Disrupted but Not Destroyed: Fictive-Kinship Networks among Black Educators in Post-Katrina New Orleans

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Drawing on Adkins' (1997) notion of reform as colonization and using ethnographic data from African American teachers in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, this article discusses how black educators' fictive-kinship (Fordham 1996, Chatters, Taylor, and Jayadoky 1994, Stack 1976) networks have been altered in the changing landscape of reform. I argue that the importance of fictive-kinship relationships among educators and students was ignored in school-reform efforts in post-Katrina New Orleans. Post-Katrina school reforms disrupted, but did not destroy, these fictive-kinship networks. I discuss three themes: (1) fictive-kinship networks created before Katrina cultivated an environment centered on cooperation, collaboration, and solidarity, (2) fictive-kinship networks allowed black educators to advocate on behalf of their students, which included supporting the nonacademic needs of students, and (3) black educators used existing fictive-kinship relationships to build resiliency in their students. Fictive-kinship relationships among educators and students can inform our understanding of resiliency in African American schooling and thus contribute to deeper knowledge of school-reform efforts in New Orleans.

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina slammed into the city of New Orleans, not only wiping out a major U.S. city but completely decimating a public school system. The Orleans Parish School Board placed 7,500 school employees on disaster leave without pay on September 15, 2005, and 4,500 teachers lost their jobs, resulting in the single largest displacement of African American educators since desegregation. Pre-Katrina, New Orleans had a strong black teaching force. The United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO) was the first integrated teachers' union in the South and the first to win a collective-bargaining agreement in the state without the protection of a state employees' collective-bargaining law. The creation of UTNO represented the first time that an all-black organization in the

South had become integrated by accepting whites (Dingerson 2006). At the heart of the rebuilding effort in New Orleans is the public school system; pre-Katrina, 80 percent of the city's school-age children attended public schools (Dingerson 2006).

Although there are many ways to approach understanding what is happening in New Orleans schools, it is important to include viewpoints from both the community *and* the schools, which provide insight into the effect of reforms on the classroom, students, and the community. Therein lies the importance of black educators. Research has documented the value of educators as agents of change and as necessary partners in any school reform (Payne 1984, Anyon 2005, Rothstein 2004, Perry 2003, Noblit 1986, Fruchter 2007, Mirón and St. John 2003). Black educators are both powerful and powerless: as educators, they have access to traditional hegemonic constructions of schools; as black folk in America, they have a "perspective advantage" that allows them to see and speak not from a place of disadvantage but with "wide-angle vision" (Ladson Billings 2000: 262). The notion of perspective advantage echoes the DuBoisian notion of double consciousness. DuBois (1903) asserts that as a result of being black in America, one has been "gifted with second-sight in this American world" (7), which leads to a "peculiar sensation…this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (7). Therefore, black educators not only are positioned to understand their work and value in schools by community standards but must at the same time contend with the larger society's beliefs about the inferiority of blacks and, as a consequence, those who work and learn in black schools. This article documents school reform in post-Katrina New Orleans through the eyes of black educators as one way to speak to the larger narratives of urban school reform in which they are often rendered invisible.

Given the possibilities of improving the academic achievement of black students by using black teachers' pedagogical strategies (Walker 2001; Jeffries 1997; Foster 1993, 1997; Dixson and Dingus 2008), the purpose of this study is to shed light on a neglected aspect of school reform by recounting the experiences of African American educators with urban school reform in post-Katrina New Orleans. Black educators are part of the community and the schooling structure. Thus, they are intimately affected by what happens in both. African American educators are an important starting point for seeing and understanding the complexities and nuances of schooling in New Orleans after Katrina.

This article discusses ethnographic data from a larger study on the narrative experience of black educators in post-Katrina New Orleans. The notion of fictive kinship materialized as a prominent factor in the stories and experiences shared by educators in the study. One main purpose of the larger project was to share the stories and perspectives of black educators in regards to how they understand the sweeping school reforms in post-Katrina New Orleans. Two research questions guided the larger project: (1) What stories do these educators tell about schooling in pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans? (2) What are the implications of these educators' perspectives for urban education reform? In the end, four stories

emerged from the data in response to the first research question: (a) losing kin and the disruption of fictive-kinship networks after Katrina, (b) the impact of the disruption of these networks on the expanded role of black educators, (c) the ways in which whiteness as property operates in regards to teacher recruitment and retention in post-Katrina public schools, and (d) the contested meaning of reform. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on the first two stories to discuss the effect of post-Katrina school reforms on fictive-kinship networks and the expanded role of black educators.

Specifically, this paper addresses three themes I gleaned from the data: (1) fictive-kinship networks allowed black educators to advocate on behalf of their students, which included supporting the nonacademic needs of students, (2) fictive-kinship networks created and cultivated an environment centered on cooperation, collaboration, and solidarity, and (3) the importance of these fictive-kinship relationships among educators and students was ignored in school-reform efforts in New Orleans. After briefly describing the New Orleans educational context, both before and after Hurricane Katrina, I discuss the methodology employed for this study. Then, I move to a review of relevant concepts and literature that informed the analysis of the data. Next, I explore the themes gleaned from the data and conclude with a discussion of implications for urban education reform.

The Big Easy: Relevant Background on New Orleans Public Schools

Located in the Mississippi River Delta on the east and west banks of the Mississippi River and south of Lake Pontchartrain, New Orleans has a rich cultural tradition emerging from the various art forms (music, visual, performance) woven throughout the fabric of its communities. Public education in New Orleans has been shaped by the racial, cultural, and economic complexity of the community. Understanding post-Katrina New Orleans requires understanding the historical context of the city. One defining and unique aspect is that it is a largely Catholic city in a Protestant state and country. The non-Americanness of this American city is also evident in its vestiges of ecclesiastical governance, such as the term "parish," rather than "county," as in the rest of the United States, being used as a geographical and jurisdictional marker (Rasheed 2006, Devore and Logsdon 1991). There are sixty-six parishes in the state, each with an elected school board (Rasheed 2006). To the east and west of Orleans Parish is Jefferson Parish, to the southwest is St. Bernard Parish (not to be confused with St. Bernard Projects, in Mid-City), and to the north, St. Tammany Parish. Orleans Parish and New Orleans are coterminous.[1]

