Teaching Children of Catastrophe

Geneva Gay

Teaching children who are victims of Katrina is not a multicultural education issue per se. The field is not centered in catastrophic events such as the hurricane, the breakage of the levees on Lake Pontchartrain and the subsequent havoc that befell New Orleans, Biloxi, Gulfport, and other Gulf coast cities in Louisiana and Mississippi (and Alabama to a lesser degree) in August 2005. Multicultural education is more about everyday issues and events that are normal occurrences in U.S. society and schools rather than the exotic, exceptional, and spectacular. Katrina and its aftermath fall within the latter categories.

However, there are some intersections between the victims of Katrina and the educational responses to them, and some of the primary constituent groups and issues that multicultural education represents and intends to serve. These are children of color and poverty who are marginalized in schools relative to resource allocation, learning opportunity, and academic achievement.

Unfortunately, the lessons learned from the educational responses prompted by the aftermath of Katrina are not nearly as positive as we would hope, Nor are they the kinds of attitudes and actions that are most desirable or should be pursued in the long run if educators expect to produce positive effects for the children of Katrina beyond immediate reactions.

Several of these lessons learned are suggested here for critical analysis, reflection, and reconstruction to generate better educational opportunities and outcomes for ethnically, racially, and culturally different students regardless of their specific circumstances at any particular point in time. These include the infeasibility of charity as pedagogy; the limitations of good intentions; the pernicious nature of racism; isolation and invisibility; and the certainty that some children are always left behind.

Geneva Gay is a professor of education at the University of Washington, Seattle, Washington.

Charity Is Not a Viable Foundation for Effective Pedagogy

It was heartwarming to see so many states, school districts, and communities throughout the United States open their doors to the children of Katrina. This response was a graphic portrayal of the spirit of volunteerism, the value of the more able assisting the less fortunate, and the sense of altruism that frequently surfaces within the United States when major crises occur. And, it is admirable!

On this point Jacqueline Jordan Irvine (2007) noted that, "Most Americans, as individuals or members of organized groups, responded to Hurricane Katrina with generous donations of money, service, sympathy, and incalculable acts of kindness. As American citizens and individuals, we should all be proud of these efforts to help those in need" (p. 22).

As is so often the case, the initial generosity did not prevail. Nor was it of a magnitude to meet the needs of the estimated 500,000 students (Dyson, 2006; Robinson & Brown II, 2007) displaced by Katrina. It was impossible for the receiving schools and districts to anticipate that they would need to accommodate so many new students and without any time to prepare for their arrival. They probably did the best they could under the circumstances, but their best was not good enough for what the displaced students needed. Their response was somewhat like the reception of highly respected visitors who arrive unexpectedly and then remain too long.

At some point, even the most gracious hosts who are initially excited about and uncompromisingly accommodating of these guests become stressed and desire to return to their own routines. The visitors also know that an indefinite stay will strain and compromise, if not destroy, the relationship.

This phenomenon of retreating from initial goodwill efforts, especially in calamitous situations that persist for long periods, is sometimes called *compassion fatigue* (Campo-Flores, 2006; Irvine, 2007; Krakower, 2007). Campo-Flores (2006) describes it as the emotional overload or exhaustion suffered by helpers in tragic events and, being traumatized by their own efforts to emphasize with the victims.

After a while the helpers become numb to the tragedy, experience a sense of futility about whether their contributions are making a significant difference, and become intolerant of hearing more about the tragedy. Krakower (2007, np) says compassion fatigue occurs "when catastrophe drags volunteers into utter exhaustion or the sheer magnitude of human suffering emotionally drowns the volunteer." They then try to reestablish some equilibrium by withdrawing and even finding fault with the victims whom they once supported enthusiastically for their own victimization.

