

Historical Memory and the Transformation of City and Suburban Schools

Jacqueline Katz

Trinity College

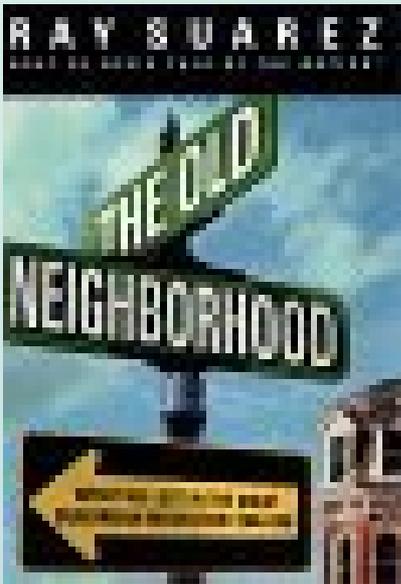
Cities, Suburbs and Schools

November 5, 2004

Research Question

How do different metropolitan Hartford residents from the 1940s to 1970s remember the quality of schools in Hartford and the surrounding suburbs,
and
how do these memories compare to other historical documents?

Expanding the Secondary Literature



The Old Neighborhood by Ray Suarez

Oral testimonies with suburban residents about why they left the city

*This study is not only looking at memories of suburban and city residents but comparing their accounts to other historical documents.

“The Death of Luigi Trastulli” by Alessandro Portelli

•Examines historical memory for a single event.

* This study is looking at a time period, not just a single event.

Significance

This research is significant as it provides insight into how people are creating their perceptions.

Since the perceptions change over time, it is possible to see the different criteria people use to judge schools and the criteria they use to judge schools are a reflection of the greater society.

It also reveals perceptions that may be surprising and this can help people to reconsider their own opinions and form new judgments.

Also, school quality can affect a town in many ways and people's perceptions can drive property values up and increase or decrease the funding for public schools.

Oral History Collections

Pine Grove School interviews (7) - conducted in 1975 about 1940s-era Avon schoolhouse

City to Suburb Oral Histories (38) - conducted in 2003 with former Hartford residents on their reasons for moving to suburbs in 1940s-70s

West Hartford Voices Project (10) - conducted in 2003-04 about suburban experience and schools between 1950 and present

Metropolitan School Quality interviews (19) - conducted 2004 with residents, educators, real estate agents on perceived school quality from 1950s to 1970s

How do these memories compare to other
Documentary Sources
historical documents?

Newspapers

Hartford Courant, Hartford Times clippings
weekly town newspapers

Archival documents

Town reports, school board minutes

Thesis

- While there are variations between the different oral histories in describing the rise and fall of city and suburban schools, the strongest variations are present between oral histories and other historical documents, such as town annual reports and newspapers, than within the interviews themselves.
- In addition, the perceptions that are present in the oral history interviews tend to view schools in the Greater Hartford area more positively than other documentary sources
- Also, within some suburbs, there has been a shift in the perception of schools and when this happens, the variations between the oral histories and other documents decrease.

Suburbanization in Hartford

Hartford families who moved to various suburbs between 1940-1970 were not drawn by suburban schools.

“Now we didn’t come to Avon because of the schools, we just thought it would be better to have a lot **more land** for the kids to play around in.” - Clifford Floyd (Hartford to Avon, 1952)



Hartford families who moved to various suburbs between 1940-1970 were not drawn by suburban schools, in contrast to some documentary evidence.

“Uh, both of us liked where we lived in Hartford, but we were inclined to go, to be more comfortable in a **more rural atmosphere.**” - Edward Doyle (Hartford to Avon, 1954)

“Well I think my primary reason for coming to Bloomfield was that I could **find affordable housing** and that I like the **mix of the population.**” -Ruth Cohen (Hartford to Bloomfield, 1955)

From Avon Annual Reports:
“Educational opportunities in rural towns are now so attractive that city dwellers are moving into the smaller towns in a steady stream. “ - FJ Penley (from “Report of Supervisors” in 1950)

West Hartford School Quality

West Hartford residents recall consistently high quality of their schools over time, despite documents that show fluctuation.

