives or discourses about immigrant integration are often tied to broader racial logics that aim to rank, sort, and evaluate immigrant populations in relation to white mainstream norms. In this project, newcomer youth defined belonging in social and relational ways (Rodriguez, 2019), yet these youth-centered aims were overshadowed by English language

learning and career readiness activities similar to what dominates school curriculum and subtly limits access and opportunities for newcomers.² To the extent that this CSP increased belonging, the critical perspective leveraging the notion of racial projects reveals the double-edged sword of such projects. As such, I argue that the critical perspective of racial projects adds a much-needed contribution to analyzing community-school efforts in urban districts with minoritized populations. Applying this critical lens, the article considers the macro-meso level dynamics of the partnership as a racial project and analyzes its impact on newcomer youths' sense of belonging, and uses stakeholder perspectives to illustrate the tensions that were navigated.

CSP Context

Urban Education Policy Landscape in Hartford

Urban education reforms have remained a challenge in Hartford. The district serves students living in poverty in a city with limited economic and educational opportunities (Nienhusser & Ives, 2020). Given the school district's neoliberal choice reforms in the last decade, college access remains a challenge as less than half of the Hartford Public Schools population enrolled in postsecondary education (Nienhusser & Ives, 2020). Like many urban districts, legacies of segregation and high concentrations of poverty impact, and often limit, the educational opportunities of students from racially/ethnically diverse backgrounds. Reforms in urban education such as school choice have yet to prove to be a successful strategy given that "choice" both structures and reproduces inequality for minoritized students (Rodriguez, 2017).

The landmark Supreme Court case, *Sheff v. O'Neill*, addressed the issue of how racial segregation had a negative impact on the education opportunities for students. The Court ruled that CT had to provide equal educational opportunity to all students (Eaton, 2007). Like other desegregation cases, there was no remedy or accountability to improve the schooling access and conditions for students in Hartford. Thus, the school district attempted several plans and settlements to address issues, that is, mandates related to voluntary school integration programs, magnet schools, and other school choice options (see, Nienhusser & Ives, 2020 for additional examples; Uslander & Cote, 2012). Additionally, a program called Open Choice allows students to enroll in local schools besides schools in their geographic district in order to reduce racial, ethnic, and economic isolation (CT General Assembly, 2016). But school choice yielded mixed results and did not necessarily improve economic and educational opportunities. This remains a challenge, especially as new immigrants are arriving in Hartford.³

Because of the 1996 *Sheff v. O'Neill* decision (238 Conn. 1, 687 A2d. 1267), choice programs in the Hartford area differ from choice programs in other areas of the state. Thus, the ruling mandated that the legislature and the executive branch search for remedial measures rather than ordering specific remedial action designed to address the racial, ethnic, and economic isolation experienced by some students.⁴ To date, reforms and additional complaints with the Office of Civil Rights reveal how minoritized students, especially language learning newcomers like those in this study, remain unable to access equitable educational opportunity (Frankenberg, 2007).⁵

Hartford has a higher number of English language learners (ELs) than any other Connecticut community. Almost 19% of the district's 20,132 students are ELs. The proportion is dramatically higher in the district's neighborhood (non-magnet) high schools that the students in the library-based program attend.⁶ These students come from an ever-broadening array of countries, and they represent, at the high school level, 31 native languages, with the largest groups speaking Spanish, Korean, and Arabic languages. The recently arrived population of newcomers in this study were in the country for 30 months or less, including a significant number (over 130 high school students) who have come to Hartford from Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricane Maria's devastation in 2017.

At the district level, a decade of reforms (2009–2019) attempted to serve language learning populations without attention to larger issues of social belonging. The district was concerned with the academic achievement of language learners (ELL), and the general trends across the nation related to the underachievement of ELL populations (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition [NCELA], 2016). Data on ELL performance in Connecticut demonstrated achievement gaps similar to those found in the national data and thus, reforms were targeted at increasing achievement.⁷ This provided an opportunity for the district to embrace additional community-school collaborations and partnerships with varying models. One of these partnerships is between the school district and the public library.⁸

