

Souls

Higher Ground

Are They Katrina's Kids or Ours?

The Experience of Displaced New Orleans Students in Their New Schools and Communities

Kevin Michael Foster

Following Hurricane Katrina, thousands of schoolchildren have been scattered across the country and required to work through a wide range of trauma as they simultaneously adjust to new schools, communities, and cultures. Their reception in new schools has been varied, ranging from pity, to support and inclusion, to vilification. It has included the work of wonderfully dynamic teachers who have adapted to challenging new classroom circumstances, the shortsightedness of schools that did not adequately account for the presence and needs of new students, and even some teachers and administrators who have openly expressed dislike for their newest students.

This article uses examples from the challenging year of teaching, learning, and healing that has occurred in Austin, Texas to discuss the complex and varied impacts of forced dispersal upon African-American schoolchildren who are now attending schools across the country. This article provides a picture of children, teachers, and community in adjustment, including examples of effective practices in working with children dispersed from New Orleans and examples of ineffective or racist responses to new students that have been present and that we must counter.

*This article is grounded in the perspective and methods of a school and community engaged educational anthropologist. It reflects over 100 hours of work in a shelter immediately following Hurricane Katrina, and a subsequent school year of work in Austin public schools working on issues of black student achievement—including the achievement of close to 1,000 students and 10,000 families from New Orleans. It builds upon Katrina related work published in *Transforming Anthropology* and forthcoming in *Perspectives on Urban Education*.*

Keywords: black students, Hurricane Katrina, student resilience, teaching

For most of us, the year starts on January 1 and goes from there. For the U.S. government, which maintains its own fiscal calendar, the year starts in October. In either case, the “New Year” is a time of new beginnings—new money to be spent, new ideas to be tried, new hopes for better days ahead. When things go well, the world of teachers, students, and schools is little different. In late August of each year, there are new teachers to meet, new students to teach, new classroom communities to join or build.

So what did “New Year 2005” bring to our children from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region? As we can imagine, for our children who were displaced by the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the new school year meant displacement, loss, and the realization of worst nightmares. And what did the new school year bring to teachers whose cities took in those displaced following the Katrina aftermath? Our teachers and school administrators, along with many of the rest of us, began a journey into the surreal—where ideas about what was possible in this powerful nation were challenged, and where ideas about how and how much we care for *all of our* children, and about our lack of prejudice in this “colorblind society,” were put to the test. It was also a year in which schools’ utter lack of preparedness to teach and serve the diversity that is represented by our nation’s students was on tragic display.

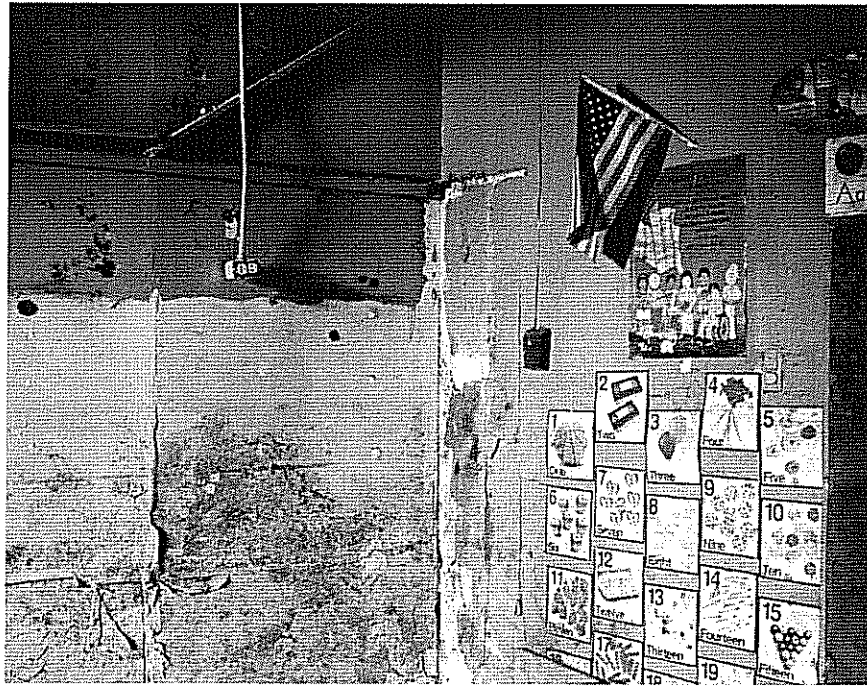
In short, and though an admitted generality, for those in schools across the country that were affected by Katrina, this past year has been a meeting of the traumatized (displaced children) with the insecure and ill-prepared (teachers, schools administrators, and schools)—sometimes with surprising and beautiful outcomes, but too often with predictable results that confirm our worst fears about the manner in which American schools routinely abuse poor Black children.

