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**PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN  
POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS**

A Thesis in  
Instructional Systems  
by  
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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the perceptions of public school principals in New Orleans, Louisiana during the period of extensive structural change in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Using the theoretical frameworks of Chaos and Systems theories, iterative interviews with ten school leaders, extensive document analysis, and school-site observations were used to collect data on principals' experiences. The following themes emerged during constant comparative analysis: 1) the omnipresence of storm recovery in principals' lives, 2) the lingering presence of the pre-Katrina school system, 3) the emerging inequalities of the post-Katrina system, 4) schools' new relationships with the external environment, 5) Principals plans for long-term (rather than rapid) improvement, and 6) principals' requirements for successful long-term change. The analysis identifies the need for a minimum stability at the outset of the change process as well as the important strange attractors of inequality and low-risk relationships which must be addressed for meaningful, long-term change to occur.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

This document contains a study of school principals' perceptions of their experiences leading schools in post-Katrina New Orleans. The first chapter explains the purpose of and need for this study. Chapter two provides the context of the study, the theoretical framework to be used, and a review of the literature pertinent to this study of principals' experiences with school change. The third chapter explains the methods used in completing the study, including a discussion of sampling, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter four provides the results of the study organized thematically. The fifth chapter summarizes principals' experiences with change and provides implications for educational change as well as the limitations of the study and directions for further research.

### **Problem Statement**

It has become apparent that an incomplete understanding of the complexities inherent in changing schools has thwarted the effects of many reformers and reform programs (Goodlad, 1975; Fullan, 2001b; McLaughlin, 1990). While reformers have emphasized the roles of organizational readiness (Ely, 1976), capacity for change (Fusarelli, 2002), and schools' social and political environments (Sirotnik, 2005), much about the process of educational change eludes us. This study addresses this gap in our understanding by exploring the lived experiences of school leaders involved in educational change. By exploring school principals' experiences with change we can learn, on one level, how leaders experience this complex social process. On

another level, this study provides a small, but important, piece of the larger puzzle of understanding how schools change.

### **Purpose**

Tyack and Cuban (1995) define school reform as “planned efforts to change schools in order to correct perceived social and educational problems” (p. 4). For more than a century, Americans have sought to reform their public schools with uneven success (Olson, 2003; Ravitch, 2000). Reforms have been both large and small in scope, centrally planned or organically grown, and have addressed both the structural aspects of schools as well as the more robust set of common teaching practices. Reformers have found it easier to make changes to schools that are well-aligned with public perceptions of schools, but quite difficult to implement reforms that challenge these existing cultural assumptions (Borman, Glickman, and Haag, 2000; Tye, 2000). Historian Michael Katz (1975) phrases this idea well:

The basic structure of American education had been fixed by about 1880 and it has not altered fundamentally since that time... It is, and was, universal, tax-supported, free, compulsory, bureaucratic, racist, and class-biased.... It is as if the characteristics noted above form the walls of a box within which other sorts of changes have taken place. The box is filled with objects that can be moved around and rearranged, but the walls themselves remain solid (p.xix)

In their call for a reconceptualization of thinking about educational change, Oakes and Lipton (2002) characterize the field of educational change as “the sorry and familiar story of school reform gone awry” (p.386). While Kleibard (2004) and Tyack and Cuban (1995) describe successful reforms such as public kindergartens, vocational education, and the creation of junior high schools, Oakes and Lipton’s quip is not without some merit. Intelligent and well-meaning reformers have developed a dazzling array of educational alternatives, very few of which have diffused widely (Elmore, 1996; Fullan, 2000b). Today, many reforms exist as museum pieces that

remind us of the challenges of school reform. We stare at film projectors, laser discs, and photos of open classrooms as we would stare at a giant, glued-together tyrannosaurus rex skeleton: interesting, but impotent.

Despite nearly fifty years of intense reform efforts, classroom-level practice remains quite resistant to change (Cuban, 1993). This has led many to believe that a likely factor in the failure of 20<sup>th</sup>-century school reforms is our poor understanding of the complexities of school systems and their myriad social, political, pedagogical and psychological interconnections (Evans, 1996; Leithwood, Jantzi & Mascal, 2002; McLaughlin & Mitra, 2001). The problem is not in the innovations, but in our limited understanding of the process of educational change. The process of how schools, as complex social organizations, *implement* change has been a lively form of inquiry for over thirty years (McLaughlin, 1990). The present study, examining principals' experiences in the change process, is an extension of this line of research.

As the primary connection between classroom teachers and the often turbulent external environment (Spindler, 1979), school principals have a central, yet not fully understood role in the implementation of educational change. While there has been much research regarding the suggested *role* of principals in reform (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; McLaughlin & Mitra, 2001; Stein, Hubbard & Mehan, 2004), and the lived experiences of principals in general (Mitchell, 1990; Wolcott, 1973), there is a scarcity of qualitative research of principals *experiences* with reform (Fullan, 2001b; Johnson, 1998; Orr, Byrne-Jiminez, McFarlane & Brown, 2005).

As Eisner (1992) suggests, examining this experience requires an exploratory, qualitative approach, characterized by Creswell (2007) as:

The study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem... [by] the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. (p.37)

Gaining this emic view of principals' experiences in the midst of change is likely to give researchers and reformers alike new insights as well as new questions regarding educational change. As Michael Fullan (2001b) notes, this approach is vital if we are to improve our track record for instituting change in complex organizations:

Neglect of the phenomenology of change- that is, how people actually experience change as distinct from how it might have been intended- is at the heart of the spectacular lack of success of most social reforms (p. 8).

Similarly, Fink (2003) writes that:

external change agents need to listen to the voices of the people charged with the implementation of change. For researchers it reinforces the need for educational research to be more sensitive to the work and lives of 'real' people in 'real' schools and to address the non-rational as sources of insight into educational change (p.106).

The development of a contextualized perspective of educational change sought here has occurred over the last several decades (McLaughlin, 1990) and provides an important step to both better understanding the change process as well as increasing our ability to successfully improve schooling for the millions of children currently being ill-served by schools in the US.

### **A Brief History of Educational Change Research**

Emerging from rather rationalist and fidelity-focused roots (Sarason, 2005), the field of educational change took a significant step when Berman & McLaughlin (1974), in their foundational RAND change agent studies, argued that successful schools bent reforms to meet their own needs (*mutual adaptation*) instead of adopting external reforms exactly as external entities had envisioned them. The field moved into a period of restructuring and school improvement research that identified best practices for schools and how schools could adopt them. Ted Sizer's (1992) work with the Coalition of Essential Schools is indicative of this type of change and the process of change under this model is intricately described by Muncey and

McQuillan (1996). The recent development of “scientifically-based” databases of suggested practice (like the Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse) is a descendent of this approach (Slavin, 2008). The field of educational change has often emphasized the importance of supporting classroom level changes, instead of policy or organizational changes. Using this micro-perspective, studies by Goodlad (1984), Bryk, Easton, Rollow, & Sebring (1994), Elmore & Burney (1997), and Stein, Hubbard & Mehan (2004) look at changing classroom level practice in this way.

Parallel to these developments, researchers have examined the implicit theories and hidden forces that guide the functioning of schools. These influence the present study in that these cultural constructions are often unrecognized adversaries to those seeking to implement educational change. Sarason (1982) refers to the *regularities* of schooling, Senge (1990) refers to *tacit mental models*, Tyack and Tobin (1994) refer to the *grammar* of schooling, and Tye (2000) refers to the *deep structure* of schooling. All of these concepts identify non-rational socio-cultural aspects of schooling that are equally powerful as structural and policy-level forces, yet are often ignored by reformers. The identification of these cultural forces allows us to reject the bureaucratic view of school change and examine schools in an increasingly ecological perspective (Eisner, 1992; Sirotnik, 2005). Such an ecological perspective is critical to this research. School principals in New Orleans and the sense they make of the conflicting internal and external forces that surround any change effort (Evans, 1996) are central to the study.

The conceptual turn involved in viewing schools as muddy social institutions instead of logical bureaucratic organizations has often led to more questions than answers. Researchers have examined schooling from multiple perspectives including race (Tatum, 1997), culture (Delpit, 1995, Gay, 2000), social class (McLaren, 1999, 2003) and gender (Weiler, 1988). The process of schooling has also been seen from the varying perspectives that make up our educational systems. This includes teachers (Kidder, 1989; Hargreaves, 1994), parents (Arriaza, 2004), principals

(Weaver Hart & Bredeson, 1996; Fink, 2003), and even outsiders (Katz, Fine, & Simon, 1997).

The assumption shared by this diverse collection of studies is that schools are sufficiently complex that our reliance on the traditional bureaucratic view of schools has led to a myopic, and seriously flawed, understanding of how they function and how they change. Proponents of Systems Theory and Chaos Theory, discussed in depth later, argue that even such an additive approach, replete with multiple perspectives, can never accurately capture the complexity of schools and argue that school systems operate in rather unpredictable patterns held loosely in check by cultural forces (fractals or strange attractors) that serve as boundaries on the system's behavior (Reigeluth, 2004; Wheatley, 1999).

A common critique of research on processes of school change is that not enough attention has been given to the role of teachers and principals intimately involved in enacting reforms (Riley, 2000; Fink, 2003). The present study seeks to address this gap by adding the perceptions of principals to the current dialogue on school reform. The fact that the perceptions of principals are generally absent from the literature is somewhat surprising in that there may be no role more important to understanding school reform than that of the principal (Sammons, 1999). Decades of organizational change literature underscores the central role of leadership in the process of change (Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Schein, 1985) and these ideas have been widely adopted in education (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Fullan, 2001b; Leithwood, 1994). In schools, leadership is most concentrated in the role of the principal, who serves as the connection between the teachers who implement reforms and the external environment which, historically, and perhaps unfortunately, is the source of most reforms. This is not to discredit the important (and essential) concepts of teacher leadership or distributed leadership, but to focus the discussion on the important intermediary role that principals play between the classroom and the external environment. Principals are much more likely to have personal relationships with classroom teachers, set professional development priorities, and understand building level needs than other

administrators situated higher on the organizational ladder. For these reasons, principals' support of reform efforts is seen as a vital component to successful change and worthy of careful study.

It is possible that a significant reason for the failure of school reforms is our insufficient understanding of the process by which schools change. There is a need to examine the phenomenon of school reform as experienced by school principals. New Orleans principals' perceptions of the change process, having been elicited and subjected to analysis, yield a fuller understanding of the complexities that make changing our educational system such an uncertain endeavor.

### **Research Question**

This study attempts to answer the following research question: *What are the perceptions of school leaders in the rapidly changing environment of post-Katrina New Orleans?* Attention is placed on the individual lived experiences- the phenomenology (van Manen, 1997)- of school principals as the New Orleans public school system is re-constituted following Hurricane Katrina. While there is a significant literature suggesting what roles principals *ought* to take in supporting educational change, there is an identified lack of empirical work capturing principals' *actual experiences* with the change process (Orr, Byrne-Jimenez, McFarlane & Brown, 2005). Principals' experiences as school leaders in this rebuilding city are central to this study. Important dimensions of these experiences include: who controls and should control the process, who participates and should participate in the process, to what extent the schools should resemble the pre-existing schools, how schools teach and assess students, how post-storm student needs are being addressed, and how schools are held accountable for their performance. A wide variety of unforeseen dimensions of reform have also emerged during data collection.

It has been noted that schools undergoing turbulent environmental changes often will seek to minimize the amount of internal change (Banathy, 1992; Goodlad & Su, 1992; Gross, 1998). If this thinking is correct, one would expect the re-creation of predominantly failing schools for the children of post-Katrina New Orleans. And given the low social status of this student population, it is far from certain that there is sufficient public will to improve conditions for New Orleans' children over the long term (Kozol, 1975; Noguera, 2002.) It is the perception and actions of educators, especially school leaders, that may well determine the future course of this now radically decentralized district. Through an analysis of school principals' perceptions of this unique instance of massive, yet not centrally planned, school change, we can learn more about the process of school reform in general.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Context, Theoretical Framework, and Literature Review**

Because of the unique nature of the New Orleans public schools in the post-Katrina rebuilding period, a description of the context in which study participants work is included at the outset of this chapter. Following that, an explanation of the aspects of chaos theory and systems theory that serve as a theoretical framework for this study is given. The conclusion of this chapter is an examination of the research literature relating to educational leadership and school reform with special attention paid to studies considering educational leadership in the context of school reform. Additionally, because school reform in post-Katrina New Orleans is a highly tumultuous setting, the literature review includes studies of other school reforms that followed a similarly major social upheaval in Eastern Europe.

### **The School District**

In August 2005, the nation cringed at the TV news clips of poor, predominantly African-American families huddled, dehydrated, and dying at the New Orleans Convention Center and Superdome waiting for much-delayed assistance from the government. Hurricane Katrina's aftermath was an embarrassment to the city and country and many believed this embarrassment might provide the political will to improve the public schools which serve the poor in this city. As residents returned to their homes and discussed the failings of their levees and their political leaders, the repair of the school district was a pressing issue. This study seeks to understand the perceptions of New Orleans principals as they participated in this complex rebuilding process.

The public schools in New Orleans have long been believed to be among the worst in any big city school system in the United States (Roesgen, 2005; Thevenot, 2004). During the 2004-05 school year in New Orleans, 63% of the public schools were labeled *academically unacceptable* by the state due to low test scores and attendance rates (Louisiana Department of Education, 2006). In terms of student achievement, the most recent pre-Katrina published results show that 55% of the city's 4<sup>th</sup> graders scored below a basic level in reading and 59% of them scored below basic in math. For the high school students in the district, 59% scored below basic in language arts while 61% were below basic in math.

This poor performance, coupled with a history of racial segregation, has left the district without the public support needed for meaningful improvement. The student population in the district is over 96% non-white and 78% of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch, the federally established poverty marker (Louisiana Department of Education, 2004). This segregation by race and by social class was a result of continuously failing schools and white flight to parochial schools or the suburbs (Bankston & Caldas, 2002; Inger, 1960). Superintendents have not lasted more than 3 years since 1998 and several have left under clouds of suspicion regarding mishandled money. With unsteady leadership and little public support, the path to improvement for the New Orleans Public Schools was an uncertain one.

Then came Hurricane Katrina. After the storm struck on August 29, 2005, the historically dysfunctional district temporarily lost 100% of its students while 50% of its buildings were moderately to severely damaged (Anderson, 2005). While the destruction was immense, many saw a unique opportunity to rebuild the school system. In a radio interview shortly after the storm, Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) member Leslie Jacobs said:

The diaspora of New Orleans represents the opportunity to rebuild our public school system. It was academically bankrupt, it was financially bankrupt, and it was operationally bankrupt... the central office ability to support schools was not there. So pre-Katrina, one could argue that Orleans public schools could vie for being one of the worst districts in the nation. (Inskeep, 2005).