Irvine (2007) provided additional insights into these turn-about attitudes and behaviors with regard to the Katrina victims and volunteers. She believes that:

> The images of desperate and abandoned people literally drowning under the weight of poverty were too heavy a burden to bear for the average person, because watching bore an acknowledgment and ultimately a responsibility to act. . . . Still others struggled with 'compassion fatigue' by blaming the displaced for their predicament—reproaching them

> for the dire circumstances in which they found themselves. . . . Compassion fatigue and victim-blaming were predictable responses to Hurricane Katrina because individual donations and the work of volunteer groups can never be a substitute for or a distraction from focusing on identifying causes and solutions to poverty and racism at the larger societal level. (p. 22)

Yet, members of mainstream society often want to run away from the harsh realities of race, racism, and poverty, and when confronted with them, quickly retreat to their own safety and comfort zones. The victimized persons are not so fortunate; poverty and racism are a permanent and profound presence in their lives.

Through no fault of their own, the children of Katrina became unwilling visitors in other school districts throughout the country, for indefinite periods of time. How soon would they wear out their welcome, not because of doing anything untold or disrespectful of their host schools, but simply by being present (Zamani-Gallaher & Polite, 2007).

In an article in the March 13, 2006 edition of *Newsweek,* Ariah Campo-Flores reported that it took a mere six months for the goodwill expressed in Houston (which accepted the largest number of Katrina evacuees) to pale in face of serious challenges of absorbing a traumatized and often destitute population into already over-burdened educational, housing, employment, and health care systems. Welcomed evacuees soon became dubious interlopers.

In his report on "Schooling Katrina's Kids" Glenn Cook (2006) confirmed that the accommodation efforts involved unprecedented and ongoing challenges for students, teachers, and school districts that will persist for some time to come.

Some of the major problems lie in the habits of political leaders and policy makers in the United States of not thinking deeply and carefully beyond the moment about major educational issues. These people should have known that ad hoc altruistic responses (whether from individuals, corporations, governmental agencies, or private sources) to Katrina, however admirable, would not suffice.

Instead, aggressive and transformative strategies are needed to create systemic infrastructures for schools to incorporate these displaced youths. Certainly, educators and politicians must have known that the educational systems in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama, decimated by Katrina, were not going to quickly recreate any semblance of normalcy so that their children could return to their home communities and schools.

Host cities and schools were going to become long-term, if not permanent, homes for many of these children. In other words, they were not going away in a few weeks or months, and the host schools could return to pre-Katrina business as usual with a feeling of pride in the goodwill they had exhibited, and the temporary shelter they had provided.

The charity that Katrina provoked was not going to persist indefinitely; nor was it a solid foundation for the kind of structural and systemic reforms needed for people of color in the affected areas to recover from and transform poverty, racism, neglect, and marginalization. Michael Eric Dyson (2006) made these points poignantly in his observations that:

> Charity is no substitute for justice. If we never challenge a social order that allows some to accumulate wealth—even if they decide to help the less fortunate—while others are shortchanged, then even acts of kindness end up supporting unjust arrangements. We must never ignore the injustices that make charity necessary, or the inequalities that make it possible. . . charity is episodic . . .. What is needed are structures of justice that perpetuate the goodwill intended in charity. Justice allows charity to live beyond crisis. (pp. 152, 203)

Thus, what began as acts of unselfish kindness had embedded within them the makings of long-range and pervasive problems. They, in effect, further marginalized Katrina students in particular and victims in general who were already marginalized. At least before Katrina, these students attended schools in familiar surroundings; afterward they became strangers in unfamiliar settings.

Undoubtedly, these situations had negative effects on the psychoemotional well-being and academic performance of the displaced students, and to some extent, the residential ones in the host schools as well. Cook (2006) described some of these specific dilemmas:

> For students displaced by the storm, mobility has been as constant as stability is illusive. Already traumatized and faced with the loss of their homes and culture, youths of all ages have been uprooted multiple times, separated from their friends, and dropped into schools where cultural tensions and turf wars were inevitable. And a large number of students—especially those from New Orleans—have played academic catch-up in their new schools.