This essay provides a glimpse into the ongoing circumstances and adjustments of children displaced from New Orleans,¹ and of the schools and school districts in which they eventually enrolled following their relocation. It focuses on Austin, Texas (as one of the cities that has taken in thousands of new children and families), and is grounded in the observations and work of a community-engaged educational anthropologist. The essay reflects over 100 hours of work in a shelter immediately following Hurricane Katrina, and a subsequent school year of work in Austin public schools working on issues of Black student achievement—including the adjustment and achievement of close to 1000 Black students and 10,000 Black families from New Orleans. It builds upon Katrina related writings published in *Transforming Anthropology*² and forthcoming in *Perspectives on Urban Education*.

First Days of School

During the evacuation and immediately afterwards, Austin proved to be a decent and caring city, full of people who dropped everything to volunteer in any way they could. But what would happen in areas of ongoing and close interactions between displaced residents and those who were already established? Schools were one of the spaces of such ongoing interaction—as students met teachers, and teachers met families. So what are some of the stories from those early days? Do they give us hope for what might come next for members of the New Orleans Diaspora?

Austin Independent School District (AISD) personnel spent several days, in early September, on-site at the Convention Center enrolling students and assigning them to schools. As school and district personnel sat at computers and attended to those who lined up to enroll, some progressive volunteers (several of whom had themselves been displaced and had lost all of their material possessions) organized students and got them and their parents into line. As the first day of schooling *en masse* began for displaced children,



“Elementary School. Ninth Ward, LA” 2005 © David Julian.

busses lined up outside the Convention Center and kids were sent to one of several schools chosen for their initial transition into AISD. As families transitioned out of the Convention Center, kids changed schools and ended up scattered across the District’s 107 campuses—two or three here, none there, and in some cases, several dozen attending the same elementary, middle, or high school.

For one elementary school student things had started off well. As we sat at an arts and crafts center in the corner of the cafeteria area that had been set up in the Convention Center, he offered his perspective on his schooling circumstances. He shared a sentiment that I would hear from other young children—he hoped that he would get to stay in Austin. He liked his new school. It was clean, he explained; the people were nice; he liked his teacher.

Other students started out similarly well, even as the magnitude and difficulty of the circumstances meant that many approached school with little guidance or support. Once children were enrolled in schools, but before they left the Convention Center, most spent their afternoons at a large computer area, which had morphed into a video game area after some movie stars who live in Austin visited the Center and donated video game equipment. Kids gathered around large screen televisions and computers and watched one another play. Not too many seemed concerned about homework. Meanwhile, a small number of children went straight to their living areas that they and their families had set up. These were generally children whose parents had provided strict instructions to go straight to their cots after school and to do their homework. There they would quietly sit and work on math problems or craft stories that they had been instructed to write. A couple of hours later their parents would return from their day of job hunting, apartment hunting, or navigating the city or federal service bureaucracy.

For one high school, where several students from the shelter were initially enrolled, things hadn’t started so well. It is sometimes impossible to think of everything, so perhaps no one is too blame for the placement of members of two rival gangs onto the same bus for

the ride to school. The bus actually carried students from a variety of backgrounds and from different neighborhoods across New Orleans, so there were plenty of students who wanted nothing to do with the fights that broke out on the bus and compelled the bus driver to pull over and work to get everything settled down. When the bus finally pulled into the school lot, students who were already filled with trepidation and unsure about what to expect now felt the added burden of being associated with and talking about “the fights.” This was their unfortunate welcome to high schooling in Austin.