And she was not alone in seeing Katrina as an opportunity. On October 7<sup>th</sup>, the school board quickly released control of approximately 15 of its schools in the Algiers neighborhood by turning them into charter schools which would be run by a neighborhood association (Ritea, 2005a). These schools operate with state funds, but will be largely free from school board control. In another blow to the status quo on November 31, 2005, the state took control of all district schools that had failed to make adequate yearly progress and placed them in a state-run Recovery School District (RSD). This placed the vast majority of New Orleans Public Schools under state control. The traditional power structure that controlled the New Orleans Public Schools was now completely dismantled and the stage potentially set for change. But many wondered if the new system, dominated by the state and independently run charter schools, would be able to successfully reform the failed district. In this decentralized context, the role of school principals in school reform will likely be even more pronounced, given the increased independence granted to charter schools which currently educate 54% of the district's students (Schooling the Poor, 2006). Even in the RSD, the central office bureaucracy was greatly diminished- a staff which once topped 1,200 employees was quickly operating with less than 100 (Ritea, 2006d). Initial guesses presumed that the district office would concentrate on basic coordinating functions (i.e. bussing, food service, payroll) instead of involving itself in curricular affairs as it had done haphazardly in the past. However, the hiring of Paul Vallas as the superintendent of the Recovery Schools district in May 2007 may signal that a larger central office staff may not be too far off (Simon, 2007f). Vallas is running 22 schools as of December of 2007, which about one-third of the public schools in the district (Carr, 2007; Simon, 2007e). In the handful of school board controlled schools, RSD schools, and in charter schools, principals will still have much less oversight from the district than was the case prior to Katrina. How they respond to this autonomy will go a long way toward determining how schools function in the new district.

The current situation in post-Katrina New Orleans lends itself well to this study both because of the increased autonomy of principals and because all principals are dealing with change. Community members have adamantly voiced their dissatisfaction with the pre-Katrina school system (Ritea, 2006a) and there is tremendous pressure on educators to fix the system that had underserved generations of New Orleanians. The national media and the state legislature have joined citizens in calling for sweeping changes to the district. Jay Dardenne, a state senator from Baton Rouge, expressed both his expectations for reform and his uneasiness about the initial rebuilding process:

I don't want to rebuild those failing schools. . .we dare not squander the opportunity to do it right. I am not comfortable it is going to be done right (Anderson, 2005).

The New Orleans Public Schools presently consist of a variety of types of schools: national charters, locally based charters (some of which are just learning how to function), a handful of original district schools that escaped state takeover, and the RSD schools. Previous conversations with New Orleans educators have shown that a relative pecking order has developed, with the selective admissions Orleans Parish schools at the top, the charter schools making up the wide middle, and the struggling RSD schools at the bottom. The RSD schools are at a severe disadvantage in that they were the last schools to open after the storm, meaning that many of the top teachers were already hired by the time they began staffing. They also must continue accepting students and opening new schools as residents return to the city, whereas the charters and district schools have enrollment caps (Thevenot, 2007). RSD schools also enroll the majority of the public school students with special needs in the city (Ritea, 2007b). Regardless of these difficulties, principals in all three types of public schools are being expected to provide improved educational opportunities for students, many of whom were impressed with what they saw in the out of state public schools they attended during the evacuation period (Inskeep, 2005).

This study will focus on how public school principals in New Orleans experience leading a school in this uniquely turbulent period.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Given the decline of the bureaucratic view of organizational change (Weber, 1947), scholars have sought alternative paradigms to explain how organizations, such as schools, operate and change (Heckschner & Donnellon, 1994). An active area of useful theories are Systems Theory and its descendants: Open Systems Theory, Chaos Theory, and Complexity Theory. There is a fair amount of scholarship which applies chaos and complexity theories (Carr-Chellman, 2000; Davies, 2004; Fullan, 2001a; Maxcy, 1995; McQuillan, in press; Reigeluth, 2004) and systems theory (Banathy, 1996; Carr-Chellman, 1998; Joseph & Reigeluth, 2005; Peck & Carr, 1997) to the study of school reform. While much of what we associate with these theories initially surfaced in the hard sciences (Briggs & Peat, 1999; Prigogine & Stengers, 1984) it has been increasingly applied to the social sciences (Kiel & Elliot, 1996) and this application to the social sciences will serve as the framework here. As a whole, these theories view schools holistically, as collections of individuals which have boundaries, and internal functions, and common purposes (Hutchins, 1996). They stand in contrast to theories of organizations in which systems can be understood by looking at constituent pieces, or theories which utilize fragmentation or reductionism (Morrison, 2002).

There is some uncertainty as to areas of overlap between these related theories, as even the experts will attest. In distinguishing Complexity Theory, Open Systems Theory, and Chaos Theory, Morrison (2002, p.7) defines Complexity Theory rather confusingly as “an attempt to explain how open systems operate through holistic spectacles.” While Complexity Theory certainly deals with open systems, the differentiation from Open Systems Theory is

muddied here. The only unique attribute Morrison gives to Open Systems is that they are “teleologically deterministic,” and neglectful on nonlinearity. But others insist that Open Systems Theory *does* deal with systems that can learn and change, and that they are certainly amenable to nonlinear functioning (Miller, 1978). Similarly, Ni and Branch (2007) include independence, interconnectedness, and a shared purpose in their definition of Complexity Theory, while Jenlink, Reigeluth, Carr, and Nelson (1998) use much the same language in explicating their systems theoretical approach to educational change. In an attempt to practically use these ideas in an empirical study, I find it is more useful to describe the *concepts* from these related theories and how they illuminate aspects of educational change, instead of trying to categorize the concepts under the “correct” umbrella- a reductionist task if there ever was one. An examination of the important concepts from these *new sciences* (Doll, 2008; Wheatley, 1999) approach to organizations follows.

### **Nested Systems**

In the words of systems theorist C. West Churchman (1979), “Systems are made up of sets of components that work together for the overall objective of the whole” (p. 11). Each system contains subsystems that contribute to the overall purpose of the system. In the case of the reorganized New Orleans Public School system, subsystems include groups of charter schools, the state-run RSD schools, school-board run schools, and the bus service that functions across all of these. Each system is also part of a larger system called the suprasystem. In this example, the citizenry of New Orleans, the state accountability system, and the school financing system are examples of these larger systems. Given this crude introduction to nested social systems, it is also important to examine how these different, but interrelated, systems communicate with each other.

## **Feedback**

All social systems are *open* systems in that they are not machine-like constructions that operate unchangingly based up on preset rules (Banathy, 1996). Open systems operate on systemic feedback which gives information to the system from its environment. There are two types of systemic feedback: positive feedback and negative feedback (Hutchins, 1996). Negative feedback (also caled regulatory feedback) works like a thermostat. It senses current conditions and suggests changes in order to keep the system on its present course. Positive feedback (or amplifying feedback) is feedback which says that the course which the system is on is not a good one and that changes in the system need to be made to prevent organizational decline or death. In applying this concept to school reform in New Orleans, we can consider the decades of continual decline in the district prior to Katrina to be the result of negative feedback winning out over positive feedback for the attention of district leadership. The system crept along on it's present course (of poor performance) and did not heed the calls for major reform that came from marginalized pockets of resistance. The highly bureaucratic nature of the pre-Katrina district served to insulate decsion makers from the positive feedback calling for fundamental change in the functioning of the system. It may be that the structural reforms put in place swiftly after the storm will remove enough of the bureaucracy for positive feedback to enter the system and be amplified, causing the systemic changes which have until recently been filtered out. This is not to say that once the system decides to change course that the problem of implementing change is trivial. Both selecting new methods of operating urban schools and implementing these methods are extremely arduous tasks (Vibert & Portelli, 2001). Principals must attend to the multiple, conflicting elements in the cacophony of feedback and interpret these messages collaboratively to guide practice (Riley, 2004). Principals' perceptions of systemic feedback were considered in the analysis process .

## **Bifurcation**

Open systems make changes based on shared purposes and the information they receive from their environment. Bifurcation is the point when positive feedback becomes so great that a system descends into chaos or re-organizes into a new form altogether (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984). Bifurcations are a fork in the road from which there is no going back. When the New Orleans Public Schools failed to re-open in a timely fashion after Katrina, the government and the public lost its last shred of confidence in the current system and this created the political opportunity for the state to move in and take control. While there is undeniably new district-level *structural* organization, it remains unclear whether or not a radical transformation in the structure of the system will translate into the types of *cultural* changes that can improve student learning (Fullan, 2000a). This examination of principals' experiences provide clues as to whether these structural changes will lead to classroom level changes likely to improve performance.

## **Autopoiesis**

Autopoiesis is "the ability of life to create itself" (Wheatley, 1999, p. 20). Drawn heavily from Darwin's concepts of variation and selection, this idea applies to animals, people, and social systems: anything that is living. Living systems (Miller, 1978), a type of open system, have the ability to recreate themselves and often change their structure so that they are better adapted to their local environment. While schools are certainly open systems, it must be noted here that school systems are not entirely organic structures and that the human tendency towards equilibrium makes change difficult. Tax subsidies and issues of power influence school system behavior and make any sort of direct application of Darwinian theory suspect. Those who call for market-based school reforms (Chubb & Moe, 1988) often cite the removal of these subsidies as a



key catalyst for school change, allowing natural (i.e. market) forces to force change. Others have also argued, convincingly, that market-based reforms often run antithetical to the moral purpose of cultivating further generations of democratic citizens (Cuban, 2004) and that concern for the most vulnerable students should be a priority for public education (Freire, 1987; Kozol, 1991; McLaren, 2003). Nonetheless, schools have the *potential* (though not always the capacity or the will) to change themselves to better align with their environment and autopoiesis means that schools are not destined to become cultural relics, but that they can adjust to changing conditions and remain viable social institutions. This concept is especially important in the case of New Orleans, as the community has demanded that the school system realign itself with societal expectations of better performance and increased equality. It is this very process of autopoiesis that is currently underway. Of note is that citizens have *not* called for the abandonment of schools as we know them, but a reinvention of a system more adapted to the students being served. In a sense, there is a public push for the system to reinvent itself, to begin the process of autopoiesis. This relationship between the community and the school is not a straightforward one, as this study will show. An analysis of the intersection of feedback and autopoiesis illuminates some of the particularities of this relationship as experienced by individual school leaders. One of the key goals of data collection will be to collect principal's views on how well their newly reconstituted schools are meeting student needs. That is to say, how principals perceive the activity of autopoiesis.

### **Self-reference**

While change is important to the survival of any system, the concept of *self-reference* tells us that while systems do change in response to their environment, they always change in ways that remain true to their original sense of self, to their identity. A private school that is

suffering from declining enrollment may alter staffing, tuition or their educational mission in order to strike a balance with its environment. It is not likely, however, to re-open as a used car dealership even if there is a huge demand for that product. This would be inconsistent with the system's identity. Systems change in ways that make them more competitive in their environment, and this usually, but not always, means tinkering with existing practices rather than building a new system altogether. When an Orleans Parish teacher says, "this is one way to start over" (Sanchez, 2005), there is a glossing over of the fact that the history and identity of the system looms large in conceptions of how it should be rebuilt. School principals, most of whom worked in the system prior to Katrina, are very aware of the conservative influences the past has on their schools, even as they fight towards improvement. Even school district turnaround consultant Bill Roberti, who should have been well aware of the challenges inherent in changing an urban school system from his tumultuous work with the St. Louis Public Schools, said that New Orleans was starting over with "a clean sheet of paper" (Merrow, 2005) after the storm. From a systems perspective, the notion that post-Katrina educational reforms are operating on a blank slate is a misguided one. Even worse, if those administrators charged with rebuilding the new system hold this simplistic view of change, they are unlikely to do the hard work of addressing the weaknesses of the system pre-Katrina such as low teacher quality and minimal community support. In the present study, the concepts of autopoiesis and self-reference will be central to data collection.

### **Dissipative Structures**

Dissipative structures come out of the work of chemist Ilya Prigogine (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984), who identified an unexplained property visible in the life cycle of a certain slime mold and in a chemical reaction known as the Belousov-Zhabatinski reaction. Both of these

processes involve self-organizing phenomena in which the system, sensing changes in its environment, gives off large amounts of energy in order to reconstitute itself at a higher level of organization more suited to the environment. In this sense, fundamental change in a system occurs not when the system is in a comfortable state of equilibrium, but when the system is pushed to the edge of chaos. In New Orleans, the top-heavy bureaucratic structure of the pre-Katrina school system has dissipated into a simpler organization, characterized by a dramatic loss of employees and even the sale of the palatial district headquarters (Ritea, 2006d; Nelson, 2007). Given the far-from-equilibrium state of schools in New Orleans, exacerbated by Katrina, this concept suggests that a fundamental restructuring might occur now. Of course, self-reference tells us that the system will still remain true to its purpose of educating students. The concept of dissipative structures suggests that New Orleans' schools might be organized in a radically different configuration that was better suited to education in the post-Katrina environment. And indeed, many structural reforms have taken place within the system, from decentralization to stake takeover. But whether or not principals will perceive a better *functioning* system remains to be seen. School change scholars have pointed out the relative ease of implementing these structural reforms and called for increased attention to the much harder, but ultimately more effective, cultural changes in schools (Fullan, 2000b; Riley, 2000). This concept is important in the sampling of this study because principals, in their work supervising instruction, establishing school culture, and setting building priorities, play significant roles in determining if the district-level structural changes will actually result in better functioning schools. Their traditional position as middlemen (Wolcott, 1973) makes principals an important source of information about how schools have changed in the post-Katrina environment.

From a leadership perspective, Wheatley (1999) explains that an important lesson from dissipative structures, and Chaos Theory in general, is the understanding that “a system can descend into chaos and unpredictability, yet within that state of chaos the system is held within

boundaries that are well-ordered and predictable” (p. 13). It is the forces that support these well-ordered boundaries of urban school systems, as seen by school principals, that tell us much about the process of change. Morphic fields and strange attractors are two such forces.

### **Morphic Fields**

Morphic fields emerged from the work of Sheldrake (1988) in biology. He noted that once one member of a species learned how to do something (i.e., birds opening shellfish by dropping them onto rocks from high in the air) it becomes easier for others in the species to learn how to do it. Instead of the trial and error process that the first individual underwent, the rest of the species could just take this knowledge “from the field.” Wheatley (1999) has applied this field theory to organizations and describes culture, vision, and shared values as fields that shape the behaviors of members of organizations. If fields are congruent (don’t contain conflicting messages), then it becomes easier for members to adopt these messages resulting in a common vision of organizational performance, a mantra of much popular leadership literature. Discovering the components of an organization’s field and how to remove incongruencies and change damaging influences from the field may lead to a deeper understanding of school reform process. But this is certainly not a simple task. The data here will only *suggest* aspects of the organizational fields, as studying them is akin to studying organizational culture, which takes a much more ethnographic approach than the phenomenological one taken here. But fields are not only helpful tools for the change agent. It has also been noted by De Greene (1996) that “the field reciprocally... constrains the realm of the possible at the microlevel” (p. 280). Fields can limit change as well as encourage it. For example, Schools that have a culture of not serving students with disabilities (as alleged in Ritea, 2007b) will have a difficult time if leadership or external forces demand that the school begin accepting such students. This demand will be incongruent

with the field. Fields, then, can be seen to both foster change by bringing individual practitioners into alignment, as well as limit change by preserving the status-quo. If a principal's work is "to decide which goals are worth pursuing" (Evans, 1996, p.165) based on a frank and collaborative assessment of where the school needs improvement, then the collection of all these goals carries with it certain values, priorities, and a vision that can potentially make up the morphic field of an organization. Scholars have noted the problems that can occur when reforms are not consistent with each other (Berends, Chun, Schuyler, Stockly & Briggs, 2002), or with the conceptual framework of individual educators (Fink, 2003). This study explores how New Orleans principals experience the morphic field in which their schools exist, and, in turn, how they create a morphic field that can be picked up by teachers and students in their school. This concept was utilized in both data collection (determining what morphic fields principals perceive within and external to the school) and in analysis (piecing together perceptions of several principals that might describe an element of the field not fully recognized by any of the individual participants). De Greene (1996) states that "fields show differential sensitivity over time and space" (p.274) and this varying likelihood of change was an essential part of the analysis process. Some principals emphasized change more than others, and these perceptions of change play important roles in the new decentralized district where bureaucratically mandated reforms are not likely because of the lack of enforcement capability.

