
**THAT WHICH CANNOT BE WASHED AWAY: A CRITICAL SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF NEW ORLEANS
PUBLIC EDUCATION POST-KATRINA**

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Publication Date

19-12-2023

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Citation for this work (American Psychological Association 7th edition)

Williams, T. (2023). *THAT WHICH CANNOT BE WASHED AWAY: A CRITICAL SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF NEW ORLEANS PUBLIC EDUCATION POST-KATRINA* (Version 1). University of Notre Dame.
<https://doi.org/10.7274/24870354.v1>

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THAT WHICH CANNOT BE WASHED AWAY: A CRITICAL SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF
NEW ORLEANS PUBLIC EDUCATION POST-KATRINA

by

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An Undergraduate Thesis
Submitted to the Education, Schooling, and Society Program
University of Notre Dame
In Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Supplemental Major

Thesis Advisor: Maria K. McKenna, PhD

May 2023

Abstract

This systematic literature review employs a critical lens to examine the shift in New Orleans public education after Hurricane Katrina's landfall in 2005. The district is currently composed entirely of charter schools, which has drawn criticism from citizens and researchers alike, although many reformers claim that the rise in student achievement justifies the change. Utilizing this qualitative methodology, a dataset ($n = 61$) was formed of peer-reviewed journal articles and edited book chapters based on time restrictions from 2005 through 2023, with emphasis on K-12 education, and a focus on New Orleans public schools. Each work was then coded by study type, school type discussed, main sector assessed, and research intent. The findings from this review imply that although public school student performance in New Orleans has improved since 2005, a lack of community, parent, and student engagement and a significant power imbalance has created tension and barriers that hinder success in social and personal measures. Thus, this work calls for more community-centered policy and research that embraces public opinion to determine the next steps for the school district.

Keywords: New Orleans, public education, critical studies, parent and community engagement, student voice, Hurricane Katrina, charter schools, systematic review

Introduction and Research Questions

New Orleans is often referred to as one of the most culturally rich cities in the United States. Its vast, yet complicated history continues to color the city's present and future. With the everpresent threat of hurricane season, many wonder why locals stay. Among a multitude of other factors, the simplest response is, "You either get it, or you don't."

Over the past two decades, New Orleans has developed into a center for educational research, specifically that concerning school choice, charter systems, and market reforms. Hurricane Katrina's landfall in 2005 and its subsequent impacts on New Orleans schools acted as a catalyst for change and questioning both within the state and from a distance by teachers, families, and administrators. With a so-called "clean slate" Louisiana state leaders decided that the Recovery School District's takeover of Orleans Parish public schools was necessary to get the schools back on track. From this ongoing journey about what New Orleans schools could look like came a system unlike any other – and perhaps that was the intention. Hurricane Katrina's effect on traditional public schools in Orleans Parish was coupled with the Recovery School District's assumption of power in a vacuum-like phenomenon. This created the "perfect storm" for independent entities to move into the city and exacerbate the paradox of choice for New Orleans families.

This review will focus on the academic writings on education in New Orleans and Orleans Parish between the years 2005 and 2023. While most publications on this subject offer snapshots of these schools, the researcher aims to offer a fuller picture of how the system has progressed. When studying a city with as many overlapping interests, communities, and histories as New Orleans, it is imperative to consider a wider span to understand why the tipping point occurred when it did.

In doing so, this work addresses the following questions:

- How did New Orleans's traditional public schools, as they were previously known, cease to exist?
- How was the movement towards a fully charter system instigated?
- Who were the power brokers in the transformation of New Orleans public schools?
- How were parents, students, community members, and other stakeholders convinced of the potential of the budding charter system in the city of New Orleans?
- To what extent did the transformation of the New Orleans public schools have a significant impact on communities of color, specifically Black communities?

The hope with this systematic review is that future scholars will be able to assess and hypothesize with a clearer understanding of the timeline and process of educational reform in New Orleans.

Justification of Research Review

Time Restrictions

By bounding this research review between the years 2005 and 2023, the scope allows for a critical understanding of the tension, strategies, and systems in place immediately following the landfall of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. As many sources argue based on both written statements from the Louisiana Department of Education and communications with community stakeholders, the leadership shift from the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) to the Recovery School District (RSD) as the overseeing entity of the schools was in motion before the hurricane. It is a shared and widely accepted sentiment that New Orleans public schools were not performing well by any standard from graduation rates to standardized test scores to even physical infrastructure. For the question of whether that warranted a takeover, the answer

depends on who you ask. Nonetheless, a starting point of publications from January 1, 2005, brings forth a solid foundation to begin to analyze the pre-Katrina context in New Orleans.