Positionality and Methodology

I served as the project evaluator and collected and analyzed all of the data in the project. I have conducted research, including program evaluations, of community-school partnerships for a decade (2009–present). The first project (2012–2014) examined how a community-school partnership, specifically a full-service community-school, in Chicago increased belonging and activism for Latinx immigrant high school youth (Rodriguez, 2014). The

second examined how a community-school partnership in South Carolina (SC) fostered belonging and provided access to social resources to undocumented immigrant youth (2015–2018; Rodriguez, Monreal, & Howard, 2020). These projects have provided insight into the various approaches to CSPs. In Chicago, the activist landscape through community-school coalitions was strong, with CS staff in the public school serving as resources while youth learned specific organizing strategies to protest inequitable policies of the school board and consistent stakeholder engagement. Meanwhile, in South Carolina, the CSP entailed direct services and referrals for youth, in part due to the restrictive state policies that impacted undocumented immigrants (Rodriguez, 2018; Rodriguez & Monreal, 2017), but little parent empowerment or youth leadership development. There were significantly fewer opportunities to promote social belonging and immigrants' rights in the community, and youth perspectives were less central in SC whereas youth were key stakeholders in Chicago. The stakeholders at the public library and school district contacted me for my expertise in community-school partnerships, immigrant belonging, and evaluation to co-lead this effort to examine how the CSP between the library and district could increase social belonging newcomer immigrant and refugee youth and to research and evaluate the CSP. As a critical scholar and activist, and a child of a Cuban immigrant and first-generation college student, I approached the project with a commitment to increasing belonging and advocacy for newcomers.

Research Questions and Design

This article focuses on the guiding question of: How does a community-school partnership function as a racial project? These results in this article are part of this critical analysis of the community-partnership efforts, impact, and limitations. The larger project utilized an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design (Hanson et al., 2005). In the first phase, I collected qualitative data from youth to explore definitions of belonging. In the second phase, I developed the survey for a pre/posttest that included items about personal, school, and community belonging (Rodriguez & Acree, 2020). Hanson and colleagues (2005) explain that in the exploratory sequential approach, the researcher begins with a qualitative research phase and explores the views of participants. The data are then analyzed, and the information used to build the second, quantitative phase. “The qualitative phase may be used to build an instrument that best fits the sample under study, to identify appropriate instruments to use in the follow-up quantitative phase, and to explore relationships when study variables are unknown” (Hanson and colleagues [2005], p. 226-229).

Participants

The participants in this article include community partners/stakeholders and newcomer youth. As noted earlier in the section describing the partnership, the community partners in this project include the director of the library programming for immigrants (Alma), the English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) director for the public-school district (Martha), and the adult learning specialist for the library (Edie). Additional project personnel were involved at varying stages of the program for newcomers but were not included in this article because they did not have leadership roles in the project. The three community partners are white females and speak languages in addition to English. One stakeholder is a bilingual immigrant. The newcomers range from country of origin, age, and languages spoken, but were recruited for this program due to their newcomer status.

Data Collection

I conducted multiple semi-structured interviews with the school district partner, library-based project personnel, including essential staff, teachers, and anyone involved in the program that newcomers attended. Additional qualitative data were collected from a sample of newcomer youth ($N = 63$), including focus groups with the youth and semi-structured interviews to learn about experiences in the community and library-program. Focus groups were conducted approximately every two months as newcomers progressed through different aspects of the curriculum (e.g., home, school, Hartford; Rodriguez, 2019). The focus groups included questions related to newcomer experiences at the library in relation to their school experiences, program related activities such as the curriculum, and relationships with the teachers, library-based personnel, and peers to gauge the impact of the community-school partnership.

Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis was iterative. I wrote analytic memos during each site visit and after each interview (Birks et al., 2008). The purpose of these memos was to reflect on the data in relation to the concept of belonging and community. This was important to understanding the impact of the CSP in order to contribute to the literature. In the latter months of the study, I wrote memos about instances when youth discussed moments when youth felt that they were focusing on their English in the program as a way to have a better life—a narrative internalized through the partnership.

In addition to memos, I coded the qualitative data in multiple phases, using open and focused coding strategies common in qualitative data analysis (Saldaña, 2013). During phase one, I coded interview data with community partners. Initial codes (defined as key words or phrases, Saldaña, 2013) included: “it’s a hub” (referring to the library), perceptions of the role of the partnership in increasing belonging, and challenges. Because this study intends to build knowledge about how community-partnerships in unique collaborations such as public libraries can increase belonging and provide resources for immigrant communities, this open coding strategy was necessary. During the second phase, I coded interview and focus group data from youth and community stakeholders. I aimed to understand dimensions of belonging from newcomers’ perspectives in relation to previous literature, which often associates belonging with assimilation and English-language proficiency for newcomers. Returning to the conceptual framework (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010), I applied the notion of racial projects to illustrate how community-school partnerships, when understood as racial projects, structure opportunities and inequalities among these newcomers in the program. This results in a racial project. A key contribution was learning that belonging was relational for youth, which was made possible through the partnership. And yet, project personnel perceived newcomers who progressed in English-language use at faster rates more successful and having more potential for leadership and job development, which limited opportunities for newcomers as their belonging became associated with English-language learning and their economic viability (Rodriguez & Acree, 2020).