### **Strange Attractors**

The behavior of complex systems, while not exactly predictable, is bounded by forces that maintain it within general boundaries. A strange attractor is the unique pattern of a system as it operates "independently" within these fixed boundaries. Wheatley (1999) calls strange attractors the appearance of "inherent orderliness" (p.22) in a system's "self-portrait" (p.23). In

other words, a strange attractor is the shape a system takes when operating under certain internal and external conditions. For example, a poor-performing urban school system like New Orleans that is plagued by low community support and poor academics and seemingly unable to improve itself may appear to be a chaotic system, but when viewed as a system designed to create compliant workers and consumers, it is functioning quite predictably based on this alternative perspective (Kozol, 1975; Lauria & Mirón, 2005). This might be called the strange attractor of ghetto schooling (Anyon, 1997). The forces of housing segregation, unequal funding, and limited economic opportunity can coalesce around these systems to produce rather predictable results: poor achievement, high dropout rates, and new generations of employees for the service industry (Willis, 1974; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Strange attractors can generally be seen only when a system is observed from a level of high abstraction. Attempts at bureaucratic control and standardized instruction have been posited as strange attractors that may limit attempts at change in school systems (Reigeluth, 2004). This study examines principals' experiences for the presence of these strange attractors in the New Orleans Public Schools. This work was undertaken with the possibility that this rapidly changing educational system may show such attractors in more relief than when change proceeds at a slower pace. It may be that our poor understanding of the complexities of schooling is due to a lack of knowledge of strange attractors that, while not listed in well-crafted mission statements, nevertheless wield immense power over the way schools function.

### **Why These Theories?**

These basic theoretical concepts are the lens through which all data were collected and analyzed. This theoretical framework serves as the primary filter through which I have seen,

understood, analyzed, and unpacked the data. My findings include a discussion of how these concepts have played out from the perspective of New Orleans principals.

Proponents note that these post-Newtonian theories may be able to provide guidance for those looking to understand the dynamics of complex social systems (Reigeluth, 2004). These are systems in which mandated policies cannot be expected to be followed verbatim (McLaughlin, 1990) and in which systems can be perturbed, but rarely managed directly (De Greene, 1996). School systems have been relatively resistant to change partly because reformers have been generally ignorant of the complexity of schools as social systems and have improperly treated them as simple cause-effect machines (Rust & Freidus, 2001). Principals can easily retreat to the simplistic cause-effect model of organizational change, but they are likely to be dissatisfied with the results. This study seeks to provide support for principals and principal educators to reorient their perspective of schools, viewing them as inherently complex, and never simple, social systems. While there have been those critical of the hard-science roots of these theories and their applicability to education (Benson & Hunter, 1994; Hunter & Benson, 1997), their complaints, however, have centered on its application to micro-level analysis such as teacher-student or student-student interactions. In this case, they are applied to the entire school system- a complex system that is very much in line with the types of systems for which the theory was developed.

### **Literature Review**

The research literature relating to this study of principals' experiences of leading schools in post-Katrina New Orleans is outlined below. While the broad areas of literature considered are those of educational leadership and school change, special attention is given to empirical work that examines school leadership in the context of change. Additionally, studies of school reform following social upheaval in Eastern Europe following the events of 1989-1990 are discussed.

## **Challenges of School Reform**

Meta-analyses of school reform research generally agree that most reforms have not been institutionalized as their authors has hoped (Berman & McLaughlin, 1974; Fullan & Pomfret, 1977; Ravitch, 2000; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). And while the vast majority of these studies examine the implementation of pre-designed reforms (not the design of new practices) during the initial “hot house” period (McLaughlin & Mitra, 2001), they serve well to demonstrate the point that school change is an uncertain venture. Cuban (2001), in his examination of technology integration in several schools in California’s high-tech Silicon Valley, noted low adoption rates amongst teachers, suggesting that the externally-imposed reform was not seen as useful to most teachers, thus, they had little expectation of changing their practice once computers arrived.

Another reform study found poor implementation because teachers had varying ways of interpreting proposed reforms. In the implementation of a novel approach to science instruction, researchers found that new teachers were too attached to the prescribed curriculum and experienced teachers felt so free to modify things that the innovation was “lethally adapted” (Fishman, Marx, Blumenfeld, Krajcik & Soloway, 2004). There are likely to be many levels of teaching ability, attitudes towards change, and perceptions of quality in any faculty of teachers, all of which complicate the efforts of reformers.

These complications are described in Muncey and McQuillan’s (1996) ethnographic study of the implementation of Ted Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools model in five American high schools. This national reform effort was interpreted in a myriad of ways by participating schools. The variety of implementations (ranging from whole-school adoption, to creating a school-within-a-school, to abandoning the reform altogether) are shown to be subject to factors such as teacher attitudes towards the principal, how the reform is presented to the faculty, the perceived need for reform, and the educational philosophy of individual educators. Supporting



this complex matrix of responses towards change is Olsen & Kirtman's (2002) study of 36 restructuring schools. In it, they identify 27 different factors that mediate a proposed reform from inception to classroom implementation. Their factors ranged from the optimism of individual teachers to the stage of the implementation cycle in which teachers first encounter a reform to personal relationships between teachers. With this potential for variability, and the often one-size-fits-all approach taken by many reformers, it should not be a surprise that most reforms fall short of expectations.

Fink (2003) identifies the common pitfall of goal misalignment- noting that individual teachers, schools, and the state often hold conflicting purposes for reforms (and education for that matter). His longitudinal study of the failed reform of an Ontario high school shows that as the government began to exert more and more control over curriculum and assessment, the more holistic purposes of education held by the teachers began to conflict with the achievement-centered purposes embedded in state-sponsored reforms. This led to a loss of teacher motivation, increased turnover, and incredible stress on school principals charged with smoothing over this disjointed environment. Of this general disagreement of goals between schools and external reformers Shakeshaft (2004) agrees:

While reformers define the primary mission of schools as ensuring student literacy and numeracy mastery, it is not clear that stakeholders have the same priorities (p. 291).

Teachers often have goals such as citizenship, ethical behavior, self expression, and career development that may result in conflict with purely academic reforms. Shakeshaft cites an analysis of district mission statements that tended to favor contributions to civic life over academic attainment. Stein, Hubbard, and Mehan (2004) cite a similar lack of alignment with local values as a cause of the difficult implementation and eventual failure of a literacy reform in San Diego. Additionally, a collaborative inquiry study conducted with six urban principals shows the threats to successful reform (and a principal's career) if schools cannot balance these

competing internal and external forces (Orr, Byrne-Jimenez, McFarlane & Brown, 2005).

Exploring principals' perceptions of this balancing process are central to this study.

While it has long been noted that schools operate within the context of larger communities (Goodlad, 1975), research has shown how community pressures can be tremendously powerful at influencing reforms. Burby and Donnelly (1977) discuss the conservative role parents played in the development of schools in centrally planned communities. Borman, Glickman, and Haag (2000) describe a similar case of a small but vocal group of parents upending a series of progressive reforms at the Celebration School, a collaboration between the Disney corporation and the local school district. Sirotnik (2005) describes a case in which middle-class parents provided a significant barrier to a principal attempting to eliminate the tracking system in a suburban Seattle school. Daniel Perlstein (2004) richly describes the community uproar and teachers' union strike that upended the 1968 community control experiment in the New York City's Ocean Hill-Brownsville district. His analysis establishes the lines of race and class that are drawn sharply in urban America and make the schools contested political territory for a variety of groups.

This discussion should make the point that attempts at substantively changing schools demands not simply conceiving a new educational idea, but a deep understanding of the process, and the location, of change (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2005). In the preceding paragraphs, the ideas of teacher engagement, flexible implementation, clarity of goals, and the balancing of internal and external pressures have emerged as important concepts in the understanding of school change.

### **Lessons learned about reform**

Like a great Shakespearian tragedy, the history of school reform is littered with carcasses. A great deal has been learned, however, about the processes governing change in school systems.

While there is no universally accepted model of school change, researchers have provided a useful framework for those undertaking the challenge of reform. In their oft-cited report entitled *Successful School Restructuring*, Newmann and Wehlage (1995) combine the findings of four large-scale studies of educational reform and identify three supports for improving schools: 1) Practice of authentic pedagogy (characterized by student engagement in higher order thinking, deep knowledge acquisition generated through academic dialogue, and connections between the classroom and the outside world), 2) Creation of professional community (characterized by a common purpose for student learning, teacher collaboration, and collective responsibility for student success), and 3) Utilization of external supports (state agencies, parents, etc.).

These three conditions were found to be present in schools that successfully implemented reforms to improve student outcomes and are loosely agreed upon by other reformers (Fullan, 2000a; Stein et. al., 2004). Unfortunately, many schools in need of reform don't have these supports in place and are facing an uphill battle in their improvement efforts. Establishing authentic pedagogy, professional community, and gaining support from external entities are certainly non-trivial tasks, but they may be the place to begin work in many cases. If these three supports can be seen as intermediary targets to the final goal of improved schools, then how do schools change current practices which are often characterized by teacher-centered pedagogy (Cuban, 1993), teachers working in isolation (Pomson, 2005) and, schools working to evade or mitigate outside influences (Fink, 2003; Orr, Byrne-Jimenez, McFarlane, & Brown, 2005). We return to the question of implementation. How does one go about implementing change in an organization?

### **Traditional Change Research**

Early work by Lewin (1951) and Rogers (1962) focused on creating desired changes among groups of people by manipulating certain features of the change environment. Lewin's freeze-unfreeze cycle of organizational change and Rogers' five perceived attributes of an innovation (relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability) both emphasize getting selected changes to be adopted, and are somewhat biased towards adoption, potentially at the risk of organizational health.

Weick (1976) explains some of the challenges of implementing change in schools with his theory of loose coupling, positing that the administration of educational institutions is more loosely coupled from the practice of workers (i.e. teachers) than in many other types of organizations. This is prohibitive to change because there is a relatively high level of individual autonomy in the teaching profession in the USA. But this theory has come under attack as well (Fusarelli, 2002; Rowan, 2002) for being somewhat simplistic and binary. More recent change models, more in line with the post-Newtonian paradigm, describe the multiple meanings and distributed nature of successful change.

### **Collaborative Approach to Change**

More contemporary change research has focused on collaboration, capacity building, and creation of a shared vision by which to guide organizational change (Jenlink, Reigeluh, Carr & Nelson, 1998; Reigeluth, 1993). One of the central tenets of this collaborative approach to change is recognition of the multiple meanings of change. Michael Fullan (2001b) defines the problem of *meaning* by describing that any proposed change means different things to different people involved in the process. Clandinin and Connelly (1998) describe the multiplicity of perspectives

at play in the reforms of a single inner-city junior high school. After examining the perspectives of teachers, the principal, and outsiders, they conclude:

Any change needs to take into account not only the knowledge, values and background of the people involved, but also their hopes, intentions, and wishes for the future (p.156).

Schools are complex social institutions and a given reform should be expected to create different reactions among the individuals tasked with implementing it. Oplatka (2003), in an examination of the life stories of women principals, identifies individual self-renewal as a key component in participants thinking about school change, recognizing the importance of personal commitment to the success of change efforts. Stein, Hubbard, and Mehan (2004), in their study of school reforms that were transplanted from the New York City Public Schools to San Diego, noted that principals in San Diego surprised district leaders by expressing discomfort in their new role as change leaders. This finding echoes Evans (1996) who describes the inevitable emotional loss felt by educators when familiar roles which help create individuals' self-identities are altered. Indeed, change processes that allow for and accept the multiple meanings of change are better suited to the reality of schools as complex social institutions. This is likely to include plenty of time as well as plenty of dialogue between teachers to interrogate and improve their practice. In essence, this is a process of learning how to educate students better (Hubbard, Mehan & Stein, 2006).

### **Collaborative Learning**

Organizational change is also facilitated when individuals holding these multiple meanings are allowed to come together and collaborate. Meaningful school change never happens as the result of a single person (Riley & MacBeath, 1998) and providing time for educators to form a professional community (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995) supports the school reform

process. Fink (2003) identifies a loss of teacher discretionary time as a central reason for the decline of an Ontario high school. Bryk and Schneider (2003), in their work with Chicago elementary schools, explain that even simple collegial interactions among staff, students, and parents in elementary schools in Chicago increased relational trust which was a predictor of successful school reform. While interactions might be formal retreats, workshops or conferences, they could just as easily be picnics, shared office space, or board game nights. McLaughlin and Mitra (2001) in their review of the implementation of three pre-packaged reforms in fifteen schools over a three year period, note that an important aspect of successful reform was educators learning together:

Sustaining practice also requires a community of practice to provide support, deflect challenges from the broader environment, and furnish the feedback and encouragement essential to going deeper (p.309).

While the terms collaboration, professional community, trust, and community of practice have been used, research clearly shows the benefit to change efforts when educators simply work together to solve shared teaching and learning problems.

### **Principal Learning**

Principals need to use reform as a learning process for themselves (Anderson & Saavedra, 1995; Hubbard, Mehan, Stein, 2006; McLaughlin & Mitra, 2001). Part of this learning is staying connected to the school's environment, which includes parents, political structures, and the community at large (Banathy, 1992). Osterman, Crow & Rosen (1997) conducted a survey of 158 new urban principals and concluded that many new urban principals were operating with a "narrowly defined, closed-system perspective" (p.389) that might limit their effectiveness. It is likely that principals who view their schools in more of a systemic context will learn more from their environment and incorporate that learning into successful school reforms. This is

exceedingly important advice in urban contexts like New Orleans where there are often large cultural gaps between students and educators (Anyon, 1997; Tatum, 1997).

An additional learning need for principals is a deep understanding of reforms that they are implementing. In their study of the implementation of externally created change programs, McLaughlin & Mitra (2001) cite not just the importance of principal support for change, but of active participation in the training and implementation of new reforms. A principal's deep understanding of reforms could avoid the problems observed by Stein, Hubbard, & Mehan, (2004) who describe the superficial changes that occurred when principals held only a cursory understanding of the Balanced Literacy reform. Possessing a deep knowledge of a particular reform allows principals to be flexibly adaptive in working with teachers who need support while changing their practice.

