When Levees Break
Pedagogical Implications for Teachers and Learners: What Do We Do Now?

Marjorie Hall Haley, PhD – George Mason University
Associate Professor of Education – Graduate School of Education
4400 University Drive – MSN 4B3
Fairfax, VA 22030-4444
Phone (703) 993-8710 Fax (540) 253-5024
Email: mhaley@gmu.edu

Melissa S. Ferro, Doctoral Student
Multicultural-Multilingual Education
George Mason University—Graduate School of Education
4400 University Drive – MSN 4B3
Fairfax, VA 22030-4444
Email: mferro@gmu.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the stories of two New Orleans teachers and some of the issues surrounding teachers and learners who, under unthinkable circumstances, returned to classrooms and tried to re-establish a sense of normalcy. During a time when physical, emotional, and spiritual lives had been dismantled, for many, the education of Louisiana's children was a critical objective. How did teachers and learners resume? Once they returned to their schools, what did they find and how did teachers balance their own losses with filling a void to be available for the sea of faces that stared back at them and wondered, "What do we do now?" Finally, this paper examines pedagogical implications as viewed through the lenses of three constructs: empathy in teaching in a post-Katrina environment, sociocultural theory and community, and teacher as learner.

LOUISIANA AND THE NEW ORLEANS SCHOOLS

Floodwaters ravaged nearly a third of all the classrooms in New Orleans beyond repair. Some have not changed much since the day the levees broke. Interesting facts about New Orleans public schools: Before Hurricane Katrina there were 128 public schools, 4,000 teachers, 60,000 students, and ten superintendents in ten years. The system was often regarded as "in crisis."

As a result of Hurricane Katrina 110 out of 128 public schools were completely destroyed. It is estimated that throughout Louisiana and surrounding states, close to 400,000 students from Katrina-ravaged areas had to move in order to attend school. After Katrina the New Orleans schools are now mostly charter and roughly only twenty percent of the public school students returned. Ninety percent of the city's private and parochial students returned. As of this writing, a total of 25 schools have reopened. Four of the 25 are run by the local school board; 18 are charter schools; and 3 are run by the state.

Scott Cowan, president of Tulane University, helped lead the charge for change in New Orleans public schools. He fought to encourage the state to take control away from the failing New Orleans school district and hand over an unprecedented 60 percent of the public schools to private companies. The goal is for these schools to be managed as charter schools. They are publicly funded but independently run.

On August 29, 2006, Steve Monaghan, Louisiana Federation of Teachers President, reported to a Congressional panel the following:

> Just as the destruction of New Orleans in the days after Hurricane Katrina was primarily a man-made disaster that could have been averted, the disgraceful condition of the Orleans Parish School System was a predictable outcome of poverty, neglect, racism and corruption. We now know that if the levees had been built and maintained to the proper specifications, New Orleans would not have gone under water. We also know that if the proper attention had been paid to the children of the city, the rebuilding of our school system would be accomplished and kids would be learning in classrooms today.

Students who have returned to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina can attend any school they choose, no matter where they live. This is one aspect of efforts to improve public education. Parents now have the opportunity to choose schools and local officials believe that this will force all schools to improve in order to attract post-Katrina students.

With these policy changes in mind, this paper explores the realities of two classroom teachers in the first days of the 2006-2007 academic year. Qualitative in nature, it is a hybrid of an ethnographic study of the post-Katrina classroom culture and a case study of two individual teachers. It should be noted however, that this was an unintentional study. The data were collected, not as a result of a pre-determined protocol, but rather as a result of one teacher educator reaching out to the many professional teachers who were struggling to get back to work in a post-Katrina environment.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods for conducting educational research are employed when one seeks to gain an understanding of a particular phenomenon, environment, or belief in the context of education (Gay et al., 2006, 399). There are protocols for selecting the participants, collecting and analyzing the data sources and for reporting the findings. All of this is done with the purpose of exploring emerging themes based on the participants' experiences. What the field of education gains is not the ability to generalize the findings, but rather a greater understanding of a particular reality. The research is purposefully planned and executed with these premises in mind. But what happens when one does not purposefully seek to conduct a qualitative study, yet through the unplanned correspondence with individuals realizes that an unpredicted phenomenon has pedagogical implications? This is precisely the case of the present study.