While this was an exploratory, meaning qualitative driven mixed methods study, survey data was collected and analyzed, and problematized as a data source in this article about CSPs as racial projects. After compiling the students’ responses from both the pre and posttest surveys, the individual pre and posttest cases were combined into singular cases in order to compare the difference in responses.⁹ After recoding the data, the responses were combined into three separate scales¹⁰ (based on a previous factor analysis of the data).¹¹ I conducted paired sample *t*-tests for all three areas to analyze any changes between the pre and post-tests. Overall, survey data contributed evidence of an overall increase in social belonging for newcomers. In this article, I refer to survey data to problematize it as a data source and to reveal how youth reported feelings of unbelonging at times in the CSP program (Rodriguez, 2019).

Findings

The data in this project reveal how community-school partnerships function as tenuous racial projects, that is, they structure opportunity and inequality in many urban communities. Below, I describe the three themes that speak to this: “*It’s a hub*,” “*They need English*.”: *CSP structuring inequality, and Tensions of belonging*: “*We’re in the same boat [. . .] we need to speak English*.” These themes reflect the complexity of racial projects because such projects are both productive and exclusionary. In other words, they structure opportunities to belong while excluding some newcomers from opportunity.

Community-School Partnerships as “Hubs for Democracy”

From stakeholder perspectives, the CSP was important for addressing a community need. The district partner, Martha noted, “We thought about this. What gap did we see? What did we need to work on [in the community and school district]? When you walk into this library, you see it. It’s like a hub.” The library partner (Alma) explained that Hartford has been facing a lot of challenges serving newcomers and immigrants. She said: “We already had a lot of the infrastructure in place. We run other programs for immigrants, including the citizenship one, so this was by no means a stretch to develop something for the youth. The library is a central place for immigrants in this community” (Group Interview, 2/6/18; 6/5/18). Additional data from project leaders suggest that the library is a “hub” and provides a space for newcomers to learn about library-based programs for obtaining citizenship and legal services. From the community partners’ perspective, the library “builds the community here from the moment they arrive,” referring to the high school newcomers, since school supports are often insufficient.

The CSP stakeholders discussed how they envisioned the library as a space to provide support for newcomers. The library partner underscored that newcomers are learning languages and need “support systems as they are forming their identity.” To elaborate, a district partner stated, “part of that identity involves coming to a new place. The CSP provides the newcomers with an authentic experience to learn English in context. When developing this curriculum, we made sure it was authentic to their everyday experience, including information about the school, neighborhood, services for immigrants and refugees, and the library” (Group Interview, 2/6/18). When asked about how the library is different from schools, she explained, “The library is such a rich place of information for them—a hub. They get to walk around and see the different things that are available here. This library is right here in the center of Hartford. They walk out there and they’re at city hall.” From the community partners’

perspectives, belonging and democratic visions were embedded in the CSP site of the library. The CSP site served as a literal hub for building networks in key city agencies and building awareness of community organizations that provide services to immigrant populations (Rodriguez, 2019). Through this institutional arrangement, newcomer youth were able to learn about and access systems of support in the community.

“They need English.”: CSP structuring inequality

Even as the stakeholders sought to increase belonging, belonging became associated with English language learning. This is common when competing ideologies emerge, and historical narratives toward immigrants surface (Goodman, 2015). In part, the tension around belonging was inherent to this CSP because it included both an intention to increase social belonging, but as the stakeholders said, “the newcomers get to practice English in context while learning about the community and school (Group Interview, 3/2019). The CSP entailed ideologies about immigrant incorporation, and reinforced assimilationist ideologies through the curriculum and research design. In other words, migrant youth are often characterized and defined by their ability to assimilate, which equates to their English proficiency, and often schools and community-school partnerships end up centralizing English language learning interventions rather than focusing on migrant youth cultural and linguistic assets (Malsbary, 2013). Even with a focus on youths’ perspectives of belonging, newcomer identity and what it means to belong became a contested site of power relations within and across the CSP. The tensions within CSP racial projects were revealed in/through the data sources in this mixed-methods evaluation and the survey items and the descriptive results in particular (shared below).