The research review will be limited until March 31, 2023. This bound is fairly recent and thus may produce fewer publications. However, the official acknowledgment and transition of New Orleans schools into an all-public charter system occurred in 2019. In expanding the area of focus into 2023, this review will capture final thoughts before the transformation as well as writings in the aftermath of the new system. While the research contained within this review includes works including publications in 2023, there are surely works in progress related to the assessment of the system. The author looks forward to engaging these works in future research and discourse surrounding New Orleans education.

Academic Works Used

Many of the sources utilized in this analysis are segmented by disciplinary silos. They cover a specific sector of schooling in New Orleans, be it political influence, sociology of the family, economic reform through education, or another field, as is understandable due to the complicated way in which schooling is executed. As with most significant topics of discussion, it is considered best practice to focus on niche parts of an issue to eventually reach a whole within a field. This study is intended to be interdisciplinary to analyze how each of these systems worked together to create an environment that allowed for a complete restructuring of schools in a city that is still physically, socially, economically, and emotionally rebuilding itself from catastrophe – to construct the whole from these pieces. From this, sources will primarily be focused on education, but due to the nature of the educational landscape in New Orleans and education in general, disciplines such as history, political science, and sociology will help frame the discussion.

Positionality Statement

In this work, as an author, I not only take the position of a researcher but as a lifetime citizen of a suburb of New Orleans. My family's history, as far back as we can trace it, has been based in New Orleans. It is rare to hear of movement out of these bounds to this day. Especially as Black residents of the metropolitan area, our identity has been shaped by this place that we call home. Due to these roots, I have been particularly interested in and passionate about how to make New Orleans a better place to stay for generations to come. This part of my identity also allows me to understand the community's social dynamics that may be missed in research conducted by non-locals.

In the aftermath of the hurricane – as in September 2005 up until the present day – every person in the community that survived was expected to either rebuild or remove themselves from the community so others could plant roots. Teachers learned to instruct with shakiness in their voices. Students learned to defend their home, or what was left of it in their hearts. Parents learned to listen and look for any signs that would give their families a path forward. Though some physical school buildings remained, they were no longer community hubs. They were reminders of what had been and haunting messages of what would be coming to the area. No trust remained for the people of New Orleans, for the ownership that they once held of the spaces and culture that surrounded them was taken by higher powers before the water could recede.

I admire the exploration and dedication of non-locals and visitors who have studied, interviewed, and written about this city in all its glory and challenges. I believe they offer insightful perspectives on education based on their experiences in other districts across the country and the world. As with any research, it is important to have diverse perspectives to allow for more creative and competent solutions. With that being said, increasing the body of work

available that takes on a local lens in addition to other scholarly publications will help us move towards reform that helps heal the New Orleans area.

Theoretical Framework

This systematic review is approached with a critical lens to acknowledge the deeply racial history of New Orleans public education and the consequent impacts on children and families of color in the city. Critical Race Theory (CRT) offers a foundation upon which research can challenge dominant narratives and liberate those whose voices and experiences have been thought of as unimportant (Crenshaw, 2002; Solórzano, 1997, 1998; Yosso, 2005). The works included in this review reflect a concern for the narratives they put forth about New Orleans citizens of color.

This work also appreciates the strong community identities in New Orleans as integral parts of the varied educational experiences. It rejects a deficit approach when discussing students, teachers, parents, and other community members and instead recognizes the Community Cultural Wealth that sustains the city (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Yosso, 2005). There is no space in this work for research that undermines the value and significance of the physical and figurative spaces New Orleanians have fought for against both natural and manmade disasters (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lipsitz, 2007).

As an added layer of honoring the stories of those impacted by Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans public education, this work embraces humanizing research, as put forth by Paris & Winn (2014). The researcher recognizes from first-hand experience that the aftermath of a hurricane is vulnerable and painful and that sharing those stories does not always come easier with time. The articles included in this review were screened with attention to the acknowledgment of the people of New Orleans as individuals above all else (Paris & Winn,

2014). These theoretical considerations came together to form the framework for the following review.

Methodology

To capture a broad view of the transformation of public education in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, this paper utilizes a systematic review to capture a multitude of perspectives. With this methodology, the work highlights academic voices but does not do so at the expense of community, student, caretaker, and teacher voices. The systematic review allowed for an impartial gathering of related literature to privilege works and perspectives that may not be as amplified in traditional reviews. From there, the author employed a critical lens dictated by a critical studies theoretical framework. The systematic process, overlaid with the critical lens, provided a fuller understanding of the timeline and progression of the issue at hand through the inclusion of several outlooks, stories, and lenses.