It is acknowledged that the term "study" may not apply to this report as the correspondence with the two teachers from New Orleans was not research oriented. The initial inquiries in October 2005 were simply made to learn more about their personal stories at a time when most of the country had moved on to other news worthy topics.

Months after Katrina, these teachers, who had lost their jobs, their professional records, their pensions, and many of their personal possessions, continued to seek information on the health and whereabouts of their former colleagues and students. Using the Internet, they sought to contact others as they wrote of their own experiences on various forums and web blogs. It was their narratives in this medium that prompted the initial contact by one of the authors. Over the next eleven months, the teachers informally answered the interview questions provided in Table 1:

Table 1

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Q#	INTERVIEW QUESTION
Q1	How long did it take you to find out about your school, your students, and your colleagues?
Q2	How long have you been teaching?
Q3	What will you do now?
Q4	What steps did you take to get back to a teaching position?
Q5	Once you returned to the classroom, what were your expectations?
Q6	How did you modify or adjust your teaching to accommodate the learners who were still reeling from this awful devastation?
Q7	How have you changed as a result of this?

As the weeks and months passed, their willingness to share information in the form of emails and instant messages increased and it became evident that this unpredicted, unplanned gathering of data had connections to three constructs in pedagogy: empathy in teaching in a post-Katrina environment, sociocultural theory and community, and teacher as learner.

THE STORIES OF MARIE THERESE AND CHANTELLE

Marie Therese

Marie Therese was a veteran 20 year teacher in New Orleans. She was a self-identified Creole. She easily code switched between French, Patois, and English. Before

Katrina she taught high school social studies. She was a New Orleans native and can't imagine living anywhere else in the world, though she has traveled and read extensively. Marie Therese was deeply religious and spiritual, so much so that one might wonder why she did not teach in one of New Orleans' many parochial schools. She felt that being in a pubic school was her privilege of service. "This is where I felt I could do the most good. The kids really need me here."

Marie Therese's commute into New Orleans was one and a half hours each way. She gladly made that commute for nearly 20 years. Katrina did not leave her or her family unscathed. They lost everything – home, cars, pets, but fortunately her entire family - husband, and two teen age children, survived. They evacuated early and returned to find everything gone. In spite of this, her first goals were to 1) get her family settled and comfortable, and 2) figure out how she would get back into the New Orleans school system. Once she learned that the New Orleans schools would not reopen and in fact, all New Orleans teachers were summarily fired, she never grew despondent. She began corresponding via the Internet to find out where her students and colleagues were. The vast majority of her students were evacuated to Houston and her teaching colleagues were even more scattered in various geographic areas.

One year later, Marie Therese found herself walking into one of New Orleans charter schools. On the first day of school, she had her room ready, materials, books, and what few resources she had pulled together. She was so excited and couldn't wait for the first period to begin. Once her class assembled, 27 in all, she was completely overwhelmed when she saw the sea of faces staring back at her and all she could say was, "What do we do now?" During the first few weeks, curricula were attended to but not in

the usual ways teacher educators tend to think. Marie Therese spent a great deal of time listening, sharing stories, and crying with her students. It was a healing process that needed to be continued even one year later.

Chantelle

Chantelle was relatively new to the teaching profession. She had taught third grade for three years before Hurricane Katrina. She was twenty-five years old, a graduate of Hampton University, African American, and a native of New Orleans. She never intended to go into teaching. In fact, she was a mass communications major and had hopes of going into broadcast journalism. In the summer of 2000, she went to Costa Rica on a church missionary project. There she helped teach at a church-based enrichment camp program with children ages five through nine. Chantelle discovered a love for teaching and decided to take as many education courses as she could handle when she returned to college that fall.

In 2002, even though all of her elementary education teaching credentials had not been met, she was hired by the Orleans Parish Schools. Chantelle readily admitted that it was a daunting beginning and there were days when she cried all the way home. Sometimes she felt so overwhelmed, she considered just quitting. However, in spite of the physical condition of her school and classroom; the lack of mentoring that she desperately needed and wanted; and the feeling of despair that seemed to hover over the children, she enjoyed her work with the students.