These psychoemotional conditions are not conducive to successful social adjustment and academic achievement. They suggest the need for educational interventions that deal simultaneously with the social, psychological, emotional, intellectual, academic, cultural, and interpersonal competencies of both the displaced students and their peers and teachers in the receiving schools.

While the catalyst was unprecedented, the educational conditions and needs for radical change that Hurricane Katrina unveiled are not, nor are the response patterns.

Educational inequities imposed on poor children of color, especially in large urban centers, is a familiar story with a long history throughout the United States (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Kozol, 1991, 1995, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Linda Darling-Hammond (2007) cautioned us not to fall into the trap of assuming that the educational conditions revealed by Katrina were unique to New Orleans, or rare occurrences anywhere.

The schools affected by the hurricane are merely extreme cases of more generalized problems of educating students who are racially, ethnically, socially, culturally, and economically different from the middle class Eurocentric mainstream. Therefore, effective educational interventions for the displaced students may be accomplished to the extent that they are part of wide-scale reforms to improve the opportunities and outcomes for African Americans and other marginalized students of color throughout the United States, and in conditions separate from catastrophes.

Good Intentions Are Not Enough

The response patterns of schools and communities to the children of the Katrina catastrophe demonstrated vividly that good intentions are insufficient as a basis for providing better educational experiences for underprivileged and marginalized students. Some individuals may argue to the contrary, and contend that whatever educational services the displaced children received in their host schools were better than what they had, since they had nothing left, and that which they had before Katrina was woefully inadequate.

What these individuals fail to acknowledge is that the intentions of the host schools to share their own with the displaced children may have been very difficult for the incoming students to accept, not because they were ungrateful, but because the gifts came in unfamiliar packaging.

Conversely, the host schools and communities probably were not intentionally hegemonic; they did so without even thinking about the possibility that their cultural styles, experiential backgrounds, rhythms of being, standards of normalcy, and ways of doing educational business may have been incompatible with those of the Katrina victims. They could have unconsciously put the displaced children in the untenable position of having to constrain or deny their own cultural impulses in order to receive those being offered to them (Cook, 2006; Dowan, 2007; Snyder, 2007). One can only imagine the additional confusion, frustration, and anguish imposed by the expectations of their hosts for the incoming students to be "just like us."

Whether spoken explicitly or merely embedded in actions, these expectations placed many Katrina victims in tension with themselves. They had already lost the bedrocks of their identities, and well-meaning people added more to the dilemmas by asking them to be somebody they were not and probably never could be. Even students in Louisiana and Mississippi who were relocated to schools in other parts of the states and populated by members of the same ethnic groups had adjustment problems as well. They simply did not know these new people and locations.

How were they to find a place for themselves in the midst of these strangers, especially if their classroom teachers and school principals were not providing explicit guidance and assistance for making the transitions? The situation is somewhat reminiscent of early desegregation plans when poor urban African American students were sent to upper middle class White suburban schools without any systemic readiness preparation and instructional program reforms for either the incoming students or the receiving ones.

The willingness of host communities and schools to receive displaced students was not enough to convey the credibility of their commitment and ensure good results for students. Their good intentions needed to be accompanied by carefully designed programs and purposeful actions to accomplish more specified educational goals. Part of this action agenda should be helping the Katrina victims to come to grips with their physical displacements and cultural losses; reconstructing their fractured identities; adjusting to new locations and relationships; adapting to different teaching styles and expectations; understanding the cultural, procedural, and organizational ethos of new schools; and managing the demands of academic performance under the weighty clouds of trauma (Dowan, 2007; Urban Institute, 2005). That these things were not done caused many of the educational rescue initiatives for the children of Katrina to be ritualized symbolism—that is, good intentions without the corollary actions needed to make them more than merely enticing rhetoric.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

Katrina did not reveal anything that we did not already know regarding the disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes for poor children of color and their middle class European American counterparts. It simply reminded us in graphic detail of how extreme the differences are for African Americans. Katrina was not only about a natural disaster that happened over a few days; it is about a history of systemic social and educational neglect and oppression of the most vulnerable segments of U. S. society—children, poor people, and racial minorities.