Oral History Testimonies:

“I guess the schools too have always had **terrific reputation**. They still maintain through all of the drama that has gone on, they still are terrific”. –**Renee McCue, resident of West Hartford**

“I think the West Hartford schools **have a long standing tradition of excellence** and I think conditions vary due to changing times so things have not remained static, they’ve been ever changing but I think standards consistently been very high and I think that’s one of the unique features of living in West Hartford. And it was what attracts families with school age children.” –**Robert Dunn, 1957-V.P of Hall High School, 1962-1990-Principal of Hall High School**

Documentary Sources Reflect a Different View

Town Newspaper: West Hartford News

“...A series reprinted from the West Hartford News from January 25 through February 15, 1952...based on the Life magazine questionnaire...”

“Workshops in the junior high are adequate, it seems, to the superficial eye, but teaching of biology, chemistry, physics and , in the low grades, general science, is **seriously handicapped for lack of modern laboratories**. In a scientific age, we are not measuring up at least in facilities.” ‘A Layman’s Look at schools...Part 1’

Another article from 1955 describes how the decrease in school funding will affect their school. “...**a reduction in the number of teachers, elimination of special teachers requested because of the addition of new schools...reduction of allotment for textbooks, postponement of the purchase of new equipment and school furniture...postponement of building repairs and alterations...**”

Avon School Quality Over Time



Pine Grove one-room
schoolhouse, Avon, 1946



Pine Grove Elementary School
Avon, 2004

Oral history interviews conducted in 1975 about the Pine Grove one-room schoolhouse are consistent with each and reflect positive memories

“My daily program provided time for the three R’s. In reading, we had daily oral and silent reading groups. And they use graded books to fit their ability. Also, we had individual reading for those in the first and second grades to strengthen their reading and to overcome their individual problems.” -Eileen Case, teacher (1933-1944)

I don’t think of any great chaotic times with any of the teachers we had. I remember this Mrs.. Hassett, who had red hair ...(and) there was a pull down blackboard that had a string on it and she said she didn’t dare pull that blackboard down, she was afraid there would be bats there. She had this gorgeous red and I had this picture of bats all in this red hair. (laughs)” -Gladys August, student (graduated approx. 1936)

Documentary evidence and other oral histories about Avon schools describing the same time period are not as positive.

“I thought they were, (pause), almost **rural in nature**. Surprisingly not up to date, **not looking to the future**, not doing things that I would have expected. Particularly with the resources they had.” -Jack Darcy, teacher at Conard High School West Hartford , 1965-1995

"No mention has been made of our **depreciated school plants, worn out equipment**, or plans for replacing **obsolete structures** with new buildings to meet new needs. These and many more pressing problems indicate that peace will mean, for education, a long period of intense activity and will demand the highest type of leadership." (Avon town report, 1944)

By the 1960s and 1970s there is less variation between all the different sources and perceptions of Avon schools have become more positive.

- **Oral Testimonies:**

“She had **wonderful teachers**, just the basic reasons that [inaudible] in school. Their **curriculum was better**...a very good music department...so that’s about all I can tell you about the school system, the space has been adequate. They keep adding on, building the schools, you know to **accommodate the influx of new people in town.**” Sue Macy, resident of Avon, daughter attended schools during the 1960s

“Oh yes, very much. You hear people complain about them but I always say, our girls got into good colleges and succeeded. How else can you judge a high school in [inaudible]. I mean if they didn’t have **good training and background from there** then I don’t think they would have succeeded as quickly in college if they hadn’t had that.” Gladys August, resident of Avon, children attended schools during the 1960s



By the 1960s and 1970s there is less variation between all the different sources and Avon schools are more positively viewed.

- **Documentary Sources**

Avon Board of Education report: 1960:

The major emphasis this year has been to **better identify and understand the needs of each child and to refine the curriculum so as to meet those discovered needs more effectively.** A vastly **improved testing and counseling program** has furnished much valuable data about the children attending the schools...in conjunction with this **curriculum study the Board of Education has taken an imaginative step.** It has approved the appointment of a team of three teachers to do research on this techniques, materials and equipment necessary for the instruction of the **gifted child** in an elementary school classroom.

- By expanding the curriculum, Avon was able to distinguish itself from other school systems and respond to the growing population.

Thesis

- While there are variations between the different oral histories in describing the rise and fall of city and suburban schools, the strongest variations are present between oral histories and other historical documents, such as town annual reports and newspapers, than within the interviews themselves.
- In addition, the perceptions that are present in the oral history interviews tend to view schools in the Greater Hartford area more positively than other documentary sources
- Also, within some suburbs, there has been a shift in the perception of schools and when this happens, the variations between the oral histories and other documents decrease.