Identification

The literature was collected via electronic searches through OneSearch through the University of Notre Dame, Web of Science, and ERIC by the Institute of Education Sciences. These databases included literature from a variety of scholarly journals, including both education- and non-education-focused works.

The language of the works was restricted to English, though no geographic boundaries were put in place. The search was bound for publication dates between 2005 and 2023, as mentioned prior, and source types including peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters. The time boundaries were initially set five years before the landfall of the hurricane to capture scholarly writing and opinions about the nature of schools in New Orleans leading up to the state takeover of the district. Due to the lack of scholarly publications on the topic between 2000 and

2005, the marker was pushed back to 2005. This still allowed for ample background on the reforms – as will be discussed in later sections. The opposite time boundary was set as the landscape remains volatile.

To effectively address the scope of this review, the search term “New Orleans” was used to bind the geographic focus of the literature. Along with this, the phrase “public schools” was added to specify works about education in the city. The term “public” was intentionally utilized due to the classification of many charter schools in New Orleans as such. This keyword is also inclusive of traditional public schools in New Orleans which become integral to the understanding of the educational landscape in the city as it has stood since Hurricane Katrina.

One concern that may arise with this study is the use of the term “schools” rather than “education” or “choice”. Because of the nature of the literature and in line with previous studies, the researcher is confident that the term “schools” effectively captures and directly relates to the research questions at hand.

Print sources such as newspaper articles, annual reports, presentations, interviews, and other non-academic sources are valuable and contain a wealth of knowledge for this context, though these are beyond the scope and intention of this work. This systematic literature review seeks to explore the experiences of educational stakeholders and participants in New Orleans through the lens of the academic community and peer-reviewed sources. Future studies using content analysis methodology may provide a fuller understanding of how education in New Orleans and the respective opinions of the public have progressed over time.

The initial search produced a total of 2,737 results once duplicates were removed. The sources were stored with RefWorks with identifying information including author, title,

publication date, journal, publisher, and abstract. This data was later used in the screening process to determine eligibility.

Screening

This systematic review was conducted using the Distant reader.¹ Distant reading is used in library science to use computational methods to research and refine systematic reviews of published source material (Moretti, 2013). The tool allows users to compile, organize, and search within a set of citations using Boolean operators² and coding; it acted as an aid in beginning to analyze this work. Due to constraints in the system and for ease of searching, limited data was collected, including title, author, publication date, publisher, abstracts, and keywords. The functions and searches utilized are described below.

The 2,737 sources systematically gathered were converted into TSV files to be compiled into a study carrel for the Distant reader. To remain as unbiased as possible at the beginning of the process, none of the citations were filtered out.

Utilizing the Distant reader method, an initial search was conducted for the term ‘orleans’ in which citations were pulled that contained the term in the title, keywords, or abstract. This was done to confirm that the citations pulled from the aforementioned databases and search engines aligned with the search terms and main topic of this research. The search produced 586 of the total 2,737 sources. A subsequent study carrel containing these 586 sources was created and searched accordingly.

A search was then conducted with the terms ‘orleans’ AND (keyword:charter OR keyword:public OR keyword:katrina). The program gathered the citations that featured these terms most heavily within the abstract or title. This search returned 40 items.

¹ This research would not have been possible without the assistance and work of the creator of the distant reading modeling used for this study, Eric Lease Morgan of Hesburgh Libraries, University of Notre Dame.

² Terms included in a search such as ‘AND,’ ‘OR,’ and ‘NOT’ that focus and limit results

This process was repeated with the terms ‘orleans’ OR ‘katrina’ AND (keyword:charter OR keyword:public) to determine whether a subset of articles that mentioned Hurricane Katrina but not New Orleans or Orleans Parish specifically were not gathered with the previous search. 28 items were returned, so the former search was maintained to preserve a broader set of data.

Inclusion and Exclusion

From that point, works were assessed by title and abstract and included based on the following criteria:

- New Orleans as the primary topic or case study
- Discussion of race, class, and/or gender as it relates to educational opportunity, reform, and outcomes
- Peer-reviewed articles and edited book chapters
- Based on K-12 public education – including charter and traditional public schools
- Research conducted or documents reviewed published between 2000 and 2023

In turn, literature was excluded from this study with the following criteria:

- New Orleans used as a brief example or as one of three or more case studies
- Non-academic or non-peer-reviewed texts or media
- Works focused on health, science, or other non-explicitly education-centered subjects

Following this narrowing down, only 19 pieces of literature remained, leading to a subsequent search and screening.