In addition to the CSP stakeholders creating activities for English language learning that were not intended to be part of the program curriculum, stakeholders at the program level created additional data sources to unofficially track the youths’ English proficiency as part of the larger CSP. The “data” that they collected on youths’ English use was fabricated and not part of the original research evaluation plan but used to set boundaries around the construct of belonging. In other words, stakeholders, without expertise in English language learning or education, made up “assessments” about the English proficiency of newcomers, reinstating belonging in a field of power based on categorization and comparative hierarchies, which community stakeholders relied upon to structure opportunity for newcomers (Rodriguez & Acree, 2020). While I collected multiple data sources, stakeholders often mimicked researcher practices and created data sources to track youths’

English language learning and practice (Rodriguez & Acree, 2020). This was a challenging part of the larger evaluation and we consistently reflected upon these tensions about the purpose of the program in the CSP. Community stakeholders continued to associate belongingness with English language facility/proficiency and some project personnel collected their own data to support their ideologies. “They need English” was a repeated phrase by adults and echoed by students who said, “they tell us English only” (5/6/2020).¹² The tension, of course, was that youth reported in the survey that they feel “comfortable” with English in the program as well.

In addition to the made-up data from ground-level stakeholders, there was also an emphasis on data collection for the evaluation of the CSP (Rodriguez, 2019). Data and reporting as part of CSP evaluations complicate and contribute to the tensions, or in many cases amplify the tensions that persist in racial projects. Evaluation data included sources that often focused on language learning. For example, the survey that I created to measure social belonging included several references and indicators related to language (e.g., “I speak more in English than in my native language in the library program” and “I feel comfortable speaking my native language in library program”). These indicators were supposed to be generated from youth-led definitions of social belonging in the qualitative data; however, these items were negotiated with stakeholders in the CSP (Fieldnotes, 6/2017; 2/2018), and often used to compare and rank newcomers according to their English-language use even though that was not the intended use of the survey data.

Ultimately, the survey tool resulted from tensions and ideological struggles. Stakeholders commented on students’ English rather than on their increased belonging, and the hope that newcomers would get a job and have a future career (Fieldnotes, 5/2019). The survey asked about relationships with peers and adults. Youth largely reported they felt a sense of belonging to the CSP program on survey items related to their peer relations. For example, 73% of the survey responses showed that youth “made a new friend in the program.” Youth responses consistently show that 60% are comfortable in the program, learn about other cultures, and learn about the community and the library. The point is that the data shows an increased sense of social, relational belonging for newcomers rather than focusing on English-language use.

On the other hand, when items asked, “Is there an adult at the library that youth trust,” descriptive analysis of survey responses were mixed with the majority (60%: $N=38/63$) of students responding “no” that they did not have a trusting adult at the library. One possible explanation for these responses is that the youth felt that their interests and talents were discouraged (the survey item asked: do CSP staff encourage student interests and talents) despite feeling connected to the program space and peers. The survey responses included:

40% reported “sometimes”; 33% reported “often”; 6% reported “rarely”; 13% reported “never”; 8% did not report. These mixed results reflect the variation in how students perceived belonging in relation to their interests being valued or encouraged. Relatedly, youth reported their aspirations about entering the international relations field and social service professions while program staff encouraged community college and insurance careers (Focus Group, 5/2019).

These examples illustrate the tensions within the CSP due to ideological differences about the meaning of belonging, the additional information that project stakeholders created and perceived as data, and the very data sources embedded in the research design and evaluation of the CSP. Indeed, youth also internalized the English-only perspectives that were ultimately prioritized by stakeholders on the grassroots level in the everyday activities of the CSP program. In this way, the contested meanings of belonging are conflated and reduced as a political and racial project because the notion of belongingness became associated with English language practice, and the newcomers who “learned English faster,” were given additional opportunities to engage in youth development projects through the community-school, and were showcased in local newspapers as “success” stories, which reverberates across “good” immigrant narratives (Rodriguez, 2018). Thus, the data collected through the CSP also enabled a pathway for a particular type of belonging and future that relied upon English-dominant and neoliberal discourses of hard work, grit, and employability (Rodriguez & Acree, 2020).¹³

Tensions of Belonging: “We’re in the Same Boat [. . .] We Need to Speak English”

Data revealed that youth experienced an increase in their sense of belonging. They reported, “We are all in the same boat here,” which meant they connected with other newcomers, and shared linguistic and cultural challenges. The library, through the CSP, provided a space of belonging. When asked how the library-based program was different, a newcomer from Togo explained: “It’s like school, but not really. We can express ourselves. In school, it’s testing, memorizing. We don’t speak English well. It’s embarrassing. Here, all students are new immigrants, and no one will laugh at you” (Interview, 9/26/2017). All youths commented on how they felt comfortable for various reasons at the library program. A youth from Burundi said: “We are all new.” Despite evidence that the CSP increased newcomers’ sense of belonging by developing projects for other newcomers, learning about city government, and school board politics as they became “leaders” (Focus

Group, 6/2017), tensions emerged through the competing ideologies about what belonging meant to stakeholders. As the program evolved, and English practice became more central, youth commented that their feelings of isolation at school were compounded by the pressure to learn and practice English. One youth said, “People don’t get it. The pain. I try to explain that I know English” (Focus Group, 6/30/17).