Chantelle was one of the lucky citizens of New Orleans. While her home sustained enormous water and mud damage, it did remain standing. She and her family were able to move back very shortly after the storm and begin the arduous task of

clearing, cleaning, and repairing. Once those things had been taken care of she began to make inquiries about schools. After learning that she no longer had a job and that her school had been destroyed, she began calling city officials to determine when and which schools would open. Nine months later, she received a phone call, offering her a position in one of the few public schools that reopened.

With great anticipation and expectation, she quickly accepted. The school had been badly damaged but had been renovated to the extent that most sections were safe and suitable for students and teachers. As her students entered the classroom the first day, Chantelle was struck by the emotional trauma her students continued to face. Nearly all of them had lost someone they knew or loved as a result of Hurricane Katrina. Her first instinct was to look at her lesson plan but then she turned back toward her students and thought, "What do we do now?"

EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Many questions were raised as the two teachers returned to work in New Orleans in the fall of 2006. How does teaching and learning resume after a traumatic event? What training, if any, could possibly have prepared these teachers for the first day of school after one of the worst hurricanes in history? How might the personal experiences of the past year affect the traditional roles of teacher and student? Additionally, one wonders, what is the role of the school in rebuilding post-Katrina communities? To address these questions, the authors have chosen to examine existing paradigms and epistemological foundations for teaching and learning.

In recent decades, paradigm shifts in the field of education have been rooted in sociocultural theory. Increasingly regarded as a conceptual framework within practice-

oriented research and efforts to bring about educational change, sociocultural theory by definition is frequently connected to a wide range of contemporary theoretical perspectives on human development. This can be traced to the work of Lev S. Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist who worked in the 1920s and 1930s. In essence, sociocultural theory examines human activity in a holistic way.

There are wide interpretations of sociocultural theory. However, they share two basic premises:

1. Stress is placed on the origin of cognition. In approaches based on sociocultural theory, the developmental pathway is assumed to begin with, and to proceed through, participation in a social activity. According to Hall, "individual development begins in social relationships framing, and framed by, extended participation in communicative practices; it proceeds from there to the psychological, that is, from intermental to intramental activity" (Hall, 1997, 302).
2. Emphasis is stressed on the mediated nature of cognition and on the role of language as a cognitive tool (Lantolf and Appel, 1994, 1-32; Lantolf, 2000, 1-26). Cognitive tools are meaning making resources that give shape to the environments where learning and development occur (Hall, 2003, 53-54). Therefore, we can surmise that as an artist would use a paintbrush and easel, that same person uses meaning-based tools such as music, drawing, singing, or dancing to think.

These premises have led to paradigm shifts in both the role of the teacher and in the design of teacher education programs. There has been a growing recognition for teachers to acquire a "sociocultural competence in working with the diversity of students

that characterize contemporary schooling" (Moll & Arnot-Hopffer, 2005, 244). Many teacher education programs now require a multicultural education component that is intended to prepare teachers to address the cognitive, linguistic, and cultural diversity of their students. The goal of multicultural education should be to ensure that all students, regardless of their diverse backgrounds, are provided an education that mirrors the realities of co-existing in a multicultural, democratic society (Ladson-Billings, 2005, 231). The challenge has been to develop multicultural education programs that are effective.

Reviewing one program in particular, Moll and Arnot-Hopffer found that "most of the teachers felt that culture was a concept applicable to other people's lives but not necessarily to them" (Moll and Arnot-Hopffer, 2005, 245). Examining the sociocultural conditions of others without making reference to one's own culture, one's own experiences, and privileges has resulted in the development of educational policies, programs and philosophies that are based on a deficit model that focuses on what the students lack instead of the positive attributes that they bring to the classroom (Ladson-Billlings, 2005, 231). Moll and Arnot-Hopffer suggest that school administrators and teachers work to build a sense of culture in their classrooms and schools by acknowledging the various "funds of knowledge", or the life experiences that are often not given educational value, that students with diverse demographic and cultural backgrounds bring to the classroom (Moll and Arnot-Hopffer, 2005, 242).