The educational and economic disparities exposed in the aftermath of the hurricane have been in the making for generations (Robinson & Brown II, 2007; Dyson, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Poor African, Latino, Native, and Asian American children in the affected areas of Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama had been subjected to inferior education for so long that the national conscience had become immune to the atrocities and found solace in the fact that "it's not me and my children."

So, the situation was pushed to the back of the nation's mind, and left unattended as long as it remained a local problem, and largely out of sight on the national radar. Dyson (2006) offered a graphic description of this habit of isolating, neglecting, and ignoring poor citizens:

> Hurricane Katrina's violent winds and killing waters swept into the mainstream a stark realization: the poor had been abandoned by society and its institutions, and sometimes by their well-off brothers and sisters long before the storm . . . It is the exposure of the extremes, not their existence, that stumps our national sense of decency. We can abide the ugly presence of poverty so long as it doesn't impinge on our daily lives or awareness. As long as poverty is a latent reality, a solemn social fact suppressed from prominence on our moral compass, we can find our bearings without fretting too much about its awkward presence. (pp. 2-3)

The same can be said about racism. U. S. society tends to ignore race-based issues and racist actions until they become chronic and out of control. Then we act out of hysteria, and are quick to blame, demonize, abandon, and obfuscate the racially oppressed persons when the crisis-driven strategies fail. Otherwise, "We do not see them; we do not acknowledge their existence. They are both out of sight and out of mind. But then Hurricane Katrina hit and we were shamed in the presence of our fellow Americans and before the entire world" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 9).

However, being shocked, disgusted, and shamed by the economic and educational disparities exposed by Hurricane Katrina is suspect. Why should long-established practices be surprising when publicly revealed? Dyson (2006) suggested that this was a convenient way for the privileged members and powerbrokers of the U.S. mainstream society to absolve themselves of any responsibility for the construction and perpetuation of poverty and racism. He thinks:

> We remain blissfully ignorant of [the poor and racial minorities'] circumstances to avoid the brutal indictment of our consciences. When a disaster like Katrina strikes . . . it frees us to be aware of, and angered by, the catastrophe. . . . We are thus able to decry the circumstances of the poor while assuring ourselves that we had nothing to do with their plight. We are fine as long as we place time limits on the origins of the poor's plight—the moments we all spied on television after the storm, but not the numbing years during which we looked the other way. Thus we fail to confront our complicity in their long-term suffering. By being outraged, we appear compassionate. This permits us to continue to ignore the true roots of their condition, roots that branch into our worlds and are nourished on our political and religious beliefs. (pp. 3-4)

For a little while, Katrina destroyed these illusions and unveiled this invisibility. It put deeply flawed educational, social, economic, and political systems in the national and international spotlight, and on the forefront of our moral consciousness. It gave compelling visual meaning to Jonathan Kozol's analyses of educational inequities in *Savage Inequities* (1991), *Amazing Grace* (1995), and *The Shame of a Nation* (2005). For a moment, the nation was embarrassed into acting to remove these disparities. But, as soon as the spotlight dimmed, (as it did with how quickly the tragedies of Katrina ceased to be headline news) the vested interests and apparent outrage at racial discrimination and neglect began to dissipate. Once

again, the United States covered up the scares on its moral compass and the blemishes in its public image through some temporary goodwill and a rapid return to practicing its habits of invisibility and marginality toward poor people of color and their children.

As long as they were out of sight, the power brokers did not have to deal with them and the impression could be conveyed that because there was no longer a public clamor, the problem had been solved. Now a mere two years later, hardly anything appears in the media about the children of Katrina and their educational fate beyond an occasional human-interest story of a few *individuals* here and there.