Newcomers reported that they felt isolated because most of their days were spent in English-speaking only classes and then the library space became co-opted by some of the stakeholders’ visions for learning English.¹⁴ Youth reported: “They [stakeholders] make us learn like baby words; car, dog, like I know those words. I want to learn more like things I can use in the community or when I go to the store. We want to be leaders (Focus Group, 5/2019). Youth from this group were primarily from Latin American, that is, Venezuela and Peru. One female said, “We know it. Everybody doesn’t have that perfect English, but it seems more that we have to practice it in the library” (6/22/18). One youth noted in a focus group, “This program could become, like, a community. To, like, develop something. We can be in the community and be the community when we learn about it” (6/30/18). Youth shared how the community activities that were part of the curriculum would offer them an opportunity to be “leaders,” but that they felt that they often focused more on English practice than engaging socially and relationally through the curriculum. Unfortunately, leadership development remained unfinished and available to some youth and not others. Their desire to make meaning in the community was challenged by the ideological differences about what newcomer belonging could mean in the community.

Furthermore, newcomers reported challenges they faced; they said, “adapting as an immigrant in the city is hard.” A youth noted that in the program they get to identify and realize these issues and how challenging it is for newcomers. One told a story of how both at school and when running errands with his parents, they get “yelled” at. He said, “Everywhere we go, teachers and everybody are yellin’ SPEAK ENGLISH [raises voice]. Like, [laughs] I do speak a little English. We are told to speak English at school and practice English in the library” (2/6/18). One newcomer explained, “I want to learn more than baby words like dog, cat, red. I want to learn things that I will need” (5/2019).

Discussion and Implications

The findings reveal how the CSP was both a democratic hub and space of belonging, and how belonging became associated with assimilationist

ideologies about immigrant integration and English language acquisition, illustrating the tensions I argue persist in racial projects. The data in this project reveal how community-school partnerships function as racial projects: while the program sought to structure opportunity, generate a youth-based definition and enactment of belonging, and serve as a “hub for democracy,” it also simultaneously circumscribed these goals through ideological conflict over what belonging means when it comes to marginalized newly arrived immigrants, who are in many ways already racialized. For youth, belonging related to the relationships and solidarity they forged in the community-school partnership. Yet, for some stakeholders, practicing English and exposing youth to “productive” careers proved to be pathways of belonging to what is ultimately a White, middle-class mainstream that is often argued as “a best interests” argument for migrant youth (Statz & Heidbrink, 2019). The irony of the “best interests” argument is that it often excludes youth voice and rights, or limits youth agency. Over time, as the data suggests, even youth adopted this prevailing narrative despite having their voices centralized in the project.

Newcomers in the CSP forged positive relations and solidarity, which speak to the positive and opportunistic dimensions of racial projects. For newcomers, it matters little where they are from because for them, as expressed above, they are able to share the library space with others who are on similar journeys and not feel like outsiders. To summarize, the newcomers associate the program as “different” from school, and as a result they are able to forge positive relations with one another through the community school partnership. Yet, this community-school partnership, while supporting and welcoming newcomers, also put forth unsettling ideologies about the meaning of belonging for them. Stakeholders’ ideologies were advanced in practice with English-practice activities and re-naming the library program, “The after-school English club,” which was not the name that students chose (Field notes, 5/2019; Focus Group, 5/2019). Such ideologies toward immigrants are made possible through neoliberal, colorblind discourses about employability and future integrability, what Bonilla-Silva (2001) refers to as “post-racial” and best interest of the child perspectives.