Finally, in yet another case, things didn’t go so well for a 5th grade teacher and one of her new students. Ms. B. had introduced herself to her newest 5th graders in a manner that was unsurprising and routine. She asked students their names and about themselves and told them she would like to be called Ms. B. The response from Earl, one of her new students from New Orleans, was nothing she anticipated or had ever experienced. “I’d like to be called Ms. B.,” went her side of the conversation. “OK, Bitch” was his. The story of Ms. B. and Earl, to which I’ll return later in this article, provides a poignant glimpse of the challenges and possibilities inherent in teaching students who have experienced trauma—be that trauma of several hellish days (as during the Katrina aftermath) or of a lifelong nature (as in the case of thousands and thousands of Black and poor children who had been systematically undereducated and abused in a broken public school system in New Orleans).

Settling In

As the school year rolled on in Austin, the mobility rates of children from New Orleans was very high—students switched schools often as parents worked towards establishing stability. For many families, two immediate priorities emerged—finding jobs and finding affordable housing. The most pressing complication, of course, was making sure that both jobs and homes were accessible by bus. School placement was often dictated by those other pressing needs, such that as families continually worked to improve their circumstances, they were pressed to change schools as well. Things began to settle down after a time, but even at the end of the 2005–2006 school year, student mobility remained an important dynamic in the education of our children.

Throughout the 2005–2006 school year, there were spaces of remarkable and dynamic teaching, examples of the inadequacy of schools to address the circumstances at hand, and some unfortunate spaces of inexcusable behavior on the part of teachers and administrators. Citywide, one concern put forth by the city manager and the mayor was whether the City of Austin would be reimbursed by the Federal Government for the cancelled Convention Center events, the overtime paid to city employees, and the expansion of the social service net to account for the new residents.³ On campuses across the school district, one early concern was whether the “Katrina Kids” would “count” in the standardized testing accountability system (where schools are penalized for failing to adequately educate their students). In classrooms, one concern was how to handle “those bad Katrina Kids.” Over the course of several months, some began to adopt the term “compassion fatigue” to capture their sense of having been asked to care too much, for too many, for too long.

Such discourses of self-concern, selfishness, privilege, and fear did not go uncontested, however, although they remain powerful and present. Discourses of despair, hardship, and defeat were answered head-on by competing discourses of compassion and (ironic) opportunity. Some non-profit social service organizations, school teachers, community members, and others actively countered the emerging rhetoric of self-concern. Others simply did not care to notice them. Most notable was the resilience, strength and

resourcefulness of many of the families from New Orleans, as they saw a chance for a fresh start in a new place and were eager to make things work for them in their new environment.

Within the swirling context of competing ideas about our newest residents and their impact upon Austin, and amidst their lived realities of grieving and ongoing struggles regarding future plans, schooling went on. The story of Earl and Ms. B.—the student who used profanity to address his teacher, and the teacher who had to figure out how to handle the situation—captures some of the challenges and possibilities that some chose to acknowledge and work through in the midst of this whole confusing morass.

Earl and Ms. B.

Teachers across the nation know the exercise well. It is captured by a statement like this: “Oh, she is so good with ‘those children’; we should give them to ‘her.’” “Those children” are children with special needs. The “her” is deemed an effective teacher.⁴ In some schools and districts in Georgia, Illinois or South Carolina, “those” may be migrant children. In California, Texas, New York, or Florida “those” may be English language learners. Often, “those” are the “discipline problems.” All too often, “those children” are Black boys. Regardless of the specifics, children are dehumanized by such labels, but in the cases of our best teachers—the ones who do the most and the best work—stigmatized children come into a classroom where their humanity is restored. In Austin 2005–2006, “those children” were “the Katrina Kids.” At AISD’s Slaughter Elementary the “her”—that effective teacher to whom the 5th grade “Katrina Kids” were sent—was Ms. B.

After Ms. B.’s initial run-ins with Earl, she sent him to the principal’s office. She did this with other kids as well. This backfired, however, and she quickly abandoned the strategy. The problem was that, as the children quickly figured out, her well meaning administrators had trouble disciplining children who had been through so much trauma. As Ms. B. relates the story, she figured this out one day when she overheard one student from New Orleans telling another in so many words, “if you get sent to this principal’s office, just give your story—tell her all your stuff about what you’ve been through and then she won’t do anything.” In essence, the kids, through no fault of their own, were learning to be victims, to use their tragedy to their advantage to receive sympathy instead of punishment (and who can blame them—this is the type of strategy that smart ten year olds employ as they negotiate schools, parents, and authority). But this was a disaster for Ms. B.’s classroom. Kids came back as unruly as before, but now were emboldened in their misbehavior because there were no consequences for misdeeds.