Similar to the rest of the nation, however, New Orleans has a history of racial division. According to the 2000 Census, the population of New Orleans was 66.6 percent black and 26.6 percent white (which, coincidently, is the opposite of the racial composition of the state of Louisiana, which was 62.6 percent white and 32.3

1 In this paper, New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS) and Orleans Parish Public Schools are used interchangeably.

percent black). Canal Street serves as the dividing point between the northern and southern sections of various streets (e.g., South Broad becomes North Broad upon crossing Canal Street into downtown). "Downtown" means downriver from Canal Street, while "Uptown" means upriver from Canal Street. Downtown neighborhoods include the Vieux Carré or French Quarter, Treme, the Seventh Ward, Faubourg-Marigny, Bywater (the Upper Ninth Ward), and the Lower Ninth Ward. Uptown neighborhoods include the Warehouse District, the Lower Garden District, the Garden District, the Irish Channel, the University District (Audubon), Carrollton, Gert Town (Mid-City), Fontainebleau, and Seventh Ward. Historically, Uptown neighborhoods were home to the white, wealthy, and powerful. Downtown was home to American and Creole blacks, with Creoles settling in the Seventh Ward. Although the bonds of race, activism, and music blurred the divide between Creole blacks and American blacks, geographical and cultural distinctions remained (Landphair 1999).

Complicated race relations in antebellum New Orleans make it difficult to draw generalizations about the history of race in the city. This complex racial history emanates from many factors, including (1) the heterogeneity of the black population, especially the role of free black Creoles (*gens de couleur*) (Landphair 1999), (2) the absence of racial segregation, with whites and free blacks living alongside each other, and (3) the integration of the Catholic Church (Blassingame 1973). Similar to the rest of the United States, social classes were racialized by complexion. For example, in 1860, 77 percent of free blacks were mulattos, and 74 percent of slaves were black (ibid.). The racial intimacy in New Orleans was due in large part to Louisiana being one of the few Southern states that permitted interracial marriages and outlawed segregation in schools and places of public accommodation after the Civil War (ibid.). The indifference to the established race rules led to a social milieu in which "free Negroes and whites drank, danced, gambled, and caroused together in many bars and restaurants in the city in spite of regulations against such activities, and houses of prostitution often had an integrated clientele and an integrated staff" (ibid.: 17). It was in this context that New Orleans public schools developed.

Three unique features have shaped the growth of public schools in New Orleans. Their late establishment (compared to other cities), in 1841, reflected the reliance of early French and Spanish colonists on the Catholic Church to educate their children. The presence of a large, private Catholic school system was another unique feature of education. Finally, the growth of the public school system was underwritten with a private endowment by John McDonogh. McDonogh, a wealthy businessman and philanthropist, left more than one million dollars to public schools in his will, which led to the building of thirty-six schools (thus the large number of schools named McDonogh, e.g., John McDonogh, McDonogh 35, McDonogh 42). Finally, unlike other major U.S. cities, immigration did not play a role in shaping schools until after the 1870s (Devore and Logsdon 1991).

Pre-Katrina, the New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS) had been plagued with problems similar to those of many urban districts, with a large percentage of economically poor students (75 percent of students were receiving free or

reduced-price lunch). The system consisted of 117 public schools, of which 102 were underperforming. Before the hurricane, school buildings were in disrepair, teacher salaries were low, and state school spending had declined. The governance structure mirrored those of most school systems: there was a central office directed by a superintendent accountable to an elected school board.

After Katrina, rather than a single, centralized governance system, a decentralized-system approach was adopted to govern public schools in Orleans Parish. The passage of Legislative Act 35[2] by the state legislature, on November 30, 2005, made Recovery School District (RSD) the operating entity for the 107 New Orleans public schools that performed at or below the state average in 2004–2005. Although the RSD had been established prior to Katrina to operate failing schools, only one charter school, P.A. Capdau, was under the RSD during 2004–2005, before the storm. The system of schools is composed of three entities: the RSD, NOPS, and charter schools. Only twenty schools were open six months after Katrina, and only fifty-three were open a year after the storm. Of the fifty-three schools open during the 2006–2007 school year, the first full school year after Hurricane Katrina, twenty-one different entities (each charter school functions autonomously) operated schools, with ten using selective admission policies (Dingerson 2006). Nationally, the federal government unilaterally supported a decentralized charter-school system, marked by the September 30, 2005, announcement by Secretary Margaret Spellings of a $20.9 million grant to Louisiana for charter schools, with no funds specifically allocated to traditional public schools. Navigating the system of schools was overwhelming for both black educators and the larger community of students and parents. During the 2006–2007 school year, the focus of this study, there were ten different start dates for schools, ranging from mid-July to early September. There was a lack of clarity regarding where and how to register your child for school, apply for employment, and address concerns about services (e.g., special education, transportation, etc.). This was complicated by the RSD initially being understaffed with only ten employees and located in Baton Rouge, more than an hour away from New Orleans. It was to this environment of decentralized governance that black educators returned.

This study did not seek to generalize any findings to all African American educators in urban districts or in New Orleans. Rather, I sought to capture a snapshot of the perspectives of African American educators who were part of the single largest displacement of black educators since desegregation. Pre-Katrina, Louisiana schools had a population of 724,000 students in sixty-eight districts

2 Act 35 changed the definition of a failing public school by raising the bar for what was considered failing, expanding state authority to take over entire districts rather than just single schools and redefining what constituted a failing district. First, a failing School Performance Score (SPS) was defined as "below the state average," which substantially raised the passing score. In the 2004–2005 school year, the state average SPS was 87.4. Second, Act 35 expanded the state's takeover authority to entire school districts, rather than individual schools. Act 35 defined a failing school district as one that had more than thirty failing schools or one where at least 50 percent of students attended failing schools (Dingerson 2006; Boston Consulting Group 2007).