To supplement the small number of results yielded from the Distant reader search because of technological limitations, the list of sources on RefWorks was manually searched and assessed by the researcher based on the aforementioned criteria. Special attention was paid to the titles, authors, and source type as the searches had produced some newspaper articles rather than

journal articles. The resulting data was cross-checked with the Distant reader list to ensure that significant works were not missed in the process. Along with this, sources were compiled based on the bibliographic citations within the 19 articles/books/chapters that fit the inclusion criteria. This process occurred until the point of saturation³ and yielded 134 results.

Eligibility

Another stage of screening of the 134 works was conducted through an analysis of the full texts of these articles and chapters to ensure adherence to the inclusion criteria. The most common reason for exclusion was a lack of acknowledgment or discussion of the role race, class, and gender play in the public school landscape and access. However, due to the critical lens with which this work is framed, this criterion is non-negotiable. The second screening process resulted in a list of 66 works: 58 “yes” and 9 “maybe”.

The literature was analyzed more closely using key terms and the assessment of works cited. This resulted in a final dataset of 61 articles and chapters from various journals and disciplines.

Note about Author Inclusion

This review’s selection process gave special consideration to scholars who have direct experience with the New Orleans community, whether through upbringing or research-practice partnerships and thus view the context differently. These academics take a specific interest in the city and its people which often translates to a deeper level of care and understanding within their work. This non-exhaustive list includes Kristen L. Buras, Adrienne Dixson, Kevin Lawrence Henry, Huriya Jabbar, Richard O. Welsh, Brian Beabout, Elizabeth Jeffers, Daniella Cook, Luis Mirón, and Douglas Harris. Though the list of included works does not capture all publications

³ In this review, this is “the point at which new data being analyzed ceases to add new understandings” (Levitt, 2018). This was based on key findings in each work and the removal of duplicates.

related to New Orleans by these authors, their ongoing dedication to this field is recognized and appreciated.

Analysis of Collected Data

Extraction and Records

To preserve a systematic approach to data collection for analysis, specific identifying information was gathered for the 61 articles and chapters that met the inclusion criteria for this review. Certain descriptive information was collected, including title, author(s), year of publication, and study type (empirical/non-empirical, qualitative/quantitative/mixed methods, type of qualitative method – if applicable). These works were also assigned a record number for ease of tracking within this review.

Further, the literature was assessed to determine specific information about how each work relates to the following research questions, which were listed in the introduction:

- How did New Orleans's traditional public schools, as they were previously known, cease to exist?
- How was the movement towards a fully charter system instigated?
- Who were the power brokers in the transformation of New Orleans public schools?
- How were parents, students, community members, and other stakeholders convinced of the potential of the budding charter system in the city of New Orleans?
- To what extent did the transformation of the New Orleans public schools have a significant impact on communities of color, specifically Black communities?

This process was completed by using categories. With some, as listed, there was an overlap that was documented accordingly. These categories include the following:

- School type discussed (traditional public, public charter, or both)

- Main sector assessed (state-level leadership, district-level leadership, parents/caretakers, students, community-at-large, teachers, or a combination)
- Researcher intent (historical, achievement/success evaluation, social impact)
- Implications for future research
- Implications for policy
- Other notes and comments

Coding for Thematic Detail

Since this review aims to provide a clearer picture of the progression of public schooling in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina and the reforms that came with its landfall in 2005, articles and chapters were analyzed with that goal in mind. The main categories and the respective notes for each work give a foundation upon which the researchers' findings stand as it relates to this review. Along with this, the critical theoretical framework is crucial in positioning the works within the relevant realms of the New Orleans community. Thus, the thematic analysis considered all of the above-mentioned.

An iterative process was employed by the researcher to explore the patterns present in the relationships between how the research discussed the community, students, caretakers, and teachers in relation to the public school reform in New Orleans. This began with a focus on the background each work gave before their analysis and findings. There was consideration given to the publication date, as the landscape changed rapidly due to social, political, and environmental factors. From that point, researcher intent and implications were assessed to examine the similarities between proposed outcomes and actual outcomes as well as the progression of relationships between community stakeholders and educational leaders and institutions. Through

a systematic method of understanding the purpose and perspective of the authors, these steps allowed for a better understanding of how education has progressed since Hurricane Katrina.⁴

The following section will provide a more detailed analysis and discussion of the process. It will first give an overview of descriptive findings and statistics. It will then provide a rough timeline of post-Katrina public schools in New Orleans and the peoples' journeys through hurricane survival and education reform.

Findings

This section synthesizes information gathered from the named sources with the main parties impacted by research questions acting as a guide. With this, major findings and representative works are identified to provide greater detail about the conjectures made. Contradictions and conflicting narratives are also addressed to tease out the nuances of the issues at hand.