### **Leadership for Collaboration**

Principals employing instructional leadership (Leithwood, Begley & Cousins, 1992; Ruff & Shoho, 2005) are likely to facilitate such a collaborative learning culture. This type of leadership is characterized by a primary focus on tasks that involve the instructional, as opposed to operational, tasks of schools. Elmore and Burney (1997), give a detailed view of such an approach in New York City's Community School District #2. Superintendent Anthony Alvarado is described as centering all meetings around student performance and methods for addressing areas of student weakness, a far cry from the managerial tasks typically associated with urban superintendents.

Since teaching is high-level cognitive task, it is best learned through a coaching approach, replete with lots of practice and feedback (Leithwood, Jantzi & Mascall, 2002). But the current evaluation of most teaching practice is generally far from this ideal, consisting of hit-and-

run observations with little agreed upon goals (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002). Combining the roles of teacher and leader is seen as an important idea in advancing collaboration. Just as principals must push the barriers of their role as classroom specialists, teachers must respond when their input in building leadership matters is sought. Not fostering teacher-principal collaboration can lead to the comical managerial game of holding meetings to discuss decisions that have already been made (Wolcott, 1973).

Principals are ideally situated, but rarely prepared, to take on this coaching role. In the tumultuous rebuilding process following Hurricane Katrina, this focus was particularly difficult to attain. Principals are concerned with textbook acquisition, cafeteria food, and student safety much more than they ever have been before (Ritea, 2007c). Principals in New Orleans who support this type of leadership were hard-pressed to dedicate what they saw as sufficient time to instructional activities due to the loss of much central-office support and the litany of managerial tasks that accompanied the rebuilding process.

### **Mutual Adaptation**

In their study of four federally funded reform programs at thousands of US schools, Berman and McLaughlin (1974) discovered that schools most likely to institutionalize a reform were those who changed the original innovation to fit with local conditions. They termed this process *mutual adaptation* and it has been one of the most widely used concepts in the field of educational change. McLaughlin (1990) later identifies mutual adaptation as a sign of a healthy school that is actively tailoring reforms to meet its perceived needs. While post-Newtonian theories of change do not support the practice of importing “off-the-shelf” reforms, we are operating in an environment in which there are plenty of available reform projects to choose from, and ignoring them altogether is often seen as counter-productive. Given that externally-



produced reforms are likely to exist for some time, *mutual adaptation* is a useful idea that should encourage educators to use pre-packaged reforms as a starting point for creating specific changes that work in a given context. Educators should reject the pressure to implement reforms with a *high fidelity* to the original intension, instead working to make the propsed changes fit with the local educational culture.

### **Many questions unanswered**

Despite these lessons, a central remaining problem is that the complexities of the school as a social system make proposed changes rather difficult to implement and sustain. Even given what we know, Elmore (1996) estimates that even the most successful reforms influence only 25% of American classrooms. This points to a need for continued study of the complex change process. Most studies of school reform describe instances of centrally planned change (Cuban & Usdan, 2002; Hess, 2005) enacted at either the federal, state, district, or school-site level (Squire & Reigeluth, 2000). The complexities of the educational system often disrupt the original intentions of the reformers. There is little empirical data on the process of school reform which is relatively unplanned, as is the case in present-day New Orleans. Since school systems are complex systems in which simple cause-effect patterns are scarce (Hutchins, 1996; Rust & Freidus, 2001), and the problem of large-scale educational changes is formidable (McLaughlin & Mitra, 2001; Dede, 2005), it is vital for change research to focus on the micro-level of the school and the classroom where personal relationships and knowledge of the local context reveals many of the individual decisions that influence the emergent behavior of a school.

### **Difficulties in changing teacher practice**

The success of school change is dependent on school professionals changing their understanding of the educational process and altering practice based on these new understandings. Michael Fullan agrees, writing that “educational change depends on what teachers think and do- its as simple and as complex as that” (2001b, p.115). This approach rings true for many because teachers are in daily contact with students, and stand the best chance (some say *only* chance) of improving both academic and humanistic educational outcomes. Similarly, Stein, Hubbard, and Mehan (2004) report a statement from former New York City and San Diego school administrator Anthony Alvarado that captures the centrality of changing teachers’ practice:

It is what the adults know and are able to do that is the primary issue at hand. It has nothing to do with who kids are or what they are doing, what do they know, what about their parents, what about their poverty level... it is what the adults in that school know and are able to do (p.178).

But the simplicity of this idea belies the incredibly complex task of promoting change in a profession with a tradition of low social status, minimal supervision, and a large degree of freedom with respect to teaching practice. Due to the custodial function of schools, teachers are somewhat limited in their availability for professional learning under traditional workplace structures. Cuban’s (1993) study of American teaching practices shows the stubbornness of “chalk and talk” teaching methods despite decades of efforts at pedagogical reform.

Tye (2000) defines the complexities of changing teacher practice by describing American school systems as both tightly coupled systems at the state and district level, and loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976) at the classroom level. Principals often face strict accountability for meeting district goals, but the loosely-coupled classrooms they are responsible for often don’t share these goals or face the same repercussions if goals are not met. As the primary person

responsible for balancing these tensions, the school principal's perceptions are vital to gaining a deeper understanding of the complexities of school reform.

### **The Need to Understand School Principals' Views**

The calls have been loud and uniform that educational change research needs to focus on the experiences of those personally involved in the process at the school site level (Eisner, 1992; Fink, 2003; McLaughlin, 1990; McLaughlin & Mitra, 2001). In his chapter on school principals engaged in change, Fullan (2001b) notes:

An understanding of what reality is *from the point of view of people within the role* is an essential starting point for constructing a practical theory of the meaning and results of change attempts. (p.137) [emphasis original]

Dillard (1995) argues that the majority of empirical literature on school principals is written from a rationalist and role-driven perspective. While there are naturalistic studies that explore the experiences and perceptions of school principals (Wolcott, 1973; Mitchell, 1990), participants' perceptions of the educational reform process are relatively absent from the research literature (Orr, Byrne-Jimenez, McFarlane & Brown, 2005). This stands in stark contrast to the literature on school reform which touts principal leadership as one of the most important characteristics of successful change (Borko, Wolf, Simone & Uchiyama, 2003; Sammons, 1999). An examination of the extant literature dealing with principals' experiences with change follows.

### **Principals Experiences with Change**

Scholars, especially anthropologists, have written at length about the lived experiences of principals working in schools (Johnson, 1998; Spindler, 1979; Wolcott, 1973). These studies attempt to identify salient themes that principals see in *their own* working lives, not the roles

assigned to them by superintendents, expert theorists, or the teachers and students with whom they work. Such studies have identified a number of factors that further our understanding of principal's experiences. One finding of this line of inquiry is that school principals' feel that they are mediators between classrooms and the external environment. In the conclusion of his ethnographic study of an elementary school principal, Wolcott (1973) suggests that principals are in :

a position peculiarly suited as a link between the educational bureaucracy and the individual human lives of a large number of children and adults (p.320).

In his essay in the book *Anthropology and Educational Administration*, Gallaher (1979) echoes Wolcott's words:

If I had to summarize the school administrator's role in one phrase, it would be *he is the man in the middle*. He stands between the client group, technically represented by the school board, and professional and other functionaries who compromise the educational system. (p.301) [emphasis original]

This characterization of the principal as a middle manager has supported the oft-cited idea that principals cannot be overly passionate about any one mode of schooling, or else they risk offending parts of their constituency and becoming ineffective in their role (Spindler, 1963). As change is sure to alienate certain members of the school community, this political fact limits the principal's effectiveness in instituting change. Of course, competing claims have been made about the centrality of principal leadership to the process of educational change (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Fullan, 2001b; Leithwood, 1994; Sammons, 1999). Principals, especially urban ones, have also reported that they feel like they are managing rapidly shifting environments and that just keeping up is hard enough, let alone engaging in planned change efforts (Riley, 2004). Interestingly, Oplatka (2003) identifies "lack of challenges" in mid-career principals' work emerging from a qualitative study of six principals. These principals did, however, experience extreme challenges in the early phases of their careers. Evans (1996) notes the increased tension and decrease in satisfaction among principals with whom he has worked. He has noticed that:

their professional lives have grown more complicated and less satisfying. The aspects of the job they most enjoy, such as working directly with teachers and students... have been steadily diminished... (p.156).

In a recent study of urban school principals (Orr, Byrne-Jimenez, McFarlane & Brown, 2005), participants felt that they were treated as incompetent because their schools had low test-scores and they resented the over-reliance on superficial data (tests scores, attendance) to evaluate leadership abilities. It should come as no surprise while looking at more recent studies, that the line between principals' work in static contexts and principals' work in changing context gets very blurry, almost to the point of disappearing. At least in the industrialized world, I would be hard pressed to envision an ethnographic study of the principalship that was not also a study about educational change.

Of course, there is significant literature specifically examining leaders' perceptions of the growing standards-based reform movement. Scholars have identified that principals feel their work is being de-skilled as state agencies become more prescriptive in the management of schools (Fink, 2003; Johnson, 1998). Principals have felt that standards-based reform has minimized their ability to create solutions to locally-defined educational problems (Oplatka, 2003). In their study of literacy reform in San Diego, researchers note that school principals felt that they were being rapidly forced into new roles that they neither wanted nor had the skills to perform (Stein, Hubbard, Mehan, 2004). It should be clear from the previously mentioned research that principals' perceptions of recent state-sponsored reforms are overwhelmingly negative. Because of the newfound independence of many of the schools in New Orleans, this study provides an interesting contrast to this extant literature on principals' experiences with standards-based reform.

### **Social upheaval and school reform**

Principals are not engaging in garden variety educational reform in New Orleans. The issues being encountered stretch well beyond instituting block scheduling or integrating writing across the curriculum. The massive changes occurring in New Orleans' educational landscape are as massive as the ones taking place in its physical landscape as neighborhoods and levees take on new shapes in response to the disaster. But New Orleans is not the only school system to undergo such catastrophe in recent decades. Another prime example of school reform in response to societal turbulence is the reform of the school systems of Eastern Europe shortly after the events of 1989-1990 spelled the end of communist rule and the adoption of Western pluralist democracies. While the new governments of Eastern Europe dealt with these changes in different ways, they all swiftly passed educational reforms in an attempt to eradicate a system that had been a major mouthpiece for the socialist dogma that was now out of favor (Fishman, 1993). It should be remembered, of course, that the school reforms taken by these former Soviet-bloc nations were not made solely for the typical reason of improving school performance, or to improve educational equity, but to align the school system with the new Western-style political and economic systems that were being put in place (Mintrop, 1999). Clearly the lessons learned from political upheaval such as this must be cautiously applied to the change process occurring in New Orleans. Nonetheless, several important themes come out of the literature studying these reforms that are useful to understanding the case of New Orleans. A brief discussion of these themes (immediate decentralization, increased outside influence, and financial difficulties) follows.

### ***Immediate decentralization***

In what seems a logical response, as a society moves from a one-party system to a multiparty one, and from a Marxist-Leninist ideology to a free market one, all of the post-1989 reforms in Eastern Europe are characterized by a rapid decentralization that involved allowing private or religious schools, loosening curricular restrictions, and giving more authority to teachers and administrators in the operation of individual schools. This rapid decentralization can be viewed as a purely *institutional* move (Mintop, 1999) in that it required only the passage of laws, and not any thoughtful reflection on the part of *individuals* on how teaching and learning were to change in the new system. The decentralization may have been due to the fact that more pressing political and economic problems were on the government's plate, and decentralizing schooling was a popular move.

Another popular rationale for the decentralization of schools in Eastern Europe is one familiar to those who have followed the school choice debates in the USA for the last forty years (Chubb & Moe, 1988). As Kozakiewicz (1992) says in reference to the creation of private schools in newly democratic Poland:

The nonstate schools... can play a role of a "social laboratory" for new didactic, financial, and instructional solutions before these are introduced throughout the entire education system. Finally, social [private] schools bring an element of competition necessary for the efficient functioning of the whole. (p. 96)

This view of decentralized schools leading to innovative practice is a long-standing argument particularly well-suited to this context of rapid, massive change. The limitations of this *R&D model* of educational reform in a US context are discussed insightfully by Lubienski (2003). He argues that for all the talk of *innovation* that surrounds decentralized schools, very few new ideas actually are created and put into practice. Indeed, most of the observers of the Eastern European reforms found similarly few changes to actual teaching practice (Klus-Stasnska &

Olek, 1998; Mintrop, 1999; Rust, 1992), even though the structure of the system had been dramatically altered in most cases.

It appears that the passage of decentralizing reforms, does not guarantee that the system will begin functioning efficiently overnight. The teachers in nearly all cases were the same ones who had taught under the rigidly bureaucratic communist system for forty years, and the culture of accepting direction from superiors was highly ingrained. Rust (1992) notes that while Polish teachers were given much more flexibility to design curriculum, they had very few curriculum development skills to take advantage of this opportunity. Additionally, Klus-Stanska & Olek (1998) note, in their case study of private schools in one Polish city, that even in the supposedly progressive private schools, only two out of five offered a curriculum that differed significantly from the approved communist era one. Given Fullan's (2000b) discussion of structural and cultural reforms, this decentralization can be seen as a structural change with no corresponding cultural shifts- a situation unlikely to produce significant changes in terms of student learning.

Of particular concern to the case of New Orleans is that several authors noted the emergence of a hierarchy of schools shortly after decentralization (Klus-Stanska & Olek, 1998; Kozakiewicz, 1992). Some private schools served the wealthy elites, some the middle class, and some the high-poverty rural students. This is not a surprising outcome in societies no longer ideologically obligated to the ideal of a classless society. Translating this effect to the case of New Orleans would mean something entirely different. In a city with one of the highest private school attendance rates in the country pre-Katrina (approximately 30%) and one that housed both the highest and lowest ranked public high schools in the state of Louisiana, any further separation of the schools into a hierarchy would be disastrous for New Orleans' large number of poor families (Saulny, 2006).



### *Increased outside influence*

In many of the newly created educational systems of Eastern Europe, the reforms brought increased reliance on bureaucrats, reform organizations, and educational thought from outside the country. This was certainly due in part to the opening of relatively closed systems that had been in place prior to 1989, but it must also be considered that educators both inside and outside of the country saw this as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for large scale educational change and wanted to be a part of it. There was a sense that because the communist states had failed, that their schools must have been inferior to those of the West. The post-reunification reforms in Germany paint the picture of practices from Western Germany being moved wholesale into schools in the East (Fishman, 1993; Mintrop, 1999; Rust, 1992). This presented trouble as reformers have long been aware of the importance of local context in the success of reform efforts (Fullan, 2001b). In the Czech Republic, numerous organizations moved in to support post-communist educational reforms (e.g., The Soros Foundation, The Peace Corps, and the European Union Program) (Polyzoi & Cerná, 2001). In fact a major report written by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) provided an important blueprint for Czech legislators who had limited experience running a system of education.