comprising sixty-six parishes. Although the overall state population is 64 percent white and 33 percent black, the state public-school student population was evenly split between white (48 percent) and black (48 percent). In contrast, of the 65,349 students enrolled in New Orleans public schools pre-Katrina, 93 percent were African American, 3.5 percent white, 2 percent Asian, 1 percent Hispanic, and less than ½ percent American Indian (Louisiana Department of Education), with 80 percent of the city's school-age children attending public schools (Dingerson 2006). Although the population of the schools, like the city, decreased substantially after Katrina, the student population of 9,150 remained overwhelmingly black (76 percent), with whites comprising 15 percent, Asians 6 percent, Hispanics 2.7 percent, and American Indians .12 percent, respectively. Similar to the student population demographics, the black-educator population of the NOPS was distinct from the state of Louisiana. In the 2004–2005 school year (the year prior to Hurricane Katrina), black educators comprised approximately 34 percent of administrators and 25 percent of teachers in Louisiana (approximately 66 percent of administrators and 74 percent of teachers were white). During the same year in the NOPS, black educators comprised 89 percent of administrators and 73 percent of teachers (11 percent of administrators and 25 percent of teachers were white). The first full school year after Katrina, with the mass dismissal of educators, the black teaching force alone was cut in half, shrinking from 2,759 teachers in the 2004–2005 school year to 801 in the 2006–2007 school year.

Methodology, Data Collection, and Analysis

The project from which this paper emerges focused on two questions: (1) What stories do black educators tell about schooling in pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans? (2) What are the implications of these educators' perspectives for urban education reform? Since qualitative inquiry typically centers on relatively small samples selected purposefully to permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon in depth (Patton 2002), purposeful sampling was used in recruiting and choosing participants for this study. Patton (2002) states that this sampling strategy is useful because it involves actively seeking those participants who provide "information rich cases...from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (2002: 230). As the project director for The National Coalition for Quality Education in New Orleans, I was quite familiar with the educational, social, and political terrain of post-Katrina New Orleans, which gave me networks that I could tap when recruiting participants. [3]

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3 The National Coalition for Quality Education in New Orleans is an ad hoc group of national and New Orleans scholars and educators who are working together to help insure that post-Katrina schooling in New Orleans provides excellent education for all children, especially children who have historically been least well served—those from low-income communities and communities of color. A primary principle is that communities have the right and responsibility to define and develop their educational institutions.

Seven self-identified African American educators[4] participated in the study, two men and five women whose experience working in the schools ranged from thirteen to thirty years. All but one of the seven were from Louisiana, with five being born and raised in New Orleans. The other was from Mississippi. All of the participants attended public schools, with six graduating from public schools. One participant attended public schools through middle school and graduated from St. Augustine, one of three private, all-black Catholic schools in New Orleans. The participants' working experience in education represented diverse positions including social workers, administrators, and K–12 teachers in the arts, science, math, and English. Although they all attended college in Louisiana, all but one of the participants graduated from a historically black college or university.

All participants met the selection criteria of having worked in NOPS prior to Katrina and during the first full school year, 2006–2007, after Katrina. Before and after each interview, I recorded field notes to capture my thoughts, perceptions, and further areas to consider. Prior to the initial interview, I answered any questions about the study, obtained consent, and gave participants the types of questions that I would ask. I interviewed three participants twice and the other four only once, for a total of ten interviews lasting between sixty and ninety minutes. The participant chose the site of the interview, with my only request being that the space was semiprivate and suitable for recording. Interviews were conducted in homes, coffee shops, classrooms, auditoriums, and school offices. Four of the seven participants were interviewed during their planning periods at their school. Interviews were transcribed, and, except for one telephone interview, I conducted all of them in person in New Orleans. Since I was unable to arrange a time with one participant during the dates I was in New Orleans, we agreed to conduct a telephone interview. If I needed additional clarification or had follow-up questions, I called participants.

After I received the transcriptions, I coded for themes emerging from interviews regarding participants' pre- and post-Katrina schooling experiences. After coding all the data "pre-," "post-," or "both" in regards to experiences in NOPS, I mined the data for what questions were answered or addressed within. Three major themes emerged: loss/anger, isolation, and the importance of education. I went back and overlaid these themes over temporal codes (pre-/post-/both Katrina) to develop the thematic story emerging from these participants. For example, participants spoke of the loss of personal and professional networks as a result of Hurricane Katrina while simultaneously referencing how the existence of these networks helped them cope in the schools in the aftermath of the storm. In this sense, fictive-kinship networks existed both before (pre-) and after (post-) Katrina. Participants spoke of being and feeling disconnected from decisions made regarding the reconstruction of public schools after (post-) Katrina. Often the stages of these stories began with loss, then turned to anger over the loss and isolation not only

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4 "Educator" encompasses teachers, administrators, counselors, and school social workers.

from their professional, school, and larger communities but from those making decisions about schools.

I now turn to exploring two concepts—urban education reform and fictive kinship—that undergird the analysis in this paper.

Urban Education Reform and Fictive Kinship

In many ways, the challenges of urban schooling must be understood in the context of the relationship between the school and the larger urban community. This relationship is influenced by the history of each particular city. If urban represents the epitome of all that has gone wrong in American society, schools are often the chosen vehicle to deal with the problems created in urban spaces, with the major issue being that of heterogeneity. Schools provide both academic training and socialization. As Bowles and Gintis (2001) assert, "schools prepare people for adult work rules, by socializing people to function well, and without complaint, in the hierarchical structure of the modern corporation…by structuring social interactions and individual rewards to replicate the environment of the workplace" (p 1). In this sense, schools serve dual, and often contradictory, functions[5] (Bowles and Gintis 1976, 2001; Giroux 1981, 1983; Apple 1990).

Although education reform is a highly diverse field encompassing multiple methods and viewpoints in order to improve educational outcomes, "it is nevertheless organized by a general professional perspective about reform, namely that it is necessary, it is possible and practicable, and, unfortunately, it is still largely work-in-progress" (Adkins 1997: 41). Adkins' (1997) review of education reform discovered three prevalent patterns: an examination of the failure of reform, a focus on implementation of reform efforts, and a critical analysis of previous studies of educational reform. According to Adkins, these patterns inform the guiding assumptions of reform research. The belief that "reform is progressive, rational and purposive" (ibid.: 66) influences the types of questions asked and the solutions sought to educational challenges. Adkins understands education reform as colonialism, in that it creates "the colonial condition [which] is the condition in which the Colonized find themselves…inferior to the Colonizer and dependent upon him to overcome their inferiority. The colonial condition, though, seems insurmountable because the Colonizer controls the terms, and, as such, he is a shifting target" (ibid.: 109–110). So although reform is often used as a neutral term, it has significant political, social, and racial meanings.