As Earl continued to address Ms. B. with curse words, she adapted her strategy (as good and thoughtful teachers do). Showing extraordinary patience (not over hours, days, or weeks but over months) she withheld attention from Earl. Unless a situation demanded intervention, she simply ignored Earl when he was uncivil. On the other hand, appropriate behavior was met with authentic and caring interest and engagement, which could have been difficult, given the many times when Earl had been so profoundly disrespectful.

Over the course of the year, an interesting dynamic emerged in Ms. B.’s classroom. Sometimes Earl wanted attention, and became tired of being ignored. At those moments, and with increasing frequency, Earl began to refer to the teacher by her name, and with appropriate respect. And then came what may have been the defining moment—just a moment—but one that Ms. B. and Earl had been working towards. Just before the Christmas break, Ms. B. did what she usually did at that time of year; she gave everyone a gift, along with a note about something she appreciated about them. Nothing big—a



"Street Life" © Chester Higgins

cute pencil, a pad, a trinket of appreciation. Earl received a gift too. He took it with mild suspicion and surprise, but he took it.

And then came the break. And then back came Earl. By Ms. B.'s account, he was not suddenly perfect, but he was markedly different. He still cursed too much, but no longer at her, and not so much at other people. His classroom and academic engagement improved and he generally behaved according to the expectations of the classroom community. Over a very difficult several months, Ms. B. had earned the trust of a hurting little boy, and he had begun to respond. Earl's story is ongoing of course, and things are not perfect for him—in school or outside of it. But he is now a more integrated member of a school community because of Ms. B.'s work—he is taught, cared for, and held up to standards of behavior and academic behavior. This is a small story of course, and it is a one of thousands of stories across Austin, and thousands of others across the country—some of which have turned out well, many others of which have gone horribly wrong.

There is an epilogue to the story of Earl and Ms. B. Once Earl and Ms. B. had a reasonable student–teacher relationship they were able to talk. Ms. B. asked Earl what all the cursing was about. He told her in plain terms that cursing was what he was used to in his old school—his teachers cursed at him and he cursed back. It was the norm. In short, Earl's New Orleans schooling experience sounded like one of systematic abuse.⁵

Some would refer to Ms. B. as an everyday hero. At the same time, we must recognize that what Ms. B. offers is the spirit, perseverance, patience, and competence that is required of teachers if we are to have children endure the everyday challenges of life (let alone the horrific experience of Katrina) with their humanity and potential intact. Although not a trained counselor, Ms. B. and other teachers have had to maintain a difficult balance in working with so many traumatized children. On one hand, it is a teacher's responsibility to provide for the academic and moral development of all of the children in their classroom. According to a rich and historically rooted tradition of African-American teachers teaching African-American children, this has meant high academic and behavioral standards and expectations for students, along with adherence to an age-old adage that we need to hold our students to the highest standards because our children need to be twice as good

to get half as far as their non-Black peers. On the other hand, the question that effective, caring, and reflective teachers struggle with is whether this is all the more true when our kids suffer such trauma, or if under such absolutely horrific circumstances we better serve our children by backing off and “cutting some slack.”

Trained counselors, let alone teachers, struggle with just how much to push and how much to ease up in such circumstances. What astute teachers and counselors in Austin reported and realized was that a range of inappropriate or difficult behaviors were to be expected of displaced children—not just cursing, but also fighting, crying, disengagement from the classroom, and sullenness, among other behaviors. In addition, poor behaviors were often wholly unavoidable as they were fueled by circumstances completely beyond students’ control—lack of sleep due to recurring nightmares; entire families in mourning for lost homes, lost family members, and lost stability; additional home stress due to financial instability, overcrowding, and not knowing where the family would live next month. The reality that cannot be overstated is that our children from New Orleans have been through and continue to endure significant trauma, that this represents an ongoing challenge to those who take their charges as public servants seriously, and that in those cases where we are ineffective, children’s tragedies are only compounded by our failures.