Surely the level of devastation brought by the hurricane could not have been corrected in such a short period of time, even under the best of circumstances and with the most aggressive, imaginative, and effective leadership. More likely, the United States is doing to the children of Katrina what it so often does in educational situations and other social issues affecting poor people of color.

It engages a quick fix mentality to institute temporary (and insufficient) assistance and maximize damage control, then quickly return to business as usual. Part of the usual business toward the most vulnerable groups and individuals in society is isolation and invisibility–in other words, out of sight, out of mind.

This is a horrific reminder that certain people in the United States are perceived by some in positions of power and privilege to be of less human value and more expendable than others. Therefore, they do not deserve the investment of quality time, sustained attention, and substantial educational and economic resources to recover from unprecedented trauma, develop their intellect, and build solid foundations for healthy futures.

If the country genuinely valued the children of Katrina, it would make sure that they are constantly kept in the forefront of the collective public's minds, hearts, and consciousness to remind them of their existence and the progress they are making toward recovery and transformation. Unfortunately, such acts of common kindness, and commitment to educational equality and justice for students from ethnic groups of color, are not always as forthright and uncontestable as they should be. Hurricane Katrina taught these ugly lessons with unequivocal clarity.

The Pervasive and Pernicious Nature of Racism

How was it possible for the children of Katrina to become so invisible and silent so soon after the wide-scale and intense devastation and public interest caused by the hurricane? How could they have been forgotten so quickly or relegated to the backburners of our minds? How could they have faded into obscurity, into vague silhouettes of humanity without any clearly defined features? The simple yet incredibly profound answer is racism. One of its most effective techniques is to strip people of the details of their humanity; then it is very easy (even "natural") to treat them inhumanely.

Kozol (2006) may be right in contending that we do not "live in a hateful nation of [White] people who want to give the best only to their child and who are somehow able emotionally to write off everybody else . . . The structures we have created have made it very difficult for ordinary American people to act on their own essential decency" (p. 25). Even if he is right, this is not necessarily a denial of the existence of racism. Rather, it is a testament to its incipient and pervasive character; that some individuals and institutions are racist without any conscious or deliberate intent.

Merely being normal and doing things in usual U. S.-style toward people of color are sufficient to be deeply racist. Dennie Palmer Wolf and Hal Smith (2006) noted further that the worst destruction in New Orleans was not the physical and economic damage done by Hurricane Katrina; it was the long-term habit of undereducating, isolating, and ignoring poor Black children" (p. 29). Irvine (2007) added, "Hurricane Katrina is a symbol of what can happen when a nation systematically and unabashedly abandons the most vulnerable" (p. 22). Eboni Zamani-Gallaher and Vernon Polite (2007) echoed these sentiments in declaring that, "the hurricane is but a metaphor for the calamity that commonly faces African American students in urban school settings" (p. 40).

These are the worst kinds of racism because they destroy the minds, hearts, spirits, aspirations, and interests of young and helpless children of color, and create a future of desperation, despair, and hopelessness for them. The wake and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina are somewhat like looking into a historical kaleidoscope of racism that is all too familiar to many African, Latino, Native, and Asian American children, families, and communities.

Official responses to Katrina made it abundantly clear that racism continues to be rampant in all segments of U. S. society, and that poor people of color are profoundly victimized by it. As Linda Darling-Hammond (2007) explained:

> Katrina brought into the living rooms of a sleeping nation the raw, unvarnished racism that has been made increasingly invisible to those beyond its reach. If every tragedy carries with it the potential for change, this may have been the blessing of Katrina—to make it brutally clear just how dispensable this government has considered those who are poor, Black, and marginalized. (p. xii)

Christopher Brown II, Elon Dancy II, and James Davis (2007), credited Katrina for amplifying "enough realities of social inequity to disgust the sensibilities of any American who embraces idealized notions of democracy, access, and opportunity" (p. 56) for all citizens.