Predating Adkins' (1997) articulation of reform as colonialism, Sizemore (1978) reminds us that the history of reform for African Americans has always been steeped in the colonial condition. She begins her analysis of school desegregation

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5 Tracking students according to perceived ability (Oakes 2005, Welner 2002) exemplifies this notion of the dual and often contradictory function of schooling. Darity and Jolla's (2009) articulation of segregated education after the ending of formal segregation to describe how schools systematically provide less rigorous curricula to African American students is also noteworthy.

with an analogy of Kenyan independence to construct a counternarrative about the ways in which white America defined the terms of desegregation.

> When a reporter asked one white affluent Kenyan why [the White minority in Kenya did not fear revenge during independence], the Kenyan said, "We gave them the parliament and we kept the banks." For African Americans in the diaspora, the colonial experience has often been used as an analytical framework for the interpretation of our condition…Just as the white Kenyans retained control of the banking institutions to maintain their power to confine and define, so white Americans retained control of the definition of integration in the struggle for school desegregation. They gave us busing and they took the jobs. (1978: 58)

Urban education reform in the twenty-first century has been influenced by the history of education reform, particularly the legacies of desegregation, which presupposes the belief in reform as inherently good, necessary, and reasonable. Fruchter's (2007) assertion that the challenges of urban schools can be understood as the failure to fully implement *Brown v. Board of Education* is captured in this statement by Judge Robert Carter, one of the attorneys who litigated *Brown*:

> …we had neither sought nor received any guidance from professional educators as to what equal education might connote to them in terms of their educational responsibilities. If I had to prepare *Brown* today, instead of looking principally to the social scientist to demonstrate the adverse consequences of segregation, I would seek to recruit educators to formulate a concrete definition of the meaning of equality in education, and I would base my argument on that definition and seek to persuade the Court that equal education in its constitutional dimensions must, at the very least, conform to the contours of equal education as defined by the educators. (Bell 1983: 290)

Siddle Walker's (2001) call for a more full account of African American teaching echoes the sentiment of Robert Carter. In essence, there must be a deeper analysis of how black educators understood and continue to understand their role as it relates to the education of black children. Thus, any review of school reform must take into account the ways in which reform, particularly within urban contexts, is socially constructed, with particular attention given to who controls those constructions.

The Historical and Contemporary Roles of African American Educators. Research has begun to examine the role of the black teacher in raising the achievement of African American children. Stewart, Meier, and England (1989) linked the proportion of black teachers to equal education opportunities for black students, illustrating that higher percentages of black teachers in schools lowers the number of black students expelled, suspended, or placed in special education (Ware 2002). Yet research must not only examine the importance of black teachers for "improv[ing] the quality of education provided to Black students" (Ware 2002: 34) but also come to a deeper understanding of how black teachers understand and

thus perform their work. Historically, teaching has been highly respected in African American communities and a major source of employment for educated African Americans (Dilworth 1988, Cole 1986, Sizemore 1978). The high concentration of African Americans in teaching was due in large part to segregated schooling, with nearly half of black professionals in 1950 comprising teachers, compared to less than one-quarter of whites (Cole 1986).

Narrative accounts of African American teachers in the South before desegregation revealed "intimate portrayals of the school [where] the African American teacher is a critical figure in a web of caring adults who placed the needs of African American children at the center of the school's mission" (Walker 2001: 752). In this sense, education was more than the transmission of formal school knowledge, and the teacher functioned as a community activist on behalf of African American children (Jeffries 1997, Walker 2001). Foster (1991, 1993, 1997) provides some of the earliest examinations of black teachers. Her scholarship has focused on a review of the extant literature on African American teachers as well as an examination of effective black teachers. Successful teachers of African American students are defined as being "proficient in community norms—that is, they are able to communicate with students in a familiar cultural idiom" (Foster 1993: 391). Countering scholarly treatments that tend to portray black teachers negatively, her research illustrates the ways in which effective African American teachers use their situated understanding of community norms to work with students and fellow teachers. The success of these teachers also can be attributed to their understanding of "the current as well as historic, social, economic, and political relationships of the community to the larger society. These teachers are not merely educating the mind—they are educating for character, personal fulfillment, and success in the larger society as well as for competence in the local community" (Foster 1993: 391).

Also useful to this analysis is the work of Jeffries (1997), which explores the ways in which African American teachers' cultural performances have played out historically in segregated schools and the changes in these performances after desegregation. Three archetypes embodying these cultural-performance traditions emerged from the analysis of key phrases and patterns of African American teachers: the trickster, the matriarch, and the preacher. All teachers used the various performance traditions to enhance the education of their African American students, yet with desegregation the performance of each of these archetypes changed creating "the need for renegotiated archetypes with which to analyze the education practices and performances of teachers today" (Jeffries 1997: 44).

The role of the trickster evolved into the warrior. In both performances, African American teachers focused on building the self-esteem and confidence of their students, which was considered a necessary first step before education could begin. During segregated schooling, the matriarch supported African American students and families in their collective struggle for racial, economic and social equality. The matriarch developed into the caretaker after desegregation, attending to student needs as best he or she could. For African American teachers, building

resilience and a sense of humanity was a key responsibility (Dingus 2006). In this way, they fostered a nurturing school environment that entailed giving students the financial, emotional, and social support needed to facilitate learning. With desegregation it became increasingly more difficult for African American teachers to adopt the multifaceted roles of "admonisher, urger, and meddler" (Jeffries 1997: 93). Walker's (2001) analysis of the ways in which African American teachers in Georgia between 1940 and 1960 understood and articulated their professional beliefs and activities sheds further light on the pedagogy of black teachers.