Descriptive Statistics

Of the 61 works included in the final dataset, 25 (40.98%) were published before the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina in 2015, and 36 (59.02%) were published in or following 2015. Notably, 14 (22.95%) of the works were published in 2015, more than any other year between 2005-2023, implying this period of reflection for the people impacted by the storm translated into academic works as well.

As for the types of works, a majority (57.38%) were non-empirical (narratives, essays, document reviews). Of the 42.62% percent that were empirical, 16 (61.53%) were qualitative studies that relied on a combination of methods – commonly, interviews and either observations or surveys.

⁴ It was an intentional choice on the part of the researcher to employ manual coding as opposed to computer-generated coding as an exercise in close reading and developing a familiarity of the field.

42 of the 61 (68.85%) articles and chapters discussed both traditional public and public charter schools, often in a comparative manner. There was a nearly even distribution of empirical and non-empirical works (45.24% and 54.76%, respectively), signaling a solid base of comparison in both lived experiences and more formal methodology.

These statistics will be discussed in greater detail in the following analysis as they relate to the findings, specifically in terms of school type discussed, main sector assessed, researcher intent, and implications for research and policy.

Power Plays to Establish New Systems

Most of the articles in which researcher intent was described as “historical account” or “critical impact” described the background of New Orleans education that led to the Recovery School District (RSD) takeover. In doing so, the works named the main power brokers as the Louisiana Department of Education’s state-level leaders, the RSD-level leaders, and outside parties, including wealthy investors from outside of Louisiana. This recognition was due to each group’s role in education, whether as financial or political sources deeply tied to and concerned about the performance of New Orleans public schools (Beabout, 2014). Thus, these power brokers began to act in a way that maintained a sense of control over results, such as the passing of Act 35.

Act 35 is often cited as a precursor to the RSD takeover and eventually an all-charter district. The legislation raised the school performance score (SPS) needed to consider it failing, leading to the transfer of the remaining Orleans Parish public schools over to the RSD (Ciolino et al., 2014; Henry, 2019; Mirón, 2008, 2014; Stelly, 2006; Weixler et al., 2018). This was done despite an improvement in performance before the hurricane and 80 percent of legislators from New Orleans voting against the measure (Cook & Dixon, 2013; Ciolino, 2014). Along with this,

Governor Kathleen Blanco's Executive Order 58 in October 2005 eliminated the stipulation of faculty, staff, and parent approval to charter a school, as well as any timeline requirement (Henry, 2019). Though this move was initially framed as a way to get students back to school as quickly as possible, it gave state-level leaders more autonomy in establishing charter schools well past 2005.

With the transfer of power over to RSD, the state was now directly responsible and liable for the results in the New Orleans public schools they deemed failing, though defining accountability and success was largely internal (Dingerson, 2006; Henry, 2019). Those conducting checks for success were also those in charge of leading and upholding the educational system.

A significant example of this political and financial power is the Algiers Charter School Association (ACSA), which is characterized as one of the major players in the onset of the "charter movement". Though technically native, this influence counters other narratives in which there is a "local versus transplant" divide on the state of public education in New Orleans (Buras, 2013, 2015). Research suggests that ACSA's petition for charter funding from the federal money given to the state for this specific purpose seemed to start a chain reaction among actors (Beabout, 2014; Buras, 2013; Mirón, 2008). The perceived innovation of the program coupled with the established, existing schools within the community – which were relatively unharmed by Hurricane Katrina – set a precedent for what the state and its companions were looking for. The system did not come about from a particularly grueling process, as some may say the mayor at the time, Ray Nagin, intended; it began a pattern of utilizing increases in student achievement scores to justify the existence of charters (Mirón, 2008).

The works suggest that the early establishment of charter networks in New Orleans was not a matter of initially proven quality or the potential for such but any semblance of a school system that would not replicate the previous state Orleans Parish public schools (Dixson et al., 2015; Frazier et al., 2006; Jabbar, 2015a; Johnson-Burel et al., 2014; Mirón, 2008). As stakeholders who either had a direct investment in the new schools in the city or whose credibility as leaders stood on the achievement of the charter schools, the power brokers in initiating these moves in New Orleans sought to prove themselves. Should they have failed, people (namely, donors) would have questioned their ability to counteract the trends they spoke so fervently against in pre-Katrina schools.