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Chantelle and Marie Therese faced a new level of social needs among their students. There was a distinct need for the students and their teachers to share their experiences with one another. It became apparent to each teacher

that for learning to take place, they would have to acknowledge the educational value of these experiences and somehow use them to build a sense of community.

EMERGING QUESTIONS FROM THE FIELD

When one does not purposefully collect data for a study, there are no pre-determined research questions with which to guide a discussion. For this report, pedagogical implications became evident as the two teachers shared their stories over an eleven month period. Their experiences, particularly after they returned to teaching, revealed three constructs that should be explored in further detail. They are: the role of empathy, sociocultural theory and the development of community, and the newly recognized concept of teacher as learner.

These constructs will be addressed separately but not in isolation as they are interrelated and grounded in sociocultural theory. The questions posed earlier as the teachers returned to their classrooms are not easily answered and new questions are raised through a sociocultural lens. For example, how might Chantelle and Marie Therese rebuild a sense of community in their classrooms for social learning to take place? According to Hall, learning includes frameworks that serve as guides for determining what counts as knowledge and then addresses how to use resources and experiences to build upon that knowledge (Hall, 2003, 49). With this in mind, how might the teachers use the shared experiences of their students as building blocks for future learning? Finally, as the teachers themselves participated in the building of new knowledge with their students, how might this change the paradigm from teacher teaching learner to teacher as learner?

As a means to operationalize the constructs and allow for a guided discussion, Table 2 illustrates these constructs in the form of research questions:

Table 2

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

CONSTRUCT	RESEARCH QUESTION
C1: The role of empathy	RQ1: What is the role of empathy for these two teachers and their students in a post-Katrina environment?
C2: Sociocultural theory and community	RQ2: How does sociocultural theory apply to their rebuilding of classroom communities?
C3: Teacher as learner	RQ3: How has the paradigm of "teacher teaching learner" shifted to "teacher as learner" for these two teachers?

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The Role of Empathy in Teaching in a Post-Katrina Environment

More often than not, and especially in the field of higher education, there is the perception that teachers should be less inclined to become personally invested in the lives of their students. This perception has been deemed acceptable, that is until a teacher is faced with a post-Columbine, post-September 11th, post-Katrina classroom. Referring to his role in a pre-Katrina environment, one Louisiana State University professor stated "when the occasional student seemed to want to discuss something personal with me, I usually tried to turn the conversation into a joint search for practical solutions" (Perlmutter, 2005, 4). However, in a post-Katrina environment, that same professor said "I will never be convinced that professors should be gurus, psychoanalysts, or pals to students, but we do need to find ways to communicate that we are willing to listen and really do care" (Perlmutter, 2005, 7). Empathy, in the form of listening and caring, is not an isolated construct when one considers the context in which it occurs.

Marie Therese and Chantelle returned to classrooms populated with students who now shared a past experience and cultural reality. While the content of the subject matter remained critically important, of a higher importance was allowing opportunities for reflection, creating community, and teachers empathizing with their students on very basic human levels.

Developing the ability to see beyond one's own perspective, to put oneself in the shoes of the learner and to understand the meaning of that experience in terms of learning, is perhaps the most important role of universities in the preparation of teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000, 166-173). As Delpit notes, "we all interpret behaviors, information, and situations through our own cultural lenses; these lenses operate involuntarily, below the level of conscious awareness, making sense it seems that our own view is simply 'the way it is'" (Delpit, 1995, 151). Sharing the same language, gender, socioeconomic status, religion, or ethnic background does not guarantee shared understandings or shared perspectives. Good teachers must develop an awareness of their perspectives or personal lenses for viewing the world, if they are to avoid a "communicentric bias" (Gordon et al, 1990, 3). The challenge for teacher education programs is to provide an opportunity for pre-service and practicing teachers the opportunity to explore their own personal histories, stereotypes, and biases. Without this self-awareness, teachers will limit their understanding of those whom they teach (Darling-Hammond, 2000, 166-173).