Katrina also demonstrated how racism is sometimes used to cause division among oppressed people. For some unexplained reason, more attention, on all levels, was given to the impact of Katrina on New Orleans and African Americans. While the magnitude of the destruction might have been greater for this location and population, it was not exclusive.

Many other ethnic groups, including Latino, Asian, Native American, and European Americans, and geographic areas in other parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama suffered greatly as well (Dyson, 2006; Robinson & Brown II, 2007). But they were overshadowed, silenced, ignored, and made virtually invisible by the limelight that shined so brightly and intently on New Orleans.

Even in the midst of catastrophe, racism demanded selectivity, and denied to all Katrina victims the right for their devastation, suffering, refuge, and recovery to be named, acknowledged, visualized, and otherwise treated equally. But, this was not the case. African Americans became the poster children of tragedy, and New Orleans the epicenter of destruction, while other ethnic groups and cities faded into the background. Racism twisted the treatment of Katrina victims to conform to its habit of giving preference to those considered "the best," and denial and disadvantage to those deemed "the worst." Thus, the "best" victims of Katrina were those who suffered the most and were the most difficult to constrain, to cover up, to isolate, or to deny.

New Orleans was the largest city, and

African Americans were the largest ethnic group of those affected by the hurricane. So they became the preferred players in the unfolding drama of life, death, and destruction after Katrina. While others were hard hit as well, they were unfortunate to be "small" and relatively insignificant; enough so to be ignored.

Undoubtedly, these groups and cities felt some animosity toward African Americans and New Orleans for their situations and needs at least receiving attention (although much of it was insufficient and flawed) while their situations and needs were not even acknowledged, or were afterthoughts. This is not to suggest that the focus on African Americans and New Orleans should be lessened in analyzing the effects of Katrina and building life beyond. Rather, other ethnic groups and cities should be given their fare share of attention, resources, recovery, and rebuilding as well.

This discriminatory treatment of the suffering of different ethnic groups in the Katrina catastrophe taught some powerful lessons that should be passed on to students. It showed that Black-White analyses of race, racism, power, privilege, and marginality are imperative but not sufficient. Other ethnic perspectives and experiences also must be examined. Two additional lessons are (1) examination of racism in contemporary times should be complemented by historical foundations, and (2) understanding general racist trends must be supported by specific manifestations according to setting, time, circumstance, and ethnic group. Dyson (2006) supports these needs in declaring that:

> Our analysis of minorities must constantly be revised to accommodate a broader view of how race and ethnicity function in the culture. As important as it is, the black-white racial paradigm simply does not exhaust the complex realities and complicated interactions among various minority groups and the broader society. (p. 144)

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina also showed that the level of racist victimization increases as socioeconomic status decreases. Most of the children displaced by the hurricane to the extent of having to relocate to schools in other parts of their home states and other states across the United States were of color and poor. Undoubtedly, their placements in classes and curriculum options were similar to what they had left behind. The stigma attached to them at home as un-achieving students went with them wherever they relocated, and was further entrenched (Cook, 2006; Wolf & Smith, 2006). The exposure of their limitations left them without much human dignity or a power base from which to demand anything better.

Therefore, Katrina unveiled several harsh realities about racism. One was that individual efforts are not enough to break the stranglehold of racism on U.S. society. Instead, systemic, institutional, and structural changes are needed. Unquestionably, individuals should be diligent and act aggressively to counteract racism, but without structural reform their effects will be minimal. Another lesson Katrina illustrated is that sometimes what appears to be progress in combating racism is more ritualistic than substantive, and things continue to be much the way they were before any change occurred. Katrina brought devastating changes on many levels. Entire educational, economic, social, and health care systems were destroyed.