Another aspect of outside assistance is the resurgence of child-centered private school models that existed in many European countries prior to WWI (i.e., Waldorf, Montessori, and Steiner schools) (Klus-Stanska & Olek, 1998; Rust, 1992). Most of the countries that saw an increase in foreign-based private schools (Poland and Czech Republic) were also slow to develop a coherent national education plan. In retrospect, not taking the time to address the necessary problems of educational purpose and pedagogy may have resulted in less meaningful change than many were hoping for. While giving local authorities the responsibility for running their own schools, perhaps the government went too far in the other direction, failing to provide at least a

minimal national structure for the educational system. Polyzoi and Cerná (2001) identify the problems inherent when a system moves between two states that are completely different (i.e. centralized vs. localized) without any intermediary stages.

In the case of New Orleans, a serious attempt at addressing at least the purposes of education and the desired structural components was undertaken by the Mayor's Bring New Orleans Back Education Committee (Ritea, 2006a). However, the discussions they started and the plan they presented to the public in January 2006 was marginalized because of the state's takeover of the district in November 2005 and the ensuing rush to get schools open in any manner possible. The New Orleans Public Schools have now been significantly decentralized and it remains to be seen if any forum will be created to provide an over-arching vision for the system.

### ***Financial troubles***

The school systems of Eastern Europe faced significant financial troubles following the reforms of 1989-90. In Poland, the already poor government had to now pay for the Catholic priests that were being hired to teach newly approved religion courses in the public schools and also begin paying rent on the church for property that the communist state had appropriated and turned into schools (Kozakiewicz, 1992). In Eastern Germany, schools had to abolish their Russian-era history and economics textbooks and find a way to purchase millions of new "acceptable" texts in less than a year (Rust, 1992). In terms of the creation of private schools in Poland, researchers note that running them was difficult due to low salary levels, limited state funding, and the difficulty in securing and maintaining property. Finally, Fishman (1993) reports that because of the instability inherent in the establishment of a new national government, once-dependable finances for regular public schools were also in doubt. After the East German economic crisis of 1991, it was initially reported that up to ten-thousand (20%) of the teachers in

the Eastern German state of Saxony would have to be laid off. Even though this threat never materialized, it did not instill confidence that the system was in strong financial shape.

While reformers in Eastern Europe saw a golden opportunity to radically alter the functioning of their school systems in 1990, the presence of other national priorities limited financial support for educational reform and thus limited the extent of change programs. While it may be true that more money does not guarantee improved schooling, making changes to existing institutions costs money. After hiring reform coordinators, providing release time for teachers, and purchasing new materials, any major innovation in a moderately large school can cost upwards of USD\$50,000 per school (Evans, 1996). Using numbers reported by Klus-Stanska and Olek (1998), that would have cost the approximately thirty-thousand Polish schools a whopping total of USD\$1.5 billion in excess of the regular education funding.

In New Orleans, the federal government responded to Hurricane Katrina with \$21 million in aid that could be spent only on charter schools (Ritea, 2005a). This provided some financial relief as the district tried to get back on its feet, but was a politically charged move that dramatically altered a district that went from around 2% charter prior to the storm to over 50% charter shortly afterwards. The Federal Emergency Management Organization (FEMA) has pledged to pay for the reconstruction of buildings destroyed by the floodwaters, but disagreements over when and where the population will return have slowed both the rebuilding and the funds. As New Orleans moves forward, the already bankrupt district will need to find external funding if meaningful reforms are to occur as both federal aid and the local property tax base are very uncertain at this date (Rowley, 2007). Even as the 2007-08 school year reaches the mid-way point, there have been press reports about the budget shortfalls for the RSD (Carr, 2007).

Taken as a whole, the literature on educational reforms in Eastern Europe following the fall of communism point to significant changes in structure and teaching materials, but little

evidence of changes in the classroom-level process that directly affect student learning. In fact, those who spent time in classrooms (Mintrop, 1999; Polyzoï & Černá, 2001) noted that despite small pockets of reform, most teachers were using the same teacher-centered practices that were in place under the old system (Cuban, 1993). In terms of school principals, very little details of their role in the change processes are given. Mintrop (1999) noted that German principals minimized the amount of teacher observations in an effort not to appear controlling, while Kozakiewicz (1992) explains the negative influence communist party status had on principals competing for jobs in the new system. Perhaps the most significant finding is the robustness of the attitudes and dispositions of citizens towards the purposes and practices of schooling. Old ways of teaching and running schools from the communist era were fixed in place without the presence of concentrated, extended, and expensive work with teachers and principals. This same processes are at work in post-Katrina New Orleans, with poor performance being the stubborn influence instead of Marxist-Leninist ideology.

### **Literature Summary**

This review of the literature of school reform suggests strongly that the complexities of the process of change have led to rather inconsistent adoption of reforms. Through our failures, we have learned of the benefits of anticipating multiple perspectives, allowing for mutual adaptation, and fostering collaborative learning for teachers and principals. Research on school reforms in Eastern Europe has emphasized the persistence of schooling practices after major social upheaval without sustained, focused efforts. Despite all of these lessons, changing our increasingly complex school systems remains beyond the reach of scientific certainty. This is due to the complex, shifting nature of schools as social organizations and the classroom autonomy that is a fact of North American classroom life. In order to better understand how these

complexities play out in actual schools, this study explores the relatively unexamined perspectives of school principals working in a district undergoing massive change. In seeking to understand school principals' perceptions of post-Katrina reforms in the New Orleans Public Schools, we can learn about a unique case of school reform in the radically decentralized post-Katrina district. These perceptions will inform our understanding of issues surrounding the complexity of school reform more generally.

## Chapter 3

### Methods

This chapter will outline the research methods used in this study of school principals' experiences leading public schools in post-Katrina New Orleans. Particular attention will be paid to the rationale for using this qualitative methodology, and sampling, and data collection and analysis procedures.

My focus on individual experiences of principals makes phenomenology an appropriate research method. This method studies:

Lived experience... the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect upon it. (van Manen, 1997, p. 9)

This research method has the advantage of not requiring *a priori* assumptions about the topic of study or requiring hypotheses to be tested. As the review of the literature has shown, it is often our erroneous assumptions and hypotheses about the process of school reform that have hindered the process of successful change. If this study were to begin with a list of characteristics expected to be described by participating principals, then this study would only reify our flawed understandings of the process of educational change. The rationale for this method then, based on an assumption that we do not fully understand the process of educational change, is that it allows me to learn how principals actually experience the phenomenon of educational change, apart from how theories and models predict reform to unfold. As van Manen (1997) writes, "the most carefully crafted poem falls short" (p.xiii) in describing its subject. That is to say, even the best theory is only an approximation of complex lived reality. Of course, the best study does not fully capture reality either, and by necessity, the research process requires a process of selecting certain data points and trends for emphasis rather than others. But this selection of data will be done

thematically, as concepts emerge from the data. While my theoretical framework, as described above, does inform this study and will influence what I, as the researcher, see in the collected data, I entered this study with a spirit of humility and a recognition that my assumptions about educational change are to be negotiated with my participants, not proven true or false by what I find. This study does not seek to provide a general theory of educational change, rather, phenomenology has allowed me to construct deeply layered levels of meaning that school principals associate with school change, and thus help in refining our understanding of the process of reform. Those who do the work of creating general theories of change may utilize this study, along with others, to create theories that better describe the process of change as it occurs in the myriad social contexts of our modern world. I leave that job to them.

In describing the perspectives of participants, the study centers around interviews with New Orleans principals. The data falls on the interpretive end of the interpretivist-objectivist continuum. Each participant gave his/her viewpoint as it emerged through the interview process and a multiplicity of perspectives were sought and expected. As Kvale (1996) states in his discussion of qualitative interviewing, “it is in fact a strength of the interview conversation to capture the multitude of subjects’ views of a theme and to picture a manifold and controversial human world” (p. 7). While the focus is on an individual principal’s point of view, schooling is an ecological and social process that cannot be fully separated from the context in which individual participants operate (McLaren, 1999). Therefore, interviews will be situated in the socio-political context of the changing New Orleans school system by supplementary data collection techniques described in the *Data Collection* section below.

## Sampling

The choice of participants in this study is vital to its contribution to the dialogue on school reform. The sampling technique is adapted from that used in Cuban's (2001) study examining teachers' classroom use of computers. For his study, he chose the very technology friendly Silicon Valley area of California because they were likely to be high implementers of technology due to the high technological skills of people in the area, a high demand for technological skills in graduates, and a relatively wealthy public likely to fund and support technology initiatives. Similarly, I chose New Orleans Public School principals because the city and the school district are in the midst of massive reforms in response to Hurricane Katrina. Because of the deplorable condition of the public schools prior to the storm, and the tremendous pressure to "get it right" afterwards, principals in New Orleans are more likely than those elsewhere to have had recent experiences with school change. Whereas Cuban made an assumption that Silicon Valley educators would have some involvement with technology, I made the assumption that *New Orleans principals will have some involvement with school change*. This assumption turned out to be generally correct and it is principals' perceptions of these experiences that form the core data for this study.

Data was collected from ten principals working in the New Orleans Public School system. In addition to the New Orleans Public Schools, the Jefferson Parish, the St. Tammany Parish, and the St. Bernard Parish Public Schools also received varying levels of damage from Hurricane Katrina. This ranged from the temporary loss of a few school buildings to the complete destruction of every school structure in St. Bernard Parish. These districts, however, clearly are attempting to open schools that were similar to the schools before the storm. Because these districts lacked the history of poor-performance of the New Orleans Public Schools, they will not



be treated in this study. The school districts that were extensively damaged along the Mississippi gulf coast and private schools within New Orleans itself will not be included for the same reasons. Thus my interest here is in the specific confluence of public demand for change and massive bureaucratic collapse.

Gaining access to study participants was facilitated somewhat by the fact that I am a former teacher in the New Orleans Public Schools and am still in contact with many educators living there. Of the ten participants in the study, two were colleagues from my days as a high school teacher (See *Researcher Identity* at the end of this chapter). However, given the upheaval that ensued following Hurricane Katrina, contact was often difficult to make because many of my colleagues have lost their homes, lost their jobs, and many have left the city permanently. Initially, letters were sent to each of the principals of all public schools in New Orleans operating in the Spring of 2007 (approximately 55). Two participants were successfully recruited from these letters, and another eight principals were recruited by follow-up phone calls using an alphabetical list of the public schools in the city. While the utilization of ten principals is clearly only a small percentage of public school principals in New Orleans, the interview data became saturated following the analysis of these ten, so no additional participants were added.

Because a related study has revealed something of a hierarchy of public schools in the new system (Beabout, Almeida, Carr-Chellman, Gursoy, Ma, Modak & Pastore, 2007) an effort was made to include principals from a diversity of public schools in the district. This study includes three principals from RSD schools, six principals from state/district charter schools, and one principal from an RSD charter school. Because two participating schools had co-principals that both agreed to participate in the study, there were a total of eight unique schools involved. Of these, two were high schools, one was a middle school (5-8), and five schools had a K-8<sup>th</sup> grade configuration.

Of the five K-8 schools whose students took the spring 2007 Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) tests, three schools generally scored in the top quartile of public schools in New Orleans and the other two schools generally scored in the second quartile. The middle school that participated scored in the first quartile, and of the two high schools, one scored in the third quartile and one scored in the bottom quartile. While this data shows that the participating principals led slightly above-average schools, there is representation from every strata of the district. It should also be noted that median schools in each category, on average, got approximately 30% of their students to perform at or above the basic level- certainly not what we would generally consider above-average performance.

### **Data Collection**

At least one in-person interview was conducted with each participant, with telephone being used when necessary. Participants were interviewed three times using the protocol attached as Appendix A. All interviews were conducted between March 2007 and September 2007. The initial interview with all ten participants was conducted in person. Five participants were interviewed all three times in person, while three participants combined two in-person interviews with one phone interview. One participant completed one in-person and two telephone interviews and one principal participated in one in-person and one telephone interview before being excused from the study after it became apparent that their role was much more involved with facilities and finances while work with classrooms, teachers, and students was left to another administrator. The data from this participant's first two interviews was included in the analysis because the facilities and financial concerns were commonly identified issues for many participants in the study. Semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 1998) were used in order to allow participant

perceptions on the rebuilding process to be explored in detail. The interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed manually using a word processing program..

In order to orient myself to the constantly changing situation, I supplemented interview data with local and national press documents as well as documents released by state and local education officials (Shank, 2006). These documents allowed me to closely follow local events that inevitably came up during interviews. Documents from the press served as an important trust builder for the interviews as both the interviewer and the interviewee were constantly reacting to the political changes that were occurring. Over 200 documents were collected pertaining to the rebuilding of the New Orleans Public Schools following Hurricane Katrina. These documents have also been used to assist in triangulating the data collected during interviews (Stake, 1995). The documents were analyzed and coded with the same codes used during the analysis of principal interviews. In this way, document data was placed meaningfully alongside interview data as the analysis proceeded.

A video-recording of New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin's Education Committee report was obtained. The tape, made on January 17, 2006, details Tulane President Scott Cowen's discussion of the final presentation of the Education Committee and the public comments that followed. It was useful for two reasons: 1) to show the results of a participatory effort at reinventing the schools in New Orleans, and 2) to show the reactions of citizens to both the Mayor's plan and the overall response of the city to the damage Katrina caused to the school system. This meeting was analyzed using field journal notes which capture important events but do not record all words or actions verbatim (Carspecken, 1996).

Additional data was collected through observations at the schools of participating principals. A three-hour observation at the school of each participating principal was attempted. Unfortunately, four of the 10 participants were no longer principals in the district by the time observations were being scheduled. This alone is a testament to the dramatic changes taking place

in the district. Thus, field journal notes (Carpsecken, 1996) were compiled following visits to the remaining 5 schools in which participants tenures extended through the duration of the study.

This served to triangulate interview data and to provide a school-level context for understanding the principal interviews. Field notes were analyzed in the same manner as the documents, using the codes developed from the analysis of interview transcripts.

### **Data Analysis**

Interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes using the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) because this approach “facilitates the generation of theories of process, sequence, and change” (p.114). Since school change is certainly a process it is well-matched to this analysis technique. This approach is also appropriate since it seeks to develop, not test hypotheses, and is recommended for use with the multiple forms of data such as those included in this study. This method is based on two central rules: 1) during coding, new incidents of a code are always compared to other incidents having received that same code, and 2) when comparisons of multiple incidents with the same code generate new understandings for the research, coding should stop and these understandings should be written down while they are still fresh.

Transcripts, field notes, documents, and videos were initially coded with emergent codes. As new data was collected and analyzed, codes formed categories with an increasing number of properties. These categories and their properties were examined for interrelationships that served as the basis for writing up the study’s results. Portions of the final text where I felt that my interpretations were uncertain were sent to participants for member checking and deleted, revised, or retained based on participant feedback.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The ethical questions surrounding this study involved selecting participants based on their status as victims of a natural disaster. Tens of thousands of educators and students have been severely impacted by Hurricane Katrina and the ensuing reorganization of the schools in New Orleans. Educators and students have lost homes, jobs, cars, and in some cases family members to the flooding that took place throughout most of the city. Even in the realm of professional practice, where the interview protocol placed emphasis, principals have lost their jobs, their income, their homes, and their daily interactions with colleagues and students that formed a large part of their identities as humans. The risk of exploiting these losses for my own professional gain was very real.