Our best teachers—heroic teachers like Ms. B.—can, must, and do find a way to account for and even address students’ realities as they teach—in fact subtly weaving healing processes into the classroom communities that they shepherd. Unfortunately, the fact that teachers like Ms. B. have to be seen as heroes lets us know that she is not the current norm. Across Austin, many teachers and administrators have not been effective in addressing the needs of our children from New Orleans. In some cases, where administrators lacked the necessary socio-cultural awareness to build bridges of possibility out of the circumstances, kids ended up fighting with one another—kids from New Orleans trying to establish a sense of space and place, kids from Austin defending the same, and ineffective administrators not understanding what was happening and chalking it all up to the typical behavior of Black people. In other cases, teachers, parents, and principals could barely hide their disdain for their new students. One administrator expressed that she “hated” the Katrina Kids. In classrooms across the district, teachers sought to have kids from New Orleans moved out of their classrooms and into someone else’s classroom, into special education, or into the principal’s office. In such cases, the trauma experienced by our displaced students was only deepened.

In such spaces of tragic ineffectiveness, we actually have schooling as usual in countless U.S. public schools. As educational anthropologist Michele Foster relates, she always knows when she is in a U.S. public school because of the line of Black boys waiting to see the principal. To wit, I could have quickly exhausted my word count for this article by sharing horror stories from the past year. My hope, however, is that readers are at least generally aware of the unchecked racism and teacher ineffectiveness in our schools, so that while I can (and will) return to that topic in other writings, I have been able to focus here on those aspects of our current crisis that provide us (those in Austin, but also those in Houston, San Antonio, Baton Rouge, and any other city, school, or neighborhood with new residents from New Orleans) with positive examples that will best prepare us to move forward.

Some citizens from the Gulf Coast region have returned to places like New Orleans to rebuild, but many others have chosen to stay in their new locales. Of the thousand or so students that have entered AISD, close to seven hundred were still with us by the end of the 2005–2006 school year. Issues for subsequent school years include (1) better accounting for the cultural and linguistic differences that our new children bring with them to school [this will mean anti-racist teacher training as well as training in cross socio-cultural

competence], (2) more pro-action in our work to incorporate families from New Orleans into the fabric of everyday life in Austin schools, (3) the need for ongoing mental health monitoring and counseling, (4) better accounting (and less blaming) for behavioral issues that arise from students' ongoing post-traumatic adjustments, and (5) more and better support to facilitate the academic growth of the many students from New Orleans whose academic preparation is well below grade level.

In short, we have a lot of work to do. Austin schools have had a year of trial by fire, and I would be less than candid if I did not say that many of the kids we should care about the most have been burned on top of their burns, and that we have not done enough to heal wounds and promote health and recovery. But now that we have been through the year, there is no reason for us to not do better in the next. The lives of our children depend upon it. For my part, I will stay involved in the work in the schools for three reasons: (1) our kids are there, (2) their educational lives are at stake, and (3) the local district, while far from perfect, and while filled with many people who have no idea of just how ineffective they are, has shown a willingness to grow, learn, and improve. This is at least a foundation. It is a start.

Notes

1. Children and families came from throughout the Gulf Coast region, but the overwhelming majority was from New Orleans.

2. Foster, Kevin Michael (2006) "Austin Shelter Notes," *Transforming Anthropology* 14(1):26–30.

3. The *Austin Business Journal* reported that the city was reimbursed 100% for its expenditures. "All together, Austin estimates it spent \$22.65 million on its Katrina response—\$5.47 million of that for emergency shelter operations. The total includes: \$2.5 million in payments to vendors, \$2.9 million for labor, use of city vehicles and related items, \$17.1 million for interim housing for more than 1,200 households, covering everything from \$12 million in rent to \$500,000 in moving expenses. The Federal Emergency Management Agency fully reimbursed the city for those costs through public assistance grants from the Division of Emergency Management in the Texas Governor's Office." The city was not reimbursed for lost business in the Convention Center. *Austin Business Journal* 10/10/05, 10/28/05).

4. For instance, teacher and researcher Jeff Duncan-Andrade notes the presence of this practice in a California school he has worked with for several years (2005).

5. In following up on this with others, several have shared that Earl's claim is not at all unreasonable. Former New Orleans teachers who now live in Austin, along with social workers and others from New Orleans, have all met this part of the story with no surprise, and rather with sad shakes of affirmation to the possibility that some elementary school children (of whatever race) were subject to cursing by their teachers in their old schools (not to mention the readily evident thorough under-education that is reflected by the abysmal academic levels of many of our newest students).