At first glance it would seem that the destruction created an opportunity for change that was unavoidable. Instead, the racism that caused the Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama school systems to be some of the worst in the United States is reasserting itself in the new locations where the displaced children are assigned. Their presence increases enrollments in low-level classes, exacerbates financial inequities, and challenges pedagogical creativity.

Receiving school districts that were already strained to meet the financial needs of their own students were hard pressed to find additional monies to support the displaced ones, while different federal agencies bickered about whether the national government should pay some of these costs, and, if so, how much and for how long. The per-pupil proposed amount (somewhere between $5,000-$8,000) was not enough to do anything but provide the most minimum of educational opportunities.

How could politicians and policy-makers miss this obvious flaw in planning the educational rescue of the children of Katrina? Or, did they miss it? Maybe they simply continued to treat the poor children of color as they had always been treated—that is, as second-class citizens who are not considered worthy of the fiscal investment it takes for them to receive a high-quality education. This denial is bad enough in itself; it is even worse when it occurs at the same time the nation was claiming to be heart-broken by and so empathetic toward the victims of the tragedy. This goes beyond insensitivity to cruelty. But that is what racism does; it kills even as it appears to be embracing the victimized. Katrina taught these lessons well.

One can only speculate about the racism that was perpetuated in curriculum content and instructional practices, because these analyses are not yet forthcoming. But logic suggests that many teachers receiving the displaced students were not familiar with their cultural and experiential backgrounds, and therefore could not make the learning experiences culturally relevant for them.

Consequently, the displaced students are at an unfair disadvantage in having to learn academic content from teachers who do not know them, by procedural rules unfamiliar to them, and in strange environmental settings. To deal with these dilemmas, teachers may appeal to their professional scholarship and employ "best instructional practices" that are supposed to be good for all students without raising questions about the cultural relevance of these strategies for children of color, of poverty, and of catastrophe.

Operating on the assumption that the same instructional practices are equally effective for all students is a form of academic racism, especially if children are blamed and penalized when the techniques do not produce the desired results. Given the critical intersections between race, culture, class, environment, and school achievement no one should be surprised when it is revealed that the displaced children of Katrina performed even lower in their new schools than in their old. If that does happen, it will not necessarily be the fault of the students, but rather of educational systems that did not modify curriculum, content, instruction, and support services to accommodate their ethnic, racial, cultural, and experiential diversity.

Children Left Behind

Hurricane Katrina created a situation that could have been the ultimate litmus test for the feasibility and effectiveness of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) regulations if the national government were willing to stand behind its own policy guidelines at the point of implementation and practice. Schools that no longer existed could not meet any average yearly progress indexes, and most of the displaced children of color were obviously not attending high-achieving schools before the storm. Here was an opportunity for the government to intervene and ensure that these students did not end up in schools with achievement

problems similar to the ones that had been destroyed by Katrina.

But the government did not even attempt to oversee any of these relocations, or to see that students exercised their right, according to NCLB, to use their allocated educational funding to enroll in better-performing schools. These oversights raised to new levels doubts about the feasibility of school choice on a grand scale under NCLB. Even if the government had been much more directive in making sure the children of Katrina were assigned to the best schools in their new locations, all of their upscale choices could not have been accommodated, especially in those districts such as Houston, Texas that accepted such large numbers of displaced students.

It was unfathomable that all of the more than 500,000 displaced children could be placed in high achieving schools. A few students probably were sent to such schools, more by chance than design. But most displaced students were assigned to schools whose racial demographics, economic levels, and achievement records were not very different from their former ones (Gadsen & Fuhrman, 2007). They are still in overwhelmingly African American, poverty, and under-achieving settings. Furthermore, a great deal has been made about such high percentages of the displaced students being underachievers (particularly those from Orleans Parish), which suggests that even if they were placed in high-achieving schools, they may have had difficulty performing at acceptable levels.

Would there have been tutors and other support services available to help them with the academics? Probably not. And, even if these accommodations had been made, local students and parents may have been quick to challenge and resist the presence of too many displaced children in high-achieving schools for fear that the educational quality and opportunities of the local residents would be compromised.