How did I combat this possibility of taking advantage of my participants in a time of need? One part of the answer was my demeanor during the interviews. I allowed for participants' frustration and grief to be validated and captured in the data. Pretending it wasn't there and pressing on with my stated agenda would have been the crossing of an ethical line that I preferred to avoid. Secondly, the work I had done in preparation for the study gave me a wide overview of the rebuilding process going on in New Orleans. Just as I sought out participants for their deeper perspectives, I was able to contextualize some of their experiences during our conversations, helping principals see more of the system in which they work everyday. This emphasizes the dialogic nature of phenomenological research (see van Manen, 1997, p.98). Thirdly, the ethical question of taking advantage of the victims of a natural disaster was minimized by establishing that the purpose of the research is to understand their perspectives on school change in pursuit of a more effective and equitable school system for New Orleans. This was a goal shared by these principals, and establishing this shared purpose made positive partnerships out of a potentially awkward researcher-participant relationship.

### **Researcher Identity**

As a former teacher in the New Orleans Public Schools, my identity as a researcher was influenced both by my previous work experience and by my role as a university researcher. Two participants had been acquaintances from my time in the district. One had been a teacher I had mentored when he was new to the district and another had been my assistant principal when I was a teacher. Eight of the ten participants were principals I had never met. In either case, my previous work experience in the district meant many of the working conditions in the district (salary, student discipline, curriculum expectations) were shared knowledge throughout the interviews. This also served to give me a certain level of credibility with my participants. My approach towards the participants was overt and used nearly full disclosure (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Participants knew that I was doing research and knew that the topic was their understandings of the rebuilding process in the school system. But my conversations with participants were hardly one way flows of information. While I came with a citywide perspective, and a concern for improving schools in all areas of the city, most principals entered our conversations, understandably, with a primary focus on their school and their teachers and students. This difference in perspective led to a great many new understandings on both my part as a researcher trying to understand principals professional lives, and on the part of my participants who were focused on making their school as good as it could possibly be. I believe this dialogic process of meaning making helps make for both better research and better principal practice.

In my school-site observations, I was a passive observer- not interacting with students or the teacher significantly (Carspecken, 1996). Due to the limited time spent observing in the current study, a more participative form of observation was not manageable. This passive observation allowed me to get a better overall sense of the environment without being pulled into

personal interactions with the students- who were not participants in this current phase of the study.

My experiences in the district led directly to my pursuit of a graduate education in urban school change- as I was generally appalled with the poor-functioning of the New Orleans Public Schools before the hurricane. The system did not prepare students well for their futures and I absolutely brought this knowledge and passion with me into the research process. Additionally, my role as a former-insider-turned-outsider colors my relationship with the participants. As one informant, who did not participate in the study remarked sarcastically, “So we had this big storm and now you want to study us?” This comment exemplifies my uncertain position in the educational community of post-Katrina New Orleans. I was someone with insider knowledge of the school system- but one who did not live through the experience of losing my home and job, evacuating, and surviving that do deeply textures life in post-Katrina New Orleans. All but one of the participants had to evacuate from Katrina. Had this study been conducted pre-Katrina, I would have been much more of an insider than I was a year later when this research began. The function of this dual-status on my research was apparent. I was offered jobs more than once during the interview process and was subtly pressured to return to the city to help rebuild the schools several times.

Given the fact that several of the interviewees were native New Orleanians, my identity with them may have approached that of the insidious, paternalistic “carpetbagger” which has existed since the end of the civil war. Just as these opportunists came south in the late 1860s to exploit the reconstruction process of the defeated confederacy, perhaps I have “come south” to exploit the reconstruction process of the destroyed city. I do not feel my intentions were viewed as darkly as this picture reveals, and none of the participants made comments to this effect. But, it would be irresponsible for me to omit this historical backdrop.

### **Methods Conclusion**

This research study seeks to extend our understanding of the process of school reform by examining school principals' perceptions of this complex process. The principal has been identified as central to successful school reform (Sammons, 1999), and a deep understanding of how they experience this process will provide insights to those interested in improving the function of schools. The research site of post-Katrina New Orleans is especially appropriate to this study because of the district-wide changes already underway and because it is our urban schools that are in dire need of attention from reformers (Kozol, 1991). The complex social dynamics of urban schools make systems theory and chaos theory a useful framework for understanding the innumerable interconnections that make change in urban schools a difficult proposition.



## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

This chapter reports on the results of this study of principals' experiences with change in the post-Katrina New Orleans Public Schools. In the analysis of the collected data, six major themes emerged: 1) the omnipresence of storm recovery in principals' lives, 2) the lingering presence of characteristics of the pre-Katrina school system, 3) the inequalities of the post-Katrina system, 4) schools' new relationships with the external environment, 5) Principals' emphasis on long-term (rather than rapid) improvement, and 6) the requirements for this long-term change. A detailed reporting of these findings follows.

#### **Storm Recovery Weighs Heavily**

While both educators and the public at large were talking about providing "world class education" in Katrina's aftermath (Hickock & Andres, 2005), principals experienced a constant tension between the desire to engage in school improvement and the extreme toll that Katrina had taken on the educators who would necessarily enact any proposed reforms. While improving the long-failing district would have been a monumental task at any time, the Katrina-weary principals, teachers, and students faced impediments to change that are almost unheard of in examinations of urban school reform. Teachers who were rebuilding their homes, students dealing with the loss of family members, and damaged school buildings all contributed to the challenges of school improvement. Principals faced both personal and public pressure for rapid reform, which served to make the challenges of reform in this context especially trying for many principals.

### High Post-Katrina Expectations

When principals began to arrive back in the city to lead the school system after the storm, many were led by an urge to participate in a historic reform effort. Indeed some of the high expectations for reform came from school principals themselves. As one Recovery School District (RSD) principal stated, “I thought that this was simply an opportunity to do it right... I just simply thought that the Phoenix was going to be reborn, and done right.” This urge to work in a newly created system, to take advantage of this rupture of everyday practice, was motivating for many principals. Even for those with less-utopian wishes, the break with the past provided a long-awaited opportunity to make changes in a historically dysfunctional system:

... I came back because I thought it was going to be better. I thought I could be a part of making it better... and that ultimate challenge: who's going to help make this thing *right*? Some kind of way, my little part, my little role. How do I make it *right* you know? (RSD principal)

The belief that *now was the time* for change was clearly palpable in the first year post-Katrina. Among charter school principals, there was also a sense of participating in a once-in-a-lifetime reform effort, and wanting to make the most of this historic opportunity:

it's a great place to be in the changing landscape of New Orleans education, right now,... and seeing how it's changing, going to all these meetings with all these charter school principals and heads and CEOs and talking... I wanna see the RSD succeed. I think if we don't get it right *now* [we never will]. It's really exciting to be a part of that- firsthand. (Charter principal)

This sense of optimism was also shared by the public, who saw this as a chance to rid the city of a failing public school system that had been a hurdle to attracting investment and convincing middle-class New Orleanians to remain in the city instead of migrating to the suburbs, or more vibrant southern economies in Atlanta or Houston. An anonymous state official is quoted in *The Atlantic Monthly* as saying that this was a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reinvent public education” (Waldman, 2007, p.89). Management consultant, Bill Roberti, who worked with the school district both pre- and post-Katrina was equally optimistic:

Here's a golden opportunity to create a New Orleans Public School system for the 21st century, with whatever money we have. And I don't think that's a daunting task at all. If we're going to build it back, why would you want it back the way it was? (Sanchez, 2005)

But this optimism for change had to interface with a beleaguered school system lacking many of the “readiness factors” which scholars have identified as important in jumpstarting the change process: shared institutional values, appropriate organizational structures, human and financial resources, and proven leadership (Ely, 1976; Nias, Southworth, & Campbell, 1992), as well as an organizational capacity to learn (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Senge, 1990). What these scholars would all agree on is that educational change has as much to do with the schools being changed as it does with the specific changes being proposed. And in post-Katrina New Orleans, many principals saw an educational system that was as devastated as the neighborhoods in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward and Lakeview. This was a system facing great turbulence as it began to re-open. These school leaders faced the paradox identified by Mulford (2005) that schools need a certain amount of internal stability in order to take on meaningful change. Participants cited numerous recovery activities that took energy and attention away from improving the core functions of teaching and learning. A discussion of some of these distractions (school buildings, student trauma, teachers' disrupted lives, community recovery, and principals' personal challenges) is necessary to fully convey the force they applied to the work lives of principals.

### **Issues with School Buildings**

Public school buildings in New Orleans were notoriously neglected even prior to Katrina, so it was not surprising to hear disgruntled words from principals about the condition of their school buildings after the storm. What had been superficial signs of neglect pre-Katrina (mismatched paint, leaky windows, insufficient bathrooms, etc.) became maintenance disasters

after the hurricanes, looters, and ensuing months of vacancy took their toll. One RSD principal describes the state of his school in the weeks before school opened in fall 2006:

the kitchen was not fully restored... stalls were not up in restrooms, there was no running water, the kitchen was not in service. No public address system... no phone system, no fire alarm system...

In the previous case, a combination of deferred maintenance and floodwaters did most of the damage. In another RSD school, vandals entered a school building in the aftermath of the storm and damaged a building that had survived the storm relatively unscathed:

They tore out every piece of copper in that building. All the wires... everything. Copper around the roof and the trim around the roof... copper flashing and all that stuff, took it all. Well when they did that, the next rainstorm that came in, it all went inside the building. So that building had a lot of problems after that.

Other principals did not even have a school building to call their own as the beginning of school grew closer. In fact, of the 8 schools in this study, three of them had to begin the 06-07 school year in temporary buildings and move into their permanent homes in the middle of the year. And the pressure for schools to move back into their permanent homes meant that numerous smaller repairs had not been completed when buildings were occupied. One RSD school went so long without a functioning kitchen that the principal purchased a huge barbecue grill and asked the kitchen staff to prepare lunches outside as much as possible. A charter school principal, who leased a building from a church after their school was destroyed, lamented the short timeframe teachers had to get their classrooms ready for students:

August 1<sup>st</sup>, I think, we officially got the lease from St. Paul's (pseudonym). I believe the teachers returned to work on August 10th, 11th or 12th... to a building that was fully stocked with stuff that wasn't ours. With dust- you know- half an inch thick... they had one week to turn that building around from someone else's school to our middle school.

While not as costly as repairing a heating system or renovating a kitchen, the work of moving teachers' classrooms required massive amounts of labor and time and took away from other instruction-centered work that might have occurred.

Some principals weren't able to get contractors in time and were forced to open school in buildings lacking even basic repairs:

we're still drinking bottled water, which is an issue because water fountains have not been replaced. Yeah, then we'd run out of bottled water. I'd find little kids wetting paper towels in the restroom and drinking the water out of 'em...But, it, it was akin to starting a school in a third world country, ya know, just starting with nothing. (RSD Principal, March, 2007)

Because of a concern for mold and other toxins that might linger on materials that had weathered the storm, many buildings were completely cleared of all furniture, books, and supplies prior to students returning to classes:

Anything that was not nailed down was thrown away. They sent us all new equipment and things- so we came out okay. And it's just a lot... putting all this material into the school, desks, chairs, I mean everything. (Charter Principal)

Given the bureaucratic mess of dealing with the state, the district, and FEMA for reimbursements (see Gouwens & Lander, in press), a lot of the supplies that were needed didn't arrive until well into the 2006-07 school year. Textbooks, A/V equipment, even pencils and paperclips were in short supply as many schools opened. One RSD principal typed individual schedules for over 900 students into a computer spreadsheet because there was no student data software available to him. Pushed to desperate measures, he explains how he finally got access to this important tool:

we did all schedules on an Excel spreadsheet. We had no data system, no student information system, and so we hand wrote the schedules and entered them into the Excel spreadsheet... by Christmas time we got a bootleg copy of SASI... and operated on that the rest of spring.

And this type of activity was not an aberration. Another RSD principal describes his own desperate measures to get supplies for his teachers and students:

I had a little reputation...I was stealin' copy paper from central office. They were askin' me what was I doin' with all that paper, I said 'I need it for my building'... And then they had to guard it- because apparently other people were doing the same thing.

When school leaders are engaging in this type of behavior, it should be clear that they had significant worries about things other than improving teaching and learning in their schools. It was clear, however, that problems with supplies were not present in ALL schools. During my visit to one of the highest performing schools in this study (a charter school), I noted:

I arrived at 8:30 AM- there's a truck delivering palette after palette of special education materials. (Field notes, 9/26/06)

On the whole, the problems with supplies were most often mentioned by principals at the 3 RSD schools in this study. Charter schools, even those who started the 2006-07 school year as new schools and had to order all new supplies, seemed to have, on the whole, fewer problems obtaining materials. For more on the inequalities of the rebuilding process, see section entitled *Rebuilding Inequality*.

It should also be noted that one principal in the study sought to minimize the impact of facilities issues on the functioning of his charter school:

There was [sic] bathroom issues, we had a tornado hit us and rip off a wall that took forever to get put back up... it's scorching hot in here, even as I speak. But those things... don't actually stop you from building the school you want to build. So- they're excuses. No offense to anyone you talked to that's offered them up.

It is interesting that this school had facilities problems that were at least on par, and probably worse, than the other principals, but his focus was on overcoming these challenges to build an effective school. His last sentence indicates a belief that other principals in the city would probably blame school failure on problems with the school building or other external forces. He was correct, in part. There was a sense from other principals that instituting meaningful reforms was more challenging or even impossible while the school building and other managerial issues constantly required attention. Whether or not these building issues were viewed as small hurdles or major impediments to improved schooling, all principals admitted that they *did* draw some attention away from the core practices of school improvement. And while the

school buildings were the most visible remnants of Katrina, there were many other aspects of schooling that had damage of a much less visible sort.

### **Student Psychological Trauma**

While caring for the social and emotional needs of students is a characteristic in many classrooms (Spindler, 1979), particularly urban classrooms (Case, 1997), the extreme nature of the psychological trauma inflicted by Katrina on many public school students was a special case that strained even those public schools who were taking steps to address student mental health. Even before the storm, Louisiana ranked 49 out of 50 states with an alarming 30% of children growing up in poverty (Katrina's Children, 2006). A 2007 report showed that, in a sample of 9,000 children in New Orleans, 65% had homes damaged in the storm, 70% had moved, 69% attended a new school, and 14% had lost a family member or friend (Viadero, 2007). In a report outlining suggested steps to minimize the psychological damage done by Katrina to children, child trauma researcher Bruce Perry notes that the greatest damage inflicted by Katrina may not have been the destroyed neighborhoods, but the traumatized children who lived through the tragedy:

The real crisis from Katrina is coming... It will destroy a part of our country that is much more valuable than all of the buildings, pipelines, casinos, bridges, and roads in all of the Gulf coast... This crisis is foreseeable... Yet our society may not have the wisdom to see that the real crisis of Katrina is the hundreds of thousands of ravaged, displaced, and traumatized children. And our society may not have the will to prevent this crisis. (Katrina's Children, 2006, p.1)

The aforementioned report, published by the Children's Defense Fund, recommended a massive influx of school-based and community-based mental health services. Very few of this report's suggestions were enacted. This left principals in a position of incredible tension between meeting

the needs of obviously suffering children, having few resources to help them, while at the same time, facing unrelenting public pressure for increased academic achievement.