Implications for CSPs as racial projects

In this article, I utilize the concept of racial projects. This critical lens highlights underlying tensions in community-school partnerships that are intended to promote alternative spaces to neoliberal market reform but that simultaneously promote reified narratives of deservingness related to migrant youth (Rodriguez, 2018, 2019). This framework helps critique how community-schools can mask

(un)intended ideologies about newcomer belonging, and the impact of racial meanings that underlie such community-based efforts. Unraveling stakeholder perceptions coupled with data from newcomer youth reveals the deeply rooted ideological and racial practices operating in community-school efforts that are intended to disrupt those very practices. This framework is useful because it underscores how racial meanings contribute to social ordering and organizing social inequalities (i.e., hierarchies created from “data” about English-language use; Feagin & Elias, 2013). The usefulness of this framework, and why it is significant to think about in relation to CSPs, is that the meanings manifest and reflect the “materiality of oppressive racial structures” and call on researchers, policy-makers, and educators to address which racial group “wins these (often fixed) contests over concrete resources” (Feagin & Elias, 2013, p. 944). Thus, this framework enables these linkages, but further study of how specific structures are organized and rationalized is needed.

Omi and Winant (2014) discuss the notion of a racial project as a “building block” of racial formation in society (p. 13). Racial projects consist of an institutionalized process or practice (e.g., community-school partnership) and its meaning (i.e., how individuals make sense of it). In other words, racial projects are mechanisms, processes, or practices that allow for the ideological and practical work of constructing and/or deconstructing racial and racialized identities. Racial projects link racial significations (ideological, racial meaning or ideas about race) with social structures (mechanisms, processes, and practices). The link between structure and meaning occurred as newcomers developed an awareness of their isolation in schools and access to resources and services in the community-school program (e.g., “We’re all in the same boat). The youths’ sense of belonging to the CSP program was challenged or unsettled as they also came into contact with the agendas and interests of stakeholders, that is a shift toward belonging as practicing English and becoming employable, and thereby assimilable (“They need English”; “We need to speak English”). The powerful moments of linking meaning and structure gave birth to youths’ understanding of the library racial project as they reported in the latter months of the study that learning English “would help in life, but it’s not everything.” Under this critical lens, the CSP advanced a racial project that intended to disrupt both educational spaces that are isolating and hostile for newcomer youth, as well as prevailing ideologies about what newcomer immigrant youth “need” to be “productive citizens.”

At the same time, the concept of a racial project allows us to recognize how in attempting to reshape racial identities, meanings and structures that both subvert and challenge racial inequalities and practices, community-based partnerships can also simultaneously draw on competing racial projects that link immigrant integration to broader racial logics that aim to rank,

sort, and evaluate immigrant populations in relation to a white mainstream norm. To the newcomer youth, belonging meant “feeling we’re all in the same boat,” and connecting with other newcomers. Conversely, belonging to some stakeholders meant “practicing English,” and “securing a future, a job” (5/2019). In this CSP, belonging was central to newcomer youth integration, but instead, it became overshadowed by English-language learning and career readiness activities, which also happens in schools as a way to limit access and opportunities for newcomers. Yet, the qualitative data captured the deeper meanings of belonging from youth perspectives as they navigated the challenges of learning English and cultivating positive identities and networks.

Despite the evidence that newcomers’ belonging was increased from participating in the CSP, tensions about belonging were also evident when newcomers reported that their interests and talents were not always encouraged as English language practice, and a focus on “future careers” became the focus in some of the program activities (Rodriguez & Acree, 2020). One example is when program staff invited insurance company agents as guest speakers to the program, and members of community college staff that created pipelines for community colleges to produce insurance company staff. Being that Hartford is the insurance capital of the U.S., it is an industry in the economically disadvantaged city; however, youth found it odd and expressed desires for alternative jobs such as “school social workers, or working in international development” (Focus Group, 5/2019). While some students attended 4-year colleges, the majority were made to believe that community colleges were the most viable option for newcomers. These lower expectations were at odds with what youth reported in the qualitative and survey data as they expressed strong beliefs in education and the power of education to achieve their goals of engaging in work they loved and that could “help others like us [them]” (Focus Group, 5/2019).

Meanwhile, stakeholders struggled to disassociate newcomers belonging from neoliberal ideals of production and economic potential, which are embedded in discourses of English-language proficiency and cultural assimilation (Malsbary, 2013). This was enabled through the English practice activities that the youth reported about during focus groups and interviews. Youth commented that “they have to practice English” and that would help them “in life,” focusing more on employability and utility as workers rather than civic-minded engaged citizens that have been part of successful CSPs’ work with urban youth (5/6/2019; Kirshner, 2009). The qualitative data helped deepen the understanding of why the peer-relations in the library-based program were so critical to newcomer youth, and how the sense of solidarity they felt helped them engage in meaningful ways with each other as they developed civic awareness about the city that eventually led them to present to teachers

and parents at the various library and school events during the study. The limited body of literature on belonging suggests that young people associate belonging with friends, peer-networks, and connectedness (Pryce et al., 2018). Despite the cultural and linguistic differences, they share the status of newcomers and the library is a “hub” for the merging of cultures and languages. And, stakeholders addressed a critical community need as part of this CSP. At the same time, a deeper look at stakeholder perspectives and youth talk about the program suggests that the project also reified assimilationist narratives that immigrants need English and a job to be successful and to “belong” in the U.S.