Teachers and Leaders as Tools and/or Obstacles

The research on the specific impacts related to teacher outcomes and impact suggests a significant power imbalance between teachers and state, local, and school leaders and legislators, especially for the United Teachers of New Orleans, the local teacher union for Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) schools. One might expect that veteran teachers, many of which were New Orleans natives and Black, are significant sources and partners for understanding the cultures that charter schools would enter – the data mined from this project indicates that they would be correct. Despite this, these veteran teachers were abruptly fired upon the waves of change and reform in New Orleans to make room for “new” teachers, which often meant young, inexperienced, and non-native. Of the articles and chapters that speak about, and from, the teacher experience, very few offer a perspective that values the charter school movement as it was enacted in New Orleans. Veteran teachers explain that they were fired without reason or warning, and if they were allowed back into charters, it was at both a literal cost of their

insurance premiums and the loss of job security and psychological safety (Buras, 2016; Cook & Dixon, 2013).

When other works acknowledge teacher perspectives following chartering, it is in reference to the “freedom” they feel from the bounds of central office bureaucracy (Johnson-Burel et al., 2014; Weixler et al., 2018). It appears that even this freedom comes at a cost, as empirical studies about teachers in post-Katrina New Orleans schools find that the group is led to abide by frameworks that emphasize adherence and control (Jabbar, 2018; Sondel, 2016). This is echoed by studies related to school- and district-level leadership following the hurricane (Henry, 2019; Henry et al., 2016; Jabbar, 2015a).

Research points to the presence of several types of leaders within New Orleans school districts following Hurricane Katrina: those who fully stand with the implementation of charter programs in the city, those who are not quite on board but recognize chartering as an opportunity to reclaim grassroots leadership, and those who recognize themselves as bounded to the “rules” or the system. Perhaps the most nuanced of these are the leaders who find themselves going with the tide, such as those who acknowledge and adhere to market-like practices of recruitment and retention of students and teachers alike (Buras, 2021; Jabbar, 2015b, 2018). This is not a blind, agreeable decision but one that comes with the tension of trying to please several parties while also feeling the obligation to do your community justice. Comparatively, this is one of the most actionable stances, as leaders who attempt to charter to promote grassroots issues and activism are unfortunately unsuccessful due to the elusive approval process needed to secure – or reestablish – community space for community purposes such as public education (Buras, 2013, 2021; Henry et al., 2016). These two groups stand in stark contrast to the charter advocates, most of whom, as mentioned prior, seem to maintain a careful distance from the impacts and execution

of the missions they promote. The works referenced suggest that this is done through funding from outside of Louisiana, careful messaging to align the charters with the community, and promises to provide successful outcomes for students, though what defines success is hazy (Buras, 2013; Jabbar, 2015a; Lay, 2016; Tillotson, 2006).

Parent/Caretaker Decision Makers with Limited Information

Articles centered around the parent and caretaker experience in post-Katrina New Orleans schools describe how advocacy on behalf of the student was exceptionally difficult. Information about the charter schools and other educational options in the city immediately following the hurricane and the RSD takeover was scarce and took the form of marketing campaigns rather than word-of-mouth that the community usually relied on (Lay, 2016; Morel & Nuamah, 2020). Thus, caretakers were left to gamble on the type of schools they would choose for their children – if they were given the choice that is (Dixson, 2011; Mee et al., 2015). While attempting to repair or salvage homes, temporarily settling in other states, and seeking employment, this group was left with little indication of what they would return to and little opportunity to find out (Dixson, 2011; Dixson et al., 2015). Because of this, research indicates that initially, just like other stakeholders in the world of New Orleans public education, many caretakers were seeking any alternative that was (a) better than the schools their students attended pre-Katrina or (b) in the city so that they could return to what they felt was home. However, even with the introduction of OneApp⁵ in 2012 to allow parents to rank their preferences for the charter admissions lottery, dissatisfaction was prominent due to the consequential issues surrounding transportation, sibling schooling, and discipline (Mee et al.,

⁵ OneApp is an online enrollment portal for New Orleans Public Schools in which guardians can list preferences and request sibling matches. After submission, the applications are reviewed, and students are placed based on a lottery system and available seats in local schools. The system was launched in 2012 as a means to provide more equitable placements.

2015; Mirón, 2014; Nelson, 2015; King, 2016). Although it was proclaimed that parents would have a say in where their children would attend school, inequitable structures manifested themselves once again as those who knew how to “work the system” were able to truly embrace choice.

Impacts of Student Voice and Scores

Of the 11 articles that discuss students as the main sector of interest, those in which researcher intent is achievement/success evaluation often define such as achievement on standardized tests or metrics such as graduation rates or academic year performance (Harris, 2015; Wolf, 2011). While this is undeniably significant in determining the success of education as we understand it currently, these works do not always address other factors influencing the quality of life for students outside of the school building. This is especially important in considering post-Katrina education in New Orleans given the trauma associated with the loss and ongoing mourning of what once was. It is apparent from student narratives that the changes in internal school policies and instruction were some of the costs of this new system they were led into (Buras & Urban South Grassroots Research Collective [USGRC], 2009; Frazier et al., 2006; King, 2016).