This tension was certainly prominent in many conversations with principals. They talked about students witnessing violence while sheltered at the Superdome and living in cramped trailers once they returned to the city. An RSD principal talks about the harsh conditions his high school students faced upon returning to the city:

we had 30%-40% of our population without any adult supervision that was back in the city... Unfortunately, you had a lot of young girls compromising themselves [sic] just for survival... extreme tardiness, high absenteeism, and at the end of the day, ya know, poor performance on the state mandated tests... No consistency in home life, won't be no consistency in school life either.

This problem of high school students returning to the city alone while parents sought temporary employment elsewhere grabbed some media attention (Dunn, 2006), but was perceived as beyond the control of school principals to address. At the elementary level, students were living with adults, but there were still no guarantees that parents and guardians were equipped to help students make sense of the trauma they had endured:

One of the 5th grade teachers...was having a problem with a child who was just like never on task. So she called his mom and... the mom said, 'I know, I'm having some problems with him too, I'm wondering if it has something to do with the fact that he saw his little brother drown in the storm.' Duuuuh, of course it does! There's no way... I would have a team of highly qualified, highly trained therapists working with students in groups and individually. For an extended period of time. I think until we deal with those issues, we can forget about textbooks. We have to help these kids know what's happening in their lives.  
(RSD Principal)

Despite this principal's concerns, and the hard work of the staff social worker, a lack of qualified counselors and a lack of resources left much of the psychological trauma he saw untreated. While most principals conceded that these psychological issues persisted throughout the 2006-07 school year, one charter school principal noticed a marked improvement as the year went on. He attributed this to the stable environment of the



school, their excellent social worker, and the very stable environment of a start-up charter school with only 60 students:

on the surface it doesn't seem to be much, but then you go a little bit deeper and you start noticing some weird patterns- and then it's like, 'OK. There is definitely more'... there definitely *is*- posttraumatic type things going on. But I will also say this, it definitely has very drastically changed as the year has gone on... it's stabilized a lot. Some of [the]... temper tantrum type things or just emotional outbursts, have disappeared. Some of the extreme fear that some kids were showing, to almost anything, has gone away... I think we offer a very stable environment.

It is clear that not all of the public schools in New Orleans were such stable environments in the first year back (Saulny, 2006; Ritea, 2007c). Some weary principals, particularly in the RSD, admitted that they were not able to make significant progress on either the academic or the social/emotional fronts during the first year back. One RSD principal noted that his:

biggest frustrations were- no one to truly address the social and emotional needs of these children. I think that if we could help these children deal with the impact of the storm in their lives, that we will be able to have more responsive, respectful, cooperative students.

The enormity of the tasks of both healing and educating students was clearly too much for the traditional public school model to handle. And principals, as the public face of their school, showed their frustration at not being able to meet their students' needs:

So how in heaven's name after a devastating flood, people coming back mentally and physically and emotionally crippled, both students and their adult parents, how can you expect scores to be the priority if it wasn't before? (RSD principal)

The options charter schools provide principals in terms of school size, staffing and the use of time may have helped to address some of the challenges that RSD principals faced. In this study, charter school principals did not report such inability to address students' emotional needs when compared to those in the RSD. Of course, some have argued that charter schools were able to have some success with their students only because they capped their enrollments (Simon, 2007b), whereas the Recovery District was forced to continue enrolling students even when they

exceeded their targeted student-teacher ratios. For more discussion of this unequal relationship between the charter schools and the RSD, see the section entitled *Rebuilding Inequality*.

### **Teachers' Disrupted Lives**

Another area of storm recovery that weighed heavily on the minds of principals was the stress level of teachers, many of whom lost homes and jobs when the storm hit in August 2005. While the teachers generally had more resources and were better prepared to evacuate the city than their students, principals noted unusually high levels of stress in the teaching force as they returned to their decimated city. An RSD principal who was hired from out-of-state after the storm spoke about his teachers' struggles: "I wasn't part of the Katrina catastrophe, but the bottom line is we still have adults who still are mourning for parents, their homes, their belongings." Another RSD principal seemed amazed that teachers were performing their professional duties with all of the uncertainties in their own lives:

some teachers have moved into their homes and settled in, others have had horror stories where they were about ready to move in, they go in the weekend before they are slated to move to discover that somebody has broken in and taken out everything... So, yeah it's a nightmare for a lot of them... I don't understand how people deal with all the stress in their lives.

Even teachers who weren't directly impacted by Katrina's floodwaters faced incredible professional challenges teaching in the new system:

one of our teachers had, had a breakdown, literally, he... knew it was going to be hard but didn't really understand. He had to leave for six weeks and get medical attention... it was too much for him, it was very stressful I think for a lot of the teachers... they did not anticipate working physically so hard, they were working without resources, without textbooks, you know, classroom libraries, it was very slow in coming and they weren't used to working that way. (Charter Principal)

Given the tremendous challenges for teachers, there were understandably few principal-led initiatives to improve the teaching and learning, which is the heart of any meaningful educational reform (McLaughlin & Mitra, 2001; Stein, Hubbard, and Mehan, 2004). It seems reasonable that teachers' efforts to re-orient their own lives in the post-Katrina landscape would have a negative effect on their ability to improve their classroom practice. One charter school principal noted the lack of interest her teachers expressed in a summer-long professional development program:

when it was presented to the teachers, [they responded:] 'I don't want to be in all summer- I've got to fix my house. And the five weeks from eight until 5:30, 'No, we're not gonna- mm-mm'

Principals responded to teachers' personal distractions in various ways. One charter school principal fired a teacher in October, while an RSD principal mentioned writing piles of disciplinary referrals to the superintendent concerning ineffective teachers. Regardless of whether a principal's approach toward teacher stress was one of leniency or one of strict quality control, principals clearly recognized that the stressors in teachers' lives severely impacted their ability to lead instructional improvement.

### **School Recovery Leads Community Recovery**

As we found in an earlier study involving both teachers and principals in post-Katrina schools, uncertainty about the recovery process was immense in the first few months after the storm (Beabout, Carr-Chellman, Almeida, Gursoy, Ma, Modak & Pastore, in press). This uncertainty appears to still present two and a half years later. Without assurances about what buildings and neighborhoods will be rebuilt, how many students will return, and who will lead the *new* New Orleans Public Schools, it becomes difficult for principals to make concrete plans for reform. Everything they would have to rely on to make these plans, including teachers, families,

students, and money, is all up in the air. Regardless of these trying circumstances, principals in this study were unified in the desire to have schools lead the way to broader recovery in New Orleans. One long-time New Orleans educator took the long view:

I think we can bring this city back one school community at a time. Because it's going to have to be built on the backs of our three, four and five year-olds. Teenagers are kind of- like, psshew!- and I'm a high school principal, and I'm saying like teenagers are... out of the picture, because the three, four, and five year olds- when the city comes back it's going to be between ten and fifteen years from now, and that's going to be the kids that's graduating high school. You know, and being in high school, and so we have to kind of create something for them to look forward to. (RSD Principal)

This gradualist approach to recovery, and reform, was one that would certainly clash with the increased public demand for quick changes. In fact, when Paul Vallas took the helm of the RSD in July 2007, this principal was reassigned to a central office position. Clear messages were being sent to the public that a reformer was in charge, and this tone has continued throughout his tenure (Simon, 2008).

A charter school principal equated the dire situation in the city with an increased need for functioning public education:

the city was clearly in pretty bad shape, but also... in pretty desperate need of some great schools- and that was the kind of vision from the get-go.

Another charter school leader commended her staff for:

being risk-takers and putting yourself out there and being part of this rebuilding in this city. From the former teachers to my brand-new teachers who... wanted to be a part of it.

In schools that had successful reopening years, as well as those that struggled, leaders noted the importance of schools providing leadership in bringing the city back. But this optimistic rhetoric, intended to point out the importance of schools to the community, tended to cover up the challenges of improving an entire educational system with decades of failure as its foundation. While some new pockets of excellence certainly emerged in the new decentralized district, many students in New Orleans, particularly those in the RSD, attended schools frighteningly similar to

the failing ones that existed pre-Katrina. This fear of re-creating another failing system, combined with the immense challenges of implementing reforms in such a turbulent educational environment took a serious toll on the principals involved in this study.

### **Katrina's Toll on Principals**

The health issues that emerged for several principals during the 2006-07 school year point to the tension they encountered between school improvement and the challenging conditions they faced. One RSD principal spoke about the new approach he would take to the 2007-08 year: "I'm gonna take it easy on my heart and my blood pressure, it *has* to be [easier], for me." He ended up having surgery in the summer after his first school year and also being reassigned to a central office position. Another principal started having "serious shoulder problems" she believes were a combination of the physical labor from moving into a new school building and the stress of taking over a school in the wake of the storm. A third principal talked about the unhealthy lifestyle that he developed as they 2006-07 year went on:

I get here at 6:45 in the morning, or earlier, and leave 12, 13, 14 hours later. I don't even stop to have lunch... I'm getting less sleep, I'm not able to get any exercise like I used to. I eat anything that's lying around. (RSD Principal)

Even a principal at one of the more successful charter schools in the study admitted that leading a school was not something she saw being able to sustain over the long term: "Honestly there's a huge burnout factor.... I do say sometimes, you know, how long can I do this?" Few principals predicted the workload would ease up after the completion of their first year back. Other principals in New Orleans share this outlook of the work of a principal being grueling (Reid, 2008b) and this "burnout factor" is certainly not unique to New Orleans, having been noted widely elsewhere (Evans, 1996; Hargreaves and Fink, 2007).

While trying circumstances definitely existed for leaders in the district pre-Katrina, circumstances have only gotten more challenging for many schools, and implementing change has certainly not gotten any easier. The general consensus of principals was that the first year back from Hurricane Katrina was a year to “get open” and deal with the multitude of distractions inherent in creating a school in such an unsettled environment. This discussion of the omnipresence of storm recovery in principals’ work lives brings me to an important concept about school change. While complexity theorists often describe the need to perturb a system in order to facilitate change (Reigeluth, 2004; Wheatley, 1999), change is also dependent on that system having enough *stability* for members to safely experiment with new ways of doing things. Without this *requisite stability* purposeful change becomes impossible to undertake without over-taxing the people involved. Post-Katrina New Orleans may be a case, at least in the first year of operating schools, where too much instability inhibits meaningful change efforts. As student enrollments and staffing become more predictable in years to come, some of the reforms called for by the public may be more likely.

### **Old System Not Washed Away Completely**

Katrina was about as catastrophic an event as has ever occurred to an urban school system in the United States. One needs to look at the impact of the 2004 Asian tsunami (Schultz, in press) or the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe (Fishman, 1993; Kozakiewicz, 1992) for lessons about how modern schools function in such turbulent times. And given the geographical spread of these other social fallouts, one could argue that New Orleans is isolated even from these cases. After Katrina, the belief was widely-held that massive educational change was imminent. The school district laid off all of its teachers shortly after the storm, principals were told that no schools would be opening that year (which later proved false), and the state

takeover of the school system on November 30, 2005 created a public perception that the old system was gone. As late as May of 2007, after all of the re-opening problems the district had already experienced (Saulny, 2006), the new RSD superintendent, Paul Vallas, said, "I really relish the opportunity to come here and, in effect, build a school system from scratch" (Ritea, 2007a). The headlines in the popular press were bathed in a sense of rebirth: *A Silver Lining?*, *'New' New Orleans*, *'New' Schools*, and *The Greatest Education Lab*. The references to a completely reborn system were pervasive.

Even the principals in this study acknowledged the fact that Katrina had dislodged enough of the entrenched structure of the district to create the opportunity for a new system (Ackoff, 1974; Banathy, 1992). One principal noted that the storm allowed many schools to bypass the challenges of reforming organizations with ingrained problems:

one of the amazing things about New Orleans after the storm is that everybody has the ability to make it more of a creating- than a changing... even schools that had very ingrained things going on... I think most schools had big staff turnovers and big student turnovers, and so, a lot of schools had the chance to- a fresh start in a lot of ways. (charter principal)

One charter school principal with almost 30 years of experience in the district noted, "this is about as clean a start as you're going to get. Without the whole basic school system being washed away, this opportunity [to start a new school] would not have occurred." But this statement leaves some room for the past to creep back into the system. When she says "as clean a start as you're going to get," we see an assumption that a school system cannot be completely born anew. Pieces of the old system will remain. The students, educators, and parents returning to the system bring with them expectations and biases about how schooling operates in New Orleans. And these returning residents are returning home to the American city with the largest percentage of native-born population (Stoeltje, 2005), a group unlikely to have experienced school elsewhere except during their evacuation (strengthening the public demand for change of course). The returning students, as well as their teachers, brought beliefs about the role of

schools, how students learn, and how students should act when in school back to the city with them. Scholars have written extensively about this *DNA* of American schooling and identified a number of factors that undergird the American system of education (See Table 4-1).

Table 4-1: Underlying characteristics of US Schools (from Mulford, 2007; Tye, 2000; and Reigeluth, 2004)	
• custodial function	• demand for quick results
• subject curriculum	• poor communication
• hierarchical control	• uncertain goals
• rigid schedule	• uncertain processes
• unequal resources	• political factions
• faith in test scores	• teacher independence
• age-grading	• standardization
• ability sorting	• egg-crate architecture

The characteristics listed in Table 4-1 summarize some of the cultural expectations about what an American school should be, whether publicly acknowledged or not. Specific characteristics of the New Orleans Public schools as a racialized and working-class system are also built on top of the framework listed in table 4-1. This is not to say that schools can't fight against these tendencies. Indeed, many of the notable efforts at authentic educational reform are those which have fought these tendencies head-on (Carr, 1996; Elmore & Burney, 1997; Goodman, 2006; Meier, 2002). Tye (2000) discusses that while the underlying structure of American schooling is unlikely to be supplanted, each school has a "unique personality" consisting of educator relationships, the local community, and the classroom climate that can help schools seeking change. But even when opportunity seems to come knocking, as in the case of Katrina, nothing is guaranteed in the uncertain business of educational change. As Burby & Donnelly (1977) reported in their study of schools in newly developed communities in the USA:

Although new community development has been viewed as an opportunity to experiment with new educational methods and techniques and to achieve racially integrated suburban communities and schools, these expectations were not shared by the parents who seemed to prefer more traditional schools... (p.13)



Their study of new schools in several centrally planned new communities clearly shows the conservative effect of community expectations for schools. Reform minded schools can oppose these forces, sometimes they'll win and sometimes they'll lose. But what they cannot do is ignore them and expect them to go away. These forces, left unchecked, will always find a way to ooze into the daily life of schooling due to their prevalence within the population at large. Thus, the story of principals' experiences after Katrina is equal parts what Katrina destroyed and what she left behind. While the principals in this study relished the chance to be a part of revolutionary change and saw the New Orleans Public Schools as a unique experiment, they also acknowledged the persistence of some of the old challenges such as under-prepared students and a lack of community support. These areas (urban classroom challenges, parent and community apathy, and teacher quality) are where long-term work by educators will need to be focused if lasting change is to occur.