Both at home and in their relocations they were left behind by attending poor quality, under-funded schools, learning from culturally irrelevant curricula and minimally competent teachers, and achieving at substandard levels. Even suspending the NCLB accountability stipulations for the first year or two after Katrina is not the solution inasmuch as other infrastructures needed to ensure high quality teaching and learning are not being put into place in the meantime. Nothing is being reported on whether the school districts receiving massive numbers of displaced students are conducting broad-based staff development for working with children and their families who have suffered severe trauma, who are refugees in their own country, and who are ethnically, racially, and culturally different from the dominant mainstream.

Another area of potential concern that has been largely silent is how well the displaced students are adapting to the behavioral codes of their new schools, and what their disciplinary records are like. Are interventions in place to teach them the social and cultural capital involved in test-taking and becoming fully engaged members of the school communities? All of these are critically important aspects of school achievement, and have profound effects on academic performance. To the extent that they are not addressed deliberately, systematically, and in culturally competent ways, the children of the Katrina catastrophe will be left further behind as the immediate ravages of the hurricane recede from our consciousness.

Responses thus far to Katrina demonstrate how difficult it is to correct deeply entrenched educational and social inequities, especially when the students affected the most are poor and of color, and even in the midst of a climate of claimed preoccupation with educational excellence, and national policy mandates that promise success for all students. Will the displaced children of Katrina be benefactors of these claims? Will the benefits they receive make a substantial positive difference in the long run?

Time well spent, along with carefully planned curricular, instructional, counseling, policy, fiscal, and leadership (social, political, economic, and educational) interventions can be antidotes to the educational neglect and abuse so familiar to students of color and poverty from areas affected by Katrina and elsewhere throughout the United States.

As Irvine (2007) advised: "We must act hastily on these urgent educational issues because the hurricanes of apathy, ignorance and prejudice continue to destroy the aspirations and achievement of America's most neglected students" (p. 27). Will this happen expeditiously and qualitatively? We must hope so, but it is too soon to tell yet.

Conclusion

While the Katrina catastrophe is not multicultural education per se, many of its related issues are. The populations victimized the most by the hurricane and its aftermath are the primary constituents and concerns of multicultural education—that is, poor, underachieving students of color who are marginalized and oppressed in mainstream U. S. society and schools. The social and educational atrocities unveiled by Katrina are at the heart of multicultural education reform, which involves transforming substandard teaching, irrelevant curricula, and low academic performance that characterize much of education in school districts that are predominantly of color.

While multicultural education does not oppose students of color attending predominately White educational institutions (PWEI) this is not its first priority in promoting high quality achievement for underrepresented ethnic groups. Nor is it having these students mimic middle class European Americans in order to have access to educational excellence.

In fact, these ideologies and approaches are flagrant violations of the principles and priorities of multicultural education. Instead, ethnically, racially, and socially different students have the right to be taught in ways that are culturally responsive to their identities, cultures, and experiences. Such cultural scaffolding in curriculum and instruction is the best way to provide high quality and equitable learning opportunities for all racially and ethnically diverse students, and ensure that none are left behind.

Multicultural education has much to offer in these educational transformations for the children of Katrina. Yet given the magnitude of the destruction the hurricane left behind, and the long duration and extensive depth of educational atrocities these children suffered before the storm, the contributions multicultural education can make toward changing them is relatively small.

Much of what needs to be done for their rescue, recovery, and reconstruction reach far beyond the purview of multicultural education—to psychological and sociological interventions for the traumatized; to equitable funding and distribution of political power; to the reconstruction of educational institutions and structures toward achieving equity and excellence for all students; toward community activism locally and nationally that aggressively demands the very best quality social services for the children of color and poverty; to everyone everywhere who will not rest until economic, political, social, and educational justice is done for children and their families from all ethnic groups, both within and beyond catastrophe.

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