According to Walker (2001), five principles describe the beliefs that African American teachers held about their teaching: (1) the importance of teachers having a relationship and familiarity with black communities, (2) commitment to professional excellence regardless of extra hours or work needed, (3) the expansion of the notion of caring to encompass high expectations in and outside the classroom as well as supporting nonacademic needs as necessary, (4) adapting curriculum to make it relevant to African American students, and (5) using community and school supports as needed. This research is key in helping pose the question of what was lost during desegregation, when the "...voices in the conversation about how to teach children" never included "...those who knew the most about how to teach African American children" (2001: 774).

Building Community through Fictive Kinship. Although the role of teachers as agents of reform and change is being acknowledged, there continues to be a conspicuous absence of black educator perspectives in school reform discussions. Payne (1984) asserts that "it is not surprising while race relations is among the most studied of all topics, we have very little in the way of systematic analysis of how Blacks relate to each other...The deemphasis on intraracial relations necessarily means that we lose touch with a vital key to understanding change" (22). Participants in this study not only adapted various cultural performances in their education practice but also articulated a network of fictive kinship as one way that they, as educators, connected with each other, their students, and the larger community. The fictive-kinship networks as described by black educators in this study offer a perspective of urban education reform that speaks to the ways in which educators help build community, not only within schools but in the larger community. This can enhance our understanding of how reform can build on existing strengths in communities to improve educational outcomes for African American children in urban schools.

Emerging from the field of anthropology, fictive kinship refers to people not related by birth with whom a person shares essential reciprocal social and economic relationships (Fordham 1996). Originally explored by Stack (1974) as a way to illustrate the collective adaptations to poverty of women, men, and children within the social-cultural network of the urban black family, a fictive-kinship network was a frame for understanding strategies adopted by the poor to survive. This seminal work shed light on an aspect of fictive-kinship networks, namely, the distinction between natural and social parenthood.

Stack's (1974) ethnographic study of the poorest section of a black community in a Midwestern city richly described how people established socially recognized kin ties "...to maintain a stable number of people who share reciprocal obligations at appropriate stages in the life cycle" (29). Pushing studies of black families that neglected the adaptive strategies, resourcefulness, and resilience of urban families, this study highlighted the stability of kin networks that "cooperated to produce an adaptive strategy to cope with poverty and racism" (28). In this sense, fictive-kinship networks are sources of informal social and psychological support (Chatters, Taylor, and Jayakody 1994).

Fordham (1996) expanded this definition of fictive kinship in the African American community to include a political and prestige function, asserting that "this porous system enables members of the community to gain prestige, obtain status, survive, and in some instances, thrive in a social context filled with obstacles and impediments to success" (35). The essence of the African Americans' imagined community of fictive kin is its focus on the survival of the group rather than the individual. Moreover, fictive kinship encouraged an emphasis on the value of cooperation, collaboration, and solidarity. As the archetypes of black educators have evolved, they continue to demonstrate the dynamics of fictive kinship, particularly those values of cooperation, solidarity, and collaboration. Although they occupy a unique space in urban communities and schools, black educators are often ignored as a source of input on school reform. Describing the fictive-kinship relationships among educators and students can inform our understanding of resiliency in African American schooling and thus contribute to a deeper knowledge of school-reform efforts in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Fictive-Kinship Networks in New Orleans

Although post-Katrina school reforms disrupted their fictive-kinship networks, black educators were able to draw on them to create supports for themselves, students, and schools. The notion of fictive kinship permeated these educators' articulation of teaching and schooling before and after Katrina. Three findings were gleaned from the data regarding the fictive-kinship networks of black educators in New Orleans. First, the fictive-kinship networks created before Katrina cultivated an environment centered on cooperation, collaboration, and solidarity. Second, these fictive-kinship networks allowed black educators to advocate on behalf of their students, which included supporting their students' nonacademic needs. Finally, black educators used existing fictive-kinship relationships to build resiliency in their students. Each theme is explicated in the following sections.

Black Educators as Kin and Carers. In New Orleans, fictive kinship in the African American community enabled members of the community to survive and, in many instances, thrive in a social context filled with obstacles and impediments to success. This idea of community survival is exemplified by Ruth Thompson, the youngest teacher, who spent her formative years in South Mississippi. When sharing her story and discussing schools in New Orleans, she stated, "I actually did come here just to teach my people." Deborah Barber, who began work as a

paraprofessional in NOPS in 1979 and eventually became an elementary-school teacher, expressed a similar sentiment. Responding to why she chose to teach in public schools after working in private schools, she stated, "My heart is just in educating African American children. That's where my heart is." Later in the interview, Mrs. Barber, commenting on why black teachers stayed after Katrina, revealed that this was "because this could be our sons or our daughters that were failing." These statements speak to a shared destiny and illustrate how black educators understood their relationships with students. This sentiment, coupled with Walker's articulation of an expanded notion of caring, explains how the black educators in this study perceived their relationships with students, and overall student well being, in and outside of the classroom. In addition to granting social and psychological support for themselves, the relationships that black educators had with each other provided a foundation for collectively supporting the needs of students.

Educators described an expanded role for themselves as part of a larger community effort to nurture the children in their schools. Lewis Griffin, with more than twelve years of experience, had served as an elementary-school teacher, school social worker, and now administrator in the public schools. He described his colleagues as part of his family, who "know when your children were born, when they graduate from school, and when they take their first driving lessons." Mr. Griffin and study participant Sarah Steve talked about the trust built among black educators that allowed them to collaborate to meet the needs of their students. In this sense, pre-Katrina black educators' conceptualization of their expanded role was captured in their use of the possessives "my" and "our" as a defining marker for their relationships with students. This reinforced their role as a communal one, with every adult member of the school being responsible for the children. Steve, a thirty-year NOPS veteran born, raised, and educated in New Orleans, explained the relationships in her school before Katrina as familial:

> ...we were a very close-knit staff, you know, principal, administrators, custodians, cafeteria workers, students, parents, as well as the alumni. You know, we just all were family. It was like, if the custodians saw you do something or say something, you know, there was some tie or something that would enable that individual to feel close enough to you to say, "Look! You know this is unacceptable behavior to you." And things would kind of change for that particular incident. Now I might see you or you may do something else and some other individual may encounter you and be able to correct that behavior while you're present with them.

Educators felt as if the other adults were more than coworkers or colleagues. They were, in a sense, coparents to the children in their schools. As such, an important function of these familial networks was to provide informal social and psychological support to each other and their students.