These ideologies related to immigrant incorporation are difficult to overcome in both research and educational processes. To combat the punitive consequences of racial projects, critical reflexivity in research and implementation of CSPs is necessary. The competing ideologies within and across the CSP were explicitly discussed as part of an on-going dialogue between the researcher/evaluator, stakeholders, and youth. Asking difficult questions about the intentions and outcomes of CSPs remains challenging, including: How can stakeholders ensure that youth voices (or other vulnerable community voices) are included at the grassroots level of implementation, especially when youth are intended to reap the benefits of the CSP? How can stakeholders, including researchers and evaluators, be reflexive and critical about deficit-based discourses and ideologies throughout the process without putting relationship-building at stake? These questions were critical in this CSP as community and youth-centered notions of belonging were intended to be centralized. These competing visions of belonging were rooted in competing visions of society. Ultimately, the benefits of social and relational belonging were achieved but unintended consequences of this CSP racial project fell back on neoliberal, colorblind notions of success in American society. And since stakeholders ultimately had more power, leveraging the “white racial frame” that dominates and organizes systemic oppression, youth also experienced feelings of isolation and exclusion (Feagin & Elias, 2013, p. 945). In this CSP, the intention and research design were inclusive of newcomers’ perspectives, but during the course of CSP, stakeholder perspectives and power dynamics were more visible. Without accountability to key stakeholders like youth, CSPs can and do take on a life of their own and exclude individuals even while promoting notions of democracy and unity (Fendler, 2006). Being attentive and critical at all stages is necessary if CSPs are to serve all community members and promote equity and social justice.

Racial projects are sneaky because they structure opportunities for belonging and inequality through ideological views of newcomers that are then

institutionalized through practices. The conceptualization of racial projects enables scholars to unravel how discourses of belonging and community function to create opportunities. In this case, opportunities such as participating in the library program allowed newcomer youth to learn about the city, school board issues, and how to access resources for immigrant families. On the other hand, as some youth progressed with their English language learning, they were given additional opportunities for youth leadership and development and showcased in local news stories. While these were unintended consequences of promoting newcomer belonging through this community-school partnership, they nonetheless limited resources and reified assimilationist narratives that immigrants need English and a job to be successful and to “belong” in the U.S. These challenges made visible through a racial project lens of community-school partnerships offer an opportunity to productively critique the viability of community-school partnerships as strategies of urban education reform.

Conclusion

This article offered a critique of a unique community-school partnership between a school district and a public library to build case knowledge about the interworkings and limitations of CSPs. While met with similar dilemmas, the community-school partnership in this study took on thoughtful reform strategies to increase social belonging and language learning through an initiative. The reflexive questions in this project interrogated who controls community schools and who do community schools serve? As CSPs have offered spaces of belonging, especially for minoritized populations in low-income communities, they are also fraught with ideological differences and competing interests, and politics. And, as critical researchers, we have to continue to push ourselves to disrupt detrimental narratives about newcomers, whether progressive or not, in order to promote equity and resist leveraging community if it includes having the detrimental effects of assimilation (Fendler, 2006).

Given the racial dynamics related to migrants, it is important in this critical analysis of community-school strategies to examine how such efforts structure opportunity and also reify or perpetuate inequality (Omi & Winant, 2014). I argue that by viewing community-school partnerships as racial projects, scholars can unravel how such partnerships are not always a viable strategy of reform as the needs of the most vulnerable fold into the dominant norms and perspectives of those carrying out the community-school partnerships. This critical analysis offers an opportunity to disrupt the wholesale use of community-schools as a strategy of reform and to make visible the dangers of decontextualized desires for “improving” newcomer youth and promoting particular forms of

belonging.

Author's Note

The views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this article do not represent those of the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank the newcomer youth in this project for sharing their experiences, and project personnel for providing critical information about the school district and the historical perspective about school choice and reforms. The author also wishes to thank Jessica Shiller and Kristen Goessling for supportive feedback. The author thanks graduate students Jeremy Acree and Rebeca Gamez for discussions about this manuscript in its later stages.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. The term community-school partnership takes on different meanings. In some cases, scholars refer to full-service community schools (Galindo, et al., 2017). Other scholars use terms such as community schools, community learning centers, and school-based integrated services (see, for example, Cummings et al., 2011). This study uses the term community-school partnerships and collaborations in a broader sense (Warren, 2011).
2. An important use of racial projects in urban education is Staiger (2006)'s work on studying race in high schools. She argues: It is at the micro-level, in our interactions with local institutions and people—individually and as groups—that

racial structures become tangible and racial meanings are enacted. At the micro-level, racial projects operate through “common sense” and the way we notice race as our preconceived notions of a racialized social structure provide the basis for interpreting racial meanings (p. 11). In this project, discourses of belonging and integration were examples of this “common sense” logic.