It is also worth noting that from the student narratives present in the dataset, many mention their direct experiences with grassroots organizing to resist the charterization or closure of their schools. From these works, it seems that for students in New Orleans, specifically Black students who were the majority of the population in New Orleans public schools pre- and post-Katrina, the schools – both the buildings and the concepts that they stood for – were places of refuge. Students walked into their schools with varied narratives but also with the security of knowing that there were people – teachers, peers, and administrators – that knew what they were

going through because of the community context. They knew that someone in the building wanted them to succeed because they wanted the city to succeed. There was a level of care that extended far beyond what test scores could measure (Buras & USGRC, 2009, 2015; Foster, 2007; Frazier et al., 2006; Wholey & Burkes, 2015). To have such significant changes to the missions and cultures of the schools, if the buildings themselves survived the hurricane, is explained as particularly devastating.

Community Repercussions

20 (32.79%) of the 61 articles and chapters included in this review focused on how public education in New Orleans impacted the community at large. Of these, 10 (50%) were historical accounts and 8 (40%) addressed the critical impact of post-Katrina educational changes and reforms. From this, it appears that the works were most often locals – whether students, teachers, or otherwise active members of the community – explaining how the ever-changing systems were both a result of how the rest of the country, particularly the federal government, perceived the city, and of a dominant narrative that the citizens were incapable of managing their own schools (Beabout, 2014; Buras, 2011; Mirón, 2008; Rasheed, 2006; Robertson & Amedee, 2015; Weixler et al., 2018). Robertson & Amedee (2015) discuss this in detail as a “savior” narrative that charter funders and supporters in the city have created to uphold the systems they created. Though it is argued that because students are more successful (in terms of test achievement) in charter schools, the community consequently improves, it is debatable whether those who have seen the evolution of the educational landscape over time would agree, especially those who have built generations in the city.

Overview

The dataset cultivated through the distant reading process and supplemented by systematic review tells the story of how New Orleans public education has changed since the landfall of Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent moves made by those in power. Though there are conflicting perspectives about whether charter schools have brought positive or negative consequences to the city and its people, the findings offer a clearer picture of how over 20 years of work by all the groups named has resulted in what stands today. The following section will focus on the implications of these findings for future research and policy, considering those proposed by the authors of these 61 works.

Discussion

This section will discuss the findings of the systematic review using the research questions as a guide. While these responses may come across as “answers”, that is not the intention. Instead, they summarize implications for policy and research in the future in hopes of providing a sounder knowledge base.

The research questions are deeply intertwined, simply due to the nature of education, politics, and social context. Therefore, the following subsection will address the first three listed in this review:

- How did New Orleans’s traditional public schools as they were previously known cease to exist?
- How was the movement towards a fully charter system instigated?
- Who were the power brokers in the transformation of New Orleans public schools?

Though Hurricane Katrina may have catalyzed the state of Louisiana to integrate New Orleans into the Recovery School District (RSD) and all that followed it, what ensued was not

the result of thoughtful consideration of community impact (Dingerson, 2006; Mirón, 2008). From the findings, one can conclude that the power dynamics in place and those created after New Orleans was deemed an RSD city were not structures intended to protect and support the communities that called the public schools home. Instead, through the passage (or revoking) of Act 35 and Executive Orders 58 and 79⁶, community voice was deemed irrelevant, and any progress made in the year prior was simply insufficient (Henry, 2019). It is accepted that pre-Katrina New Orleans public schools were not up to state standards in terms of academic performance on standardized tests, graduation rates, behavior, and more. However, as many researchers in this dataset would assert, to assume the answer is to perpetuate a deficit model and eliminate the neighborhood public school is counterintuitive. This conscious decision instead silences the voices of those closest to the issues (Buras, 2021; Dixson, 2011; Mee et al., 2015; Sondel, 2016).

As a community healing from a catastrophic natural disaster and living with the constant threat of another, New Orleanians look to find something to uphold what they know and value despite all that they have lost (Frazier et al., 2006). This is especially true for Black citizens of New Orleans that have seen generations live and pass in the city. To take away the autonomy to educate from those who know the city and its people communicates the presumption that their organizing would be their ruin. It is a rejection of the vast community cultural wealth embedded in New Orleans public schools and lifestyles in favor of outsiders assumed to know best (Buras, 2015b; Nelson, 2015; Sanders, 2015; Yosso, 2005).