The fictive-kinship networks of black educators facilitated a more intimate understanding of and connection to resources in the larger community. This understanding was grounded in a strengths-based, rather than deficit, view of

black communities. Mrs. Barber spoke to the strengths of communities in New Orleans:

> Well, traditional community [in New Orleans] rallied around those things that were in their community. They supported the schools. They supported whatever went on in their communities, and so not having that support, then we have to depend on all of our funding and everything else that we need from the school district [after Katrina], and that didn't happen prior to that. We were allowed the freedom to have community people come in and do whatever it took for that school to function as best possible.

Echoing this sentiment, Hattie Johnson, a music teacher of thirty-three years, saw the community as providing connection and ownership. She emphasized the importance of community schools, noting, "There was continuity, and children felt a sense of ownership because they were going to school pretty much in their own neighborhoods." Before Katrina, fictive-kinship relationships with the community allowed black educators to advocate on behalf of their students, which included supporting both the academic and nonacademic needs of students. Mr. Griffin spoke of the connection among school, home, and the larger community.

> DC: Can you describe for me what you saw the role of the community or neighborhoods were in the schools, because you mentioned earlier that that was something that changed.
>
> LG: Sure. Pre-Katrina, we had what we would call parent advocates. They would be in the school; they would be responsible for recruiting parents to be involved in their children's education. The community folk knew that this was their community school, and as a result they lent their resources and their talent to that school, where now you have children who may be at a community center in their community but in a school that is almost ten miles away from their home. So those kids couldn't benefit from those community resources at that school. That school now is linking their resources through another channel.
>
> DC: What types of community resources?
>
> LG: Well, you have mental-health services, we had afterschool programs, we had mentoring-type issues, where we had people coming out mentoring to younger kids, reading programs. We had a program where grandparents were involved in the children's education. So we had those types of programs in communities that were cemented there. But as a result of Hurricane Katrina and the turn of the administration, those types of social programs don't exist now. It's more of a "pull yourself up by your own bootstrap, find the resources where you can find them at."

The fictive-kin networks that supported community programs were disrupted as a result of school reforms enacted after Hurricane Katrina. As described previously, the decentralized approach to school governance discontinued community schools. As a result, access to schools became more challenging for parents and the larger community. Study participants spoke angrily of this loss. Mrs. Barber, responding to a question about what was lost after Katrina, stated,

And I think [of] the loss of community involvement, because community involvement can actually make a difference within the school, how it functions. The aspects and the needs of the students, the community, you know, that community tie. I think that's a tremendous loss. We don't have that anymore, simply because communities are no longer the traditional New Orleans communities that we were accustomed to.

All participants, to varying degrees, spoke of the importance of relationships with each other and the larger community as an integral part of student success. Familiarity not only strengthened the bonds between educators and the community but created an avenue for collectively addressing student needs. The disruption, and in some cases loss, of these relationships after the storm was felt deeply. Mrs. Steve, while speaking of her experience during the 2006–2007 school year, said,

[The high school served] the St. Bernard housing development, and as a result of that we were family, you know. We, I with my years of experience, I taught your mother, your father, your uncle, cousin, friend. So when I had a problem with you as a student, and your parent came, "Oh, that was my teacher [too]." With the community, the kids from that St. Bernard, we had that same type of woven relationship where kids could come to us and, you know, share something, and we could get to the agency or someone if we couldn't help the situation. So we lost kind of that piece of the puzzle last year.

Jeremiah Snyder, a band teacher of twenty-one years, asserted a similar sentiment regarding the loss of the kinship networks.

Well, the biggest loss was actually just the kinship between teachers and students that you develop over the years. You know, these kids, like, they're our kids, and they're our family. You know, we care about them more than anything. So the loss was the relationship that we had with the students, and because once that happened, you know, not only people, but everybody was just scattered all over. That's the biggest loss that I feel. And then by that not being in place, it really hasn't been the same since, to be honest with you.

Not only were the values of cooperation, community, and solidarity not shared or embraced in the American system of schooling, as reflected in school-reform research that documents how the desegregation process systematically disregarded conceptions of school quality valued by the African American community (St. John and Cadry 2004, Noblit and Dempsey 1996), but these values were not embraced in the restructuring of the New Orleans Public Schools after Katrina. Although the post-Katrina decision to shift from neighborhood schools and a single system to a system of systems district with multiple entities operating schools disrupted the fictive-kinship networks, the educators relied heavily on these networks to deal with the stress of the first full school year after Katrina. Throughout her interview, Ms. Steve reiterated the familial bond she felt toward her colleagues and school staff, which provided support during that first post-Katrina year.

> So I think that was a lot of the stress that, you know, we faced last school year, of just trying to teach kids as well as trying to hold everybody together. You know, we lean upon each other a lot, and as I said, we've always been a school where, you know, we were family. You know, my kids, my babies, you know, I had my babies here with some of the other teachers who had their kids. We were just family. If you needed something, if you were going through something, we were there for each other.

This type of caring within the articulation of relationships in the schools speaks to Walker's (2001) work, in which she found that African American teachers use an expanded notion of caring facilitated by relationships and familiarity with black communities. In this manner, fictive-kin relationships among educators led to fictive-kin relationships with students and the larger community.

Resiliency of Fictive-Kin Relationships. While the RSD was struggling to become fully operational, fictive-kinship networks continued to function after Katrina. In Mrs. Steve's high school, three days before school was to open, a principal had not been selected and there was no master schedule. She described:

> And we came together and we said, "OK, we don't have a computer system to schedule students, so I'm saying to you all that the only way we're going to be able to open this school is for us to hand-schedule students." So we decided we were not going to wait on RSD because we knew the chaos and situation that they were involved in, because they were trying to hire and staff schools. And we just believed that we needed to take charge and do whatever we needed to do.