3. According to the Connecticut General Assembly, public school choice programs are defined as those enrolling students in schools outside of their geographically-based neighborhood schools by choice of the student or their family. Connecticut has four types of choice schools: (1) interdistrict magnet schools designed to promote diversity; (2) technical high schools, focused on providing technical and trade vocational education; (3) charter schools, designed to serve underserved segments of the student population; (4) regional agriculture science centers (agri-science), year-round institutions focused on providing agricultural training and occupational instruction.
4. Since the 1996 *Sheff* ruling, there have been five agreements between the state and the plaintiffs, including three main agreements (Phases I, II, and III). The most recent agreement, adopted by the Hartford legislature in February 2015, included a goal that at least 47.5% of minority Hartford-resident students attend reduced-isolation schools. However, by October 2015, only 45.5% were enrolled in reduced-isolation schools. A Phase IV stipulation was supposed to be in place by August 2015 but no such agreement was yet adopted at the time of this article’s release.
5. For additional resources on Hartford Public schools (2013), see: <https://commons.trincoll.edu/cssp/2012/12/01/hartford-the-poster-child-for-portfolio-based-school-reform/>; <https://www.hfpg.org/application/files/6415/8102/3256/ProjectChoiceCampaignFinalReport.pdf>; https://www.hartfordschools.org/files/TOA_Outline_for_Revision_062714.pdf
6. For instance, two of the feeder high schools have approximately 69% of English language learners in the district. (266 ELs; 38% of the total school population) at one high school while 31% (109 students) at the other feeder school.
7. The two major reforms to be carried out in phases were: a managed performance empowerment theory of action that outlined the district’s relationship with each school on the basis of its performance on the state tests and the development of an “all choice” system of schools. These reforms continue to be implemented but challenges in serving newcomer populations remained.
8. The idea for the program was conceived after years of developing and implementing programs for immigrants in Hartford (see, Naficy, 2009). The library had programs related to immigrants’ rights, citizenship, and employment.

9. All the no responses were re-coded as 1, and the yes responses were re-coded as 2. For these questions, the yes response was the more desirable response or the response that was associated with more acceptance from the community, political awareness, or sense of belonging. On the questions related to the amount of discrimination that the students faced or their feelings of isolation, there were three responses: never, one a school year, and more than three times a school year. For these responses, never was recoded as 3, once a school year was recoded as 2, and more than 3 times a school year was recoded as 1. In this way, the higher number was associated with the more desirable response. Those responses that the participants left blank were recoded as either 1.5 on the yes or no questions or 2 on the questions with three possible responses.
10. As mentioned, these items were intentionally constructed from the qualitative responses that the youth offered. The newcomer youth discussed trust and feeling alone at school at great length in the interviews and being bullied at school for their language learning. While youth raised community and school issues that related to injustice toward immigrants and refugees, the third scale was designed in part to align with the curricular dimensions of the program in order to replicate this program.
11. For additional information on the survey items, see Rodriguez and Acree (2020).
12. Moreover, project stakeholders call the program “The After-school English Club,” which is not how it is specified in the original intent of the project and was not one of the name choices that the newcomer youth generated. While the partnership sought to disentangle language proficiency from belonging, project staff communicated more directly and consistently with participants in the library program, allowing for data to be overwhelmed by traditional ideals.
13. Elsewhere, Rodriguez and Acree (2020) have discussed how the research design and larger evaluation dimension enabled these tensions. This was the case because survey scales allow for categorization and comparison within the newcomer population as well as the tracing of “progress” and “improvement” in terms of belongingness over time and across contexts. The concept of belonging is made universal both by existing narratives and quantification through the survey, while those items used as indicators of belonging mark the (individualized) pathways to its attainment.
14. Space limits the number of examples, but during a focus group, youth commented on how some adults at school and at the library speak Spanish so if there are newcomers who speak Spanish “they may get some help.” One youth explained, “I speak French and Creole, so they [adults] just leave us to ourselves at school. I feel isolated.” In the library space, youth typically could connect with one or more newcomers who spoke similar languages.

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