For Marie Therese and Chantelle, the challenge of avoiding communicentric bias also included the need to be empathetic with their students. It would not have been enough to acknowledge their students' experiences and then return to the lesson plan at

hand. Recognizing that these experiences could be used for learning, each teacher crafted the plans to include lessons that served as a vehicle for expression. Marie Therese allowed her high school students to keep journals and when possible, they emailed or blogged with other displaced New Orleans students. Chantelle's curriculum was structured in such a way that students used art, poetry, and drawing to express their feelings. This was particularly effective, because no matter what the assignment and or task, she participated alongside her students and time was always made for sharing.

Sociocultural Theory and Community

The role of empathy was critical to developing a new sense of community through a sociocultural lens in the post-Katrina classroom. When teachers and students share experiences and offer one another empathy, a different kind of sociocultural understanding emerges. A sense of community is established.

What became increasingly clear to both Marie Therese and Chantelle was that school provided a constant in the lives of the students before them. The classroom was safe and students needed to believe that it was in fact, their new community. What was immediately incumbent upon these two teachers was to figure out how to construct that sense of community in their respective classrooms.

Both teachers and students engaged in sociocultural behaviors upon returning to their classrooms. In sharing their personal experiences, they shared their social histories including their individual group memberships and social identities based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and religious beliefs. The classroom was a place of socioculturally sanctioned communicative practices. In particular, these classrooms were illustrative of people using varied resources for making meaning in ways that

reflected their identity based on past experience and creating new meanings and personal identities in a social context. Part of the sociocultural process of building a new classroom community included a change in the role of the teacher.

Teacher as Learner

As Marie Therese and Chantelle attended to creating a community of learners, it became evident that for them this was a shift in the paradigm of "teacher teaching learner" to "teacher as learner." Both teachers acknowledged that their roles changed from "knower" to "facilitator" and that they became active participants in co-creating new knowledge with their students. As active participants in their classrooms' communities, they were able to reflect and introspectively think about their individual teaching stance. They each kept journals and they too emailed and blogged with other teachers. Chantelle found writing poetry to be a particularly effective way for her express the feelings that surrounded her daily. This soon led to her students getting excited about putting their emotions into writing and as a culminating activity on a history project, students wrote about a person whom they admired. This was an unexpected pattern of teaching and learning, or rather, teacher as learner for both Marie Therese and Chantelle.

Teacher as learner is a relatively new area of research. There has not been a great deal published and what is available focuses on case studies that highlight teacher learning over extended periods of time and teachers' action research projects. The findings from research on learning suggest roles for teachers that differ from their roles in the past. Education reform efforts in the United States cannot succeed without an effort

to help teachers and administrators assume these new roles (Darling-Hammond, 1997, 154).

The effect of traumatic events on teaching and learning is not new to the educational field yet the paucity of research would suggest otherwise. Much of what was published shortly after Hurricane Katrina focused on the stories of those who were displaced or of the re-building efforts in New Orleans. Little if any research was conducted on the actual re-integration of teaching and learning in the post-Katrina classroom. Many questions remain unanswered. This report has shown that in the wake of Katrina, two teachers resorted to new methods and new lessons based on sociocultural theory that enable them to create a community for learning in their classrooms. However, if teachers are to prepare an ever more diverse group of students for much more challenging work – for framing problems; finding, integrating and synthesizing information; creating new solutions; learning on their own; and working cooperatively – they will need substantially more knowledge and radically different skills than most now have and most schools of education now develop.

CONCLUSION

The two stories illustrated here probably do not begin to scratch the surface of the numbers of remarkable teachers and students who were affected by the impact of Hurricane Katrina. Marie Therese and Chantelle were kind enough to share their stories and to answer many questions over an eleven month period. Both authors are humbled and grateful to recount their experiences. Having worked and researched in the field of teacher education, they note the importance of examining educational phenomenon through a pedagogical lens. Although this report was not founded upon an intentional

study, the stories of these two exceptional teachers should serve as an impetus for future research that explores the methods of resuming classroom instruction after traumatic events. Additionally, there is a call for educational reform to include training that supports the new role of teacher as learner. The constructs illuminated here, empathy, sociocultural theory and community, and teacher as learner, gave a very brief glimpse of how these resilient educators and students began anew. For Marie Therese and Chantelle, it was not "business as usual," but rather, "what do we do now?"

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