In addition to supporting the structural aspects of schooling (such as scheduling) and helping others cope with tremendous personal loss, black-educator fictive-kinship networks continued to provide a system of nonacademic support for students. Ms. Thompson, Mrs. Barber, and the other educators in this study expressed having a responsibility to their students that extended beyond traditional notions of the teacher-student relationship. While walking in the hallways of her high school between classes, Ms. Thompson shared with me how teachers pooled their money to purchase clothing and toiletry items for students after Katrina. Mrs. Barber related how "we [teaching staff] were feeding and buying clothes for kids." In this sense, their students were their children and, as such, part of their familial network, requiring teachers to care for the whole child. This type of caring was evident in how these black educators described their relationships with each other, students, and the broader community, which not only endured Hurricane Katrina but, I would argue, were strengthened by it. Although he was speaking about "the loss of kinship relationships between teachers and students that you develop over the years," Mr. Snyder recounted:

> One of my students was living in Texas in Houston, and he got sick, and he wound up getting on a life-support machine, and the other people that were with him called me, other band members called me and said, "Well, Frank is really sick, you know." He was on his deathbed, so I drove to

Texas that night, my wife and I. Because I knew just being there, it would give them that support. And then he wound up being really sick, and his family decided to take him off the life-support machine, and he wound up crashing. And he was just, like, nineteen years old.

The kinship that African American educators felt with their students was an important aspect to their expanded notion of caring. At its heart is the belief that providing for their nonacademic needs is a crucial component in the high achievement of African American students. Supporting students began with a deep belief in the students' ability to not only do well in school but make an impact in their communities.

The Building-Resilience Function of Fictive Kinship. Participants also articulated building resilience and a sense of humanity as a key responsibility of educators (Dingus 2006). They talked about the importance of fostering a nurturing environment in schools that gave students the financial, emotional, and social support needed to facilitate learning. This became even more important when addressing the challenges faced by students after Katrina.

For these educators, an important aspect of building the resilience of their students was having a shared background with them. Mary Brown, a twenty-five-year high-school teacher, believed that since "a lot of us have come from the same environments, we know, so we can relate much better." The educators often used their own stories to inspire students to see beyond current challenges. Ms. Brown, who grew up in the Lower Ninth Ward, shared what she does when she first meets her students:

MB: I try to establish rapport with them, and I try to let them know where I came from, and the problems and things I had coming up, and things of this nature.

DC: What would you tell them, for example?

MB: I would tell them that it was six of us. With my mother, there were six of us, and although my father was in the home, it wasn't a good situation, but my father was there, and we didn't have everything. We had some things, and I came through some of the same things that, you know, they came through, but always I knew I wanted to have more than my mother had. I always did. My mother was my focal point. I always knew I wanted to have more than she had, and that's what would cause me to strive. Then I came up in the Lower Ninth Ward, and those people down…that wasn't, let's say, the best environment, but I didn't let the environment take me down. So that's the way I would relate to my kids. I would let them know, "Oh, you're from the Lower Nine"… and see, they have a slogan from the Lower Nine that they say: "You're from the Lower Nine, then you don't mind dying." And that's still a slogan. When you tell people, "Oh, you're from the Lower Nine, you don't mind dying," I know I say, "That is what they would say." But I wanted to have more and do better, and that's what I feel that I have done. And that's what I explain to my kids. And I tell them, "You don't have to remain in your environment. You can get up and

come out of it." And that's what I tell them, "You can get up and come out
of it. You don't let the environment take you down."

The importance of sharing stories of individual struggle to build collective resolve
in their students was central to the participants' pedagogy. This desire to impact
the lives of their students and communities guided their pedagogical beliefs. As
such, teaching was more than a job; it was a calling to instill the holistic goals
of education in the schooling of African American children. Students needed to
have a sense of their racial history and legacy as well as an understanding of their
responsibilities as community members. Although he was the band teacher, Mr.
Snyder emphasized, for example, the importance of having his students participate
in community meetings at the Treme Center in support of the Black Indians.

Inspired by their own struggles and schooling experiences during segregation
and desegregation, these educators believed it was of the utmost importance for
students to have an understanding of history. History could be a vehicle to build
solidarity among students. This was especially important in addressing the turf
and ward issues among students. The educators in this study believed that the
curriculum could be used to help students see and honor notions of community
that existed beyond their particular wards. Yet it is important to note that their
articulation of solidarity "acknowledge[s] that we are divided and must develop
strategies to overcome fears, prejudices, resentments and competitiveness" (hooks
2000, 65). In short, these educators explained the importance of connecting the
curriculum to the real conditions and struggles students were facing. Data from
this study reveals their appreciation for students' needs and their responsibility in
addressing those *before* schooling could begin. In this way, their focus was on the
development of the whole person. Educators believed it was their job to provide
nonacademic support as needed in order to help students develop as whole people.
After Katrina, the multifaceted roles and functions of black educators were even
more crucial.

Expanded Role of African American Educators. The educators in this study
did not shy away from giving students additional support that was structurally
unavailable in order to cope with the trauma resulting from Hurricane Katrina.
They felt compelled to meet the needs of students despite policies that dictated
otherwise, such as giving access to medication if needed. In the midst of attempting
to deal with their own issues, educators took on various roles after Katrina,
including those of advocate, parent, and social worker. This was a daunting task
when considering the trauma and loss they had experienced themselves.[6] Ms.
Thompson shared, "I really haven't dealt with my Katrina issues." Nevertheless,
black educators in this study felt responsible for the needs of their students. Mr.
Snyder asserted:

Any quality teacher—and I mean quality in a sense where teaching is not
just showing up at work from 9 to 5 or 8 to 3, whatever the time may be,

6   According to a study published by the Bulletin of the World Health Organization
(Kessler et al. 2006), severe mental-illness rates in New Orleans almost doubled after
Katrina.

and receiving a check. Teaching—and the reason why I relate to students so well—teaching is life lessons. It doesn't matter what subject matter you teach. It's about life. And the reason that I know that and can say that is because I now have been teaching long enough to have former students who have become band directors, and hopefully I was a good influence on them. So it's a process. It's really about sharing and caring. And students and kids seem to be very perceptive about that, you know. They know who's real and sincere. So it does make a difference.

As captured in this quote by Mr. Snyder, teachers accepted full responsibility for students with the goal of "...impart[ing] to African American students the ultimate purpose and use of a good education—social, economic, and emotional equity" (Jeffries 1997: 110). After desegregation, the preacher, the last archetype explored by Jeffries (1997), transformed into the enforcer and as such maintained the philosophical ideals of the preacher while being viewed as the "strong-arms of law at school" (100). Yet for these teachers, discipline was connected to students being loved and both giving and receiving respect.