This stands, even when considering the academic implications of an all-charter district. Students are more readily seen as vessels to perform well on state assessments so that the charter can maintain its authorization for another year and boast high achievement (Jabbar, 2015b;

⁶ See descriptions in Findings section.

Buras, 2021). From the narratives presented, students who fail to do so – and the teachers that have them in class – are encouraged to pursue other academic and career avenues. Though these charter schools are described as open enrollment and receive funding as such, it is clear that their loyalties are not always to the students or their families (King, 2016). But what happens when the options offered are entering the lottery in hopes of transferring schools, enrolling in (and paying for) private school, or moving to another parish? This leads to the next research question:

- How were parents, students, community members, and other stakeholders convinced of the potential of the budding charter system?

Although some groups in New Orleans do support the charter system, most did not give enthusiastic consent for the elimination of traditional public schools (Buras, 2016; Cook & Dixson, 2013; Johnson-Burel et al., 2014; Weixler et al., 2018). As discussed prior, these stakeholders were essentially excluded from the development of these new school programs. In the years following charterization, parents have continuously spoken out about the lack of adequate transportation and matching issues with OneApp (Robertson & Elliott, 2015). Similarly, since 2005, students are less enthused about the changes in place, though they are told that they are for their greater good (King, 2016). When looking at the documents and evidence that are supposed to point to this potential, student voice is rarely found.

This is not to say that charter programs and schools should not exist in New Orleans. In some situations, they may be a justifiable option for a student or a community. However, when describing what choice means in the context of education, the opportunity to choose must actually exist. Though proponents of the current landscape in New Orleans have called it a system of universal choice, this does not appear to ring true (Dixson, 2011). Whether a student

can attend a school in their neighborhood, with a sibling, or even on their list of preferences, is left to a lottery and a district that lacks the details and time to give an equitable assignment.

The dissatisfaction that results from these restrictions may lead to weakness in other areas. If a caretaker works into the evening but wants to attend a conference or event, is it worth it to drive across town to the school? If the neighborhood school has been a community cultural center since its founding, but new students feel no connection to the area or its history, is it left to be forgotten? If another hurricane hits as the funders and leaders watch on from a distance, what happens to the relationships that are supposed to develop with caretakers and students? Without the foundation of strong identities and community understanding, new policies and programs will remain ill-informed and unsuccessful (Buras, 2021; Roberston & Elliott, 2015). Now more than ever, there is a desperate need to acknowledge where the city has come from and to listen to its people to know where it wants and needs to go.

School and district leaders in New Orleans must acknowledge how integral student and caretaker voices are to enact their missions. If an all-charter district will remain, they must go beyond simply fielding questions and concerns and instead embrace a truly public model – one that goes beyond using public funding. Though there is the temptation of limiting the impact of these voices to create “efficiency” and focus on academic achievement, it is with the support of the community that students can sustain this progress and growth once they leave the classroom. This – along with stable investment and spaces – is a part of how you not only help students graduate but become thoughtful citizens. If achievement is the standard for public school success, define it in more ways than test performance.

Conclusion

My position as a researcher and a native of a town proximal to New Orleans has undoubtedly influenced this work. As I began reviewing articles and chapters, I grappled with how to balance all that I was feeling with the “professionalism” I assumed I was supposed to uphold in this space. However, the deeper I involved myself with the work, the more I realized that this is not the time nor the topic to strive for neutrality.

Since 2005, local leaders, teachers, parents, students, community members, and citizens have fought for New Orleans in ways that extend far beyond education. Much of the grassroots work in the city resembles an attempt to avenge the lives lost and to give those that remain a light at the end of the tunnel. Schools tell one part of a larger journey for New Orleans. This does not diminish their significance, though. Public spaces are critical, and without the support to uphold them, it is difficult to maintain a legacy. The boundary being pushed by charter schools in New Orleans may alter the way we see education in the city for decades to come – and not in the positive way that “reformers” have claimed. As educational leaders work to tease apart what comes next for New Orleans, I urge them to consider the non-academic implications. How can public schools bring people back together after a disaster? How might these spaces provide and signify a home for students beyond their four or more years enrolled? How can they help the city heal through stable and conscious investment rather than rapid change run by outside parties? New Orleans does not need a hero. It needs to be heard.

As a researcher, I hesitate to use the term “resilience” as it is often used as an excuse for the actions and people that lead to adverse circumstances. Put differently, the people of New Orleans know what they hold sacred and will preserve and pursue it at all costs. That community power and heart are what keep the city running. Though it has been brushed aside, as this review

reveals, it will remain as long as there is a will within the citizens. It is that which cannot be washed away by any storm.

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