The pedagogy of these educators was guided by their understanding of what their students needed to know as African Americans in America. The educators believed that it was necessary, as Mrs. Barber shared, to "go beyond the curriculum to teach the curriculum." Memoirs and autobiographies were used to give students a sense of history and their place in it, thus writing themselves into history via biography. The educators often focused on the significance of history, story, and biography in reaching students and teaching them about their racial legacy. Mrs. Barber used the biographies of King, Wheatley, and Hughes to give students examples of black people who, just like them, had struggles that were overcome. History was important in teaching students to not have "ills about your own race." Stated another way, these educators wanted the students to value their blackness. Thus, the educators created conditions in their classrooms and schools that simultaneously countered negative narratives about black people and reinforced the broader value of shared struggle while reinforcing a community narrative of overcoming obstacles.

Foster's (1991, 1993, 1997) examination of excellent black teachers found that the task of educating African American students was focused not only on the academic but also on the understanding of larger societal relationships. Black educators spoke of the kids' anger as having roots in pre- and post-Katrina structural conditions, and they felt that it was their responsibility to help them cope. Ms. Brown expressed an important belief of these educators, stating, "The kids have to feel that they are loved. And I'm not talking about just loved by parents. I'm talking about by society. Their teachers, other people on the outside, someone they could go and could talk to." These educators used their situated knowledge and proficiency in community norms to communicate that love to students.

Participants also believed that being able to identify with students was of great value. Their experiences as African Americans uniquely positioned them

to understand the challenges faced by their students. According to these black educators, the lack of understanding on the part of the new, predominantly white teaching force led to conflicts in the classroom. Although these conflicts were not unique to urban schooling (see Delpit 1995), in post-Katrina New Orleans, they took on new magnitude in light of the trauma experienced by the students. All of the participants commented on the effects of losing black veteran teachers and replacing them with mostly novice white teachers. Deborah conveyed,

> Nobody can reach our kids like us [black teachers]. I think it has to be us because we can see through their eyes. We know their struggles, and we're not blind to them. And this year alone, a lot of new teachers have come in from all over the United States into the school, and they really cannot reach and deal with our kids. And they're probably fantastic teachers, but it takes people who have been there, have seen it and worked through it to help our kids work through it.

In this sense, black educators in this study felt that having the ability to teach would not be enough for teachers who desire to effectively reach students in New Orleans.

Conclusion

Before Katrina, educators in this study felt as if their coworkers were not just educators, they were family. St. John and Cadry (1996) highlight the enhanced qualities of care and community that were strongly emphasized in schools controlled by African Americans. Within the African American tradition, the strong culture of care can be used as a foundation on which to restructure urban schools (ibid.). Furthermore, participants articulated that the importance of these fictive-kinship relationships among educators and students was ignored in school-reform efforts in New Orleans.

In the New Orleans context, reform was not a neutral term; it had and has significant political, social, and racial meanings. Sizemore (1978), reflecting on desegregation, was deeply troubled that "the child is no longer the center of the controversy, desegregation is. The means have become the end" (62–63). In the aftermath of Katrina, reform is the center, with researchers and reformers alike having again ignored the knowledge of black children held by black educators. Research and, arguably, public opinion often see teachers as part of the problem rather than part of the solution in school-reform efforts. Thus, the voices, knowledge, and experiences of black educators are not explicitly included in urban school-reform practice and research. In this study, I seek to offer an alternative to the dominant narrative of school reform by focusing on the experiences of black educators in post-Katrina New Orleans. However, if the voices of the marginalized matter, then research must take into account the voices and experiential knowledge of black educators. It is important to legitimize those people who are often ignored in the school-reform literature and research.

The educators in this study articulate an understanding of professional

excellence that attends to the needs of the whole child. These educators fostered a nurturing environment that gave students the financial, emotional, and social support they needed. This study reinforces the importance of relationships for improving urban schools. Rethinking school reform requires a wider conceptualization that identifies and works from the strengths of a school system, not just its weaknesses. Of course, this requires viewing urban schools and the communities they serve as more than the compilation of their problems and challenges. The focus on fixing urban schools often results in reifying schools, their students, and their teachers as the problem. If school reforms continue to take the position that black educators are the problem, we will miss the opportunity to learn from and build on the knowledge and experience of these educators, which can lead to sustainable change. Seventy-four percent of schools demonstrated growth the year before Katrina. With the national call for more diverse teachers, and given the large percentage of black educators in New Orleans before Katrina, reformers had a unique opportunity to build on the work of black educators, particularly the way in which fictive-kin relationships were used to support the academic and nonacademic needs of students.

The importance of fictive-kinship relationships was ignored in school-reform efforts in New Orleans. In his exploration of the persistence of failure despite the reforms in urban education, Payne (2008) asserts the importance of relational trust as a crucial factor associated with improving schools. As a multidimensional notion that encompasses how to think about social relationships among teachers, students, administrators, parents, and the larger community, it is a kindred notion of fictive kinship that operates from a strengths-based rather than deficit model approach to the larger communities served by schools. Fictive-kinship networks among black educators, students, and communities in New Orleans represent this integral element of improving schools and should be considered an asset. How can school reforms build on the existing relationships educators have with schools and the larger community that contribute to better learning outcomes for students if the relationships are unacknowledged or not valued?

This article represents my attempt to produce research that meaningfully takes into account the strategic role of black educators in the very real and complex racial realities of twenty-first-century public schooling. This daunting task cannot be left only to those who study twentieth-century desegregation-era schooling. Given the possibilities of improving the academic achievement of black students by using black teachers' pedagogical strategies (Walker 2001; Jeffries 1997; Foster 1993, 1997), this study begins to address the gap in knowledge specifically by recounting the unique experiences of African American educators during urban school-reform efforts in New Orleans. Future research questions could address the following: How can the notions of fictive kinship inform measures of teacher quality and quality teaching in post-Katrina New Orleans? How do black educators account for the vast improvements that occurred the year before Hurricane Katrina? This work offers just a small glimpse into what post-Katrina school reforms not only added but almost swept away.

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