### **Urban Classroom Challenges**

Students attending the public schools in New Orleans are overwhelmingly poor and African-American (Sanchez, 2005). Problems of low academic skills (Louisiana Department of Education, 2006), little preventative mental or physical healthcare (Viadero, 2007), and early entry into the criminal justice system (Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2007) are all issues that teachers in New Orleans continue to face regularly. Principals noted a number of classroom challenges that might be attributed to urban students. As one charter principal said, "we are still an urban school. And sometimes... there are issues... that you probably would not [see] in another place." While it is common knowledge that urban schools are situated in urban environments, Pedro Noguera (1996) highlights the disjointedness of scholarship in these areas:

Urban schools are inextricably linked to and affected by the urban environment. While this fact seems obvious and irrefutable, the connection between the urban environment and urban schools generally seems to be ignored in most discussions about school reform and improvement. (p.1)

While scholars may have built up walls between the “separate” fields of urban schooling and school reform, principals in this study perceived addressing the urban characteristics of their schools as part and parcel of reform efforts. Several principals commented on the prevalence of school violence that existed in the post-Katrina public schools:

I had one little girl run at another girl and she hit me in the process. [She] was hitting me and punching me trying to get to the other little girl that she wanted to go after. (Charter Principal)

They shouldn't have two- pieced desks. Why? Too many pieces for kids move around and throw. OK? It's going to be kind of difficult to throw a whole desk- one piece. But when you have two pieces- and the chair- shoot! And many times... it happened, they sailed across the room. Several times striking another student. (RSD Principal)

These instances were generally peripheral to our discussions of school leadership in the city, but they clearly were on the minds of principals who had experienced violence. It should be noted that the majority of principals in the study made no mention of violence, but, especially in the RSD, school violence was certainly an issue that remained on principals' minds and in the public eye post-Katrina (Ritea, 2006b). Beyond the continuation of pre-storm school violence, there was also a feeling by some principals that the new citywide schooling plans, which mixed students from various neighborhoods, may have contributed to an increase in tensions at some of the schools:

And you had the violence, the neighborhood territorial stuff that was, you know, unfortunately a part of our existence throughout the district. (RSD Principal)

While it may be that the appearance of some small charter schools creates a healthier atmosphere for students and a decrease in the impact of student violence in the future (McQuillan, in press), the number of these small schools in New Orleans, while increasing, is not sufficient at this date

to make any conclusions about their impact on the issue of violence. Another result of the movement of population after Katrina was the arrival of an increased number of Spanish-speaking students in schools that had not traditionally served this population. During one classroom observation, I noted:

I spent a lot of time with Jose, one of four Spanish speakers. He was the least proficient in English and was just sitting there, quietly doing nothing [while the rest of the class worked independently]. The teacher said he usually has an aide- but he had been absent for two days. She didn't seem to do much for him. (Field notes, 9/26/07)

In addition to student violence, principals also noted the challenges of educating students who had been held back prior to Katrina, who had missed schooling during the year following the storm, had undiagnosed learning disabilities, or otherwise were not likely to succeed in classrooms with their age-mates. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that Louisiana had implemented high-stakes testing for 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders prior to the storm. One charter principal sarcastically commented on this policy:

I got a job teaching as a 4.5 teacher, 4th graders who had failed the high-stakes test, went to summer school and failed it again, and were now sitting in front of me. With the *brilliant* concept being that the first half of the year you'd teach all of 4th grade- the second half of the year you'd teach all of 5th grade, they'd pass the high stakes test and go straight to 6th grade.

The results of this ability grouping had major impacts on schooling post-Katrina. At the elementary level, this same principal notes the impact of this policy on several of his post-Katrina 5<sup>th</sup> graders:

Lawrence\* and Mario\* are both two years too old for the grade that they are in... both still coming in at a third-grade level, even though... they should've been seventh graders. Phillip\* was a year behind in terms of age -- he had been held back once before, he probably came in at about a first grade level.  
(\*pseudonyms)

These students, while over-age, were still legally required to remain in school for several years, and New Orleans schools will have to make accommodations for the thousands of students in

their situation. A K-8 charter school principal noted similar problems in an 8<sup>th</sup> grader at his school:

dealing with a non-literate six-foot five, 280 pound boy who is a problem. And that's a problem you've got to deal with him. And we did not expel anybody. I really worked very hard to not expel... a six-foot-eight boy, I mean he's a nice kid- 16 years old and in eighth grade, and he is just not going to function. He needs something special. But when you're open admissions... you get all that stuff.

This principal pointed to testing-based admissions policies at the district-run magnet schools and some of the less-obvious screens put up by some of the charter schools in the form of behavior policies and enrollment caps. It is clearly his feeling that open-admission schools will educate a disproportionate number of these over-age students than other types of schools. For more on this tiered nature of schooling in post-Katrina New Orleans, see the section entitled *Rebuilding Inequality*.

As these over-age students move into high school, they reach the age when dropping out becomes a legal option, and this forces this high school principal in the Recovery District to take a different approach:

I even brought some of my older kids... out to Avondale [a major shipyard] last year. 'Cause I said, you know, the chance of them finishing high school in the regular way it's probably not going to work out. Because you are acting a fool around here now and you're 18 years old and you're not- I mean *come on*, some kind of way we've got to make this connection because you are not getting any younger... I can't look at you the same way I look at a 14-year-old freshman. When you are now a 16, 17-year-old freshman. I got to get you... your instinctual maturation won't keep you trapped in my high school another four years. You just gonna quit. So, and that's not going to help me, in building the city.... So looking at a 16, 17-year-old freshman, scares me in the sense that what are we doing to meet that person's needs?

The lack of community-based resources for high school aged students who are likely to drop out is of concern for this principal. While entry-level jobs in the service industry will always be available in New Orleans, this did not work well as an economic base pre-Katrina and is unlikely to work after. He mentioned programs like Café

Reconcile- which trains workers for the restaurant industry, and dual-enrollment programs with community colleges as good ideas for equipping over-age students with skills to give them some financial options. This conversation focused on what to do with these students once they reached his high school doors- realizing that there would continue to be academically weak students unless wholesale changes in educational practice took place at the lower grades.

Even in cases where there were no over-age students, the diversity of people living in the city led to a diversity of ability levels in public school classrooms. In one language immersion classroom, I noted that “there was a large discrepancy between the... 5-6 native speakers and the rest of the class of American-born students” (Field notes, 9/27/06). This large gap in student abilities, which exists in all schools serving all types of students, is certainly exacerbated when students in a single classroom run across racial and class lines. In this same school the principal told me about:

a little girl whose mom is an attorney and an instructor at Tulane Law School, her father is a physician, neurologist, and brain surgeon, and then right next to her sat a little girl whose mother was in... prison and she was living with her grandmother and no one knew where her dad was. So in that same classroom, you know, you ran the whole gamut of everyone in between. (charter school principal)

This extreme case of diversity complicates the process of meeting individual student needs in the confines of the public school classroom. And while the principal certainly took pride in the differences among her “dynamic, diverse group of kids,” the pedagogical challenges of this arrangement still remain.

### **Parent and Community Apathy**

Another aspect of pre-Katrina life that survived the floodwaters and continues to be a characteristic of schooling in New Orleans is the lack of connection between the public schools and the community. Ever since the New Orleans desegregation battles of the 1960s (Inger, 1969), there has been a continuous loss of support for the public schools as white and middle class blacks students left for the suburbs, private schools, or the few magnet schools created to stem the tide of students from the increasingly black and increasingly poor district (Bankston & Caldas, 2002). There was hope that the post-Katrina move towards charters and schools of choice would invite parents back into the system, with state board member Leslie Jacobs venturing a guess that the post-Katrina district would see a larger percentage of white students (Inskeep, 2005). This racial balancing did not happen. At some schools, however, there was an increased involvement of parents during the rebuilding process. One charter school principal described the outpouring of support after they received a new building to replace the one destroyed by the storm:

faculty, staff, parents, community members, all converged on the building and began to work and paint and scrub bathrooms, repair floors, make sure it was ready... for the kids... Parents, community volunteers came together and decided, 'let's make this work.'... so the building is where it is today because of the members who ... put work into it.

Another charter school principal felt like the rebuilding of the school was a rallying point for families and that it really pulled people together for the common good of their children:

I guess that whole sense of renewal after the storm, you know. Like 9/11, people feel a connection and start pulling together and everybody who may have not wanted to work together initially... all of that has become secondary or third and you don't even think about it. It was, 'we've got to keep the school up and running, because... it's a good place to be.'

It should be noted that both of these charter schools had large numbers of middle class parents, however, and did not struggle with a lack of parental involvement before the storm. In fact, it might be argued that the effects of Katrina were much less severe in schools that had high levels

of parental involvement because they were able to step in and help with getting the building ready, providing classroom supplies, and ensuring a predictable student enrollment. While the board-run public school system failed miserably in the post-Katrina recovery process, some schools had parental support that helped insulate them from this institutional failure. On the other hand, principals in most schools did not report the kind of parental involvement that could make up for such a catastrophic district collapse. One RSD principal noted the difference in parental involvement between charter schools and RSD (what he calls “public”) schools:

will there be some successes [with charter schools]? Of course there will be. But they’ll be in those communities where those parents... are participating in the lives of their children... the problem with public education is that parents drop the kids off at 3,4,5 years old and wanna pick ‘em up in 12 or 14, 15 years as a productive citizen. And, that just doesn’t work.

Like this one, the majority of principals in the study faced struggles getting parents involved in the school, a well-noted struggle for urban schools nationwide (Taylor, 2005). Some cited cultural differences between the school staff and the parents for the lack of involvement. Another RSD principal, one new to the district, cited institutional history as a reason for parents’ lack of involvement:

it was difficult for me to call up parents, and I *did* have to call the parents but, it was difficult for them to commit themselves to their own children’s educational program. But they weren’t used to having a principal do that. And to try to set up a meeting to deal with it, it was almost unheard of.

The continued lack of community support for public schools in New Orleans was also evident in a *Times Picayune* story about a school registration fair that attracted only 3 students and 4 parents out of the over 32,000 students attending the district (Reid, 2008a). RSD Superintendent Paul Vallas placed to blame for the low turnout on schools themselves, saying that, “We need to get the word out about these choices” (ibid). But principals acknowledged that school-community involvement is a two way street, and that many parents were not inclined to participate for a variety of reasons. The schools that were actively reaching out to parents had to

be constantly aware of the disappointments that many parents have had with the public schools, either as students themselves, or with their children pre-Katrina. A principal at a high-achieving, high-poverty charter school noted:

if you've got a kid whose family is kind of oppositional... you also can't be too judgmental of that because you have no idea what their personal experience with the previous school system was and why they are so... opposed. Or...why it's tough to sell them on what we are doing. (Charter principal)

This awareness and sensitivity to the past experiences of parents seems like wise advice in a district where so many students are attending new schools. Relationships with parents were described in negative terms as often as in positive ones.

Another facet of community apathy was a general perception on the part of principals that public school families did not value education. While this is in contrast to a strong tradition in the Africa-American community of viewing education as a priority (Allen-Haynes, St. John, & Cadray, 2005), many principals sensed a lack of commitment to education from their families.

One charter-school principal recounted an exchange with one of his parents:

there was an incident a couple weeks ago... the parent encouraging -- encouraging him to *skip* school and I am trying to get him in.

Similarly, an RSD principal explained that in his school community, the “value of education is like lettuce... you get very little or nothing out of it.” That same principal later said in a separate interview that “education is not a priority here... education in the ‘hood is not a priority.” And while it seems possible that parents and educators simply had different visions of the type of education their children needed, or that principals based their opinions on a small number of negative parent interactions, there was a definite lack of common ground here. This adversarial relationship between parents and schools certainly inhibits meaningful school change.

Apathy also existed among the educational elites who were now in the limelight of a nationally significant reform project, but generally pessimistic from years of failed efforts. One charter school principal discussed the public reaction to the lofty goals for his new school:



almost everybody looked at me and just said, ‘not here, not New Orleans. Eighth-grade, 100% proficient and advanced’... That's what we'll do here. And people are looking at me flat in the face- people who are... self-proclaimed reformists-education people, saying ‘well that's not New Orleans. You don't know anymore.’

One would be hard pressed to successfully reform an urban school system that doesn't have the support of the community which pays its bills. It seems that despite islands of success, most of which existed pre-Katrina, most public school principals in New Orleans have yet to establish healthy relationships with parents and much of the community. One notable exception here is the outpouring of charitable gifts to schools following Katrina. Schools were eager to develop relationships with donors, and this may be an opening into developing more and stronger relationships with other external groups, including parents. For more on the new types of relationships schools are forming with external organizations, see the section entitled *New Relationships with the External Environment*.

### **Teacher Quality**

A final area in which leaders perceived pre-Katrina problems impacting post-Katrina education is the area of teacher quality. While it is not my intention to define teacher quality here, participants described a pre-Katrina district that suffered from teacher quality problems at a level that could be considered severe. Many schools suffered from annual turnover rates in excess of 30% and large numbers of young teachers left the district within the first five years of their career. This rotation meant there was a constant need for teachers in the district, and hiring standards were lowered in an attempt to fill every classroom. Large numbers of uncertified teachers taught in classrooms with only a bachelor's degree- but no certification. And with the teacher's union bargaining agreement in place, firing poor teachers was challenging. This left poor teachers in the system, only to be sent from school to school through the transfer process.

One principal, a former central office employee, described how weaker teachers ended up at the poorest schools:

you do have a higher number of less competent teachers in schools like that because when they get into trouble somewhere else for not doing what they're supposed to do or just not being a good teacher, then the district would send them to those schools where they saw that the standards were not as high and nobody wanted to work there, so the principal wanted just somebody to take the class.

So without regard to the quality of their work, weak teachers would not only stay in the system for years, but they would congregate in schools with the neediest students, making the prospect of reform for the neediest students even harder to contemplate.

In the post-Katrina system, some schools were able to bring back the staff that had previously been together. The two highest performing schools in my sample were able to do this since they converted from public schools to charter schools and were able to handle staffing on their own during rebuilding. The other 6 schools in the study had to create new staffs during a time when many experienced teachers had left the city. These principals faced a difficult process, perhaps even worse than the centralized staffing process that existed pre-Katrina. One RSD principal was constantly hiring staff from August until February because of continuously increasing enrollments. When talking about teacher quality, he said, "I've had to virtually hire whoever came through the door. [I] didn't have much time." Several principals commented that Katrina led to such a high demand for teachers that people who never would have been considered for a job pre-Katrina were snatched up in the rush to open schools and meet the demands of a returning student population.

Once teachers were hired and began teaching, principals were not always enthused with what they saw. One RSD Principal describes the frustration when a new hire began performing poorly in the classroom:

The lady who's in charge of the English department said, 'I think we've got a winner, I think we've got a winner.' I said 'OK, Let's hire her.' Man, the day she set her foot in that classroom, was the last day- the first and last day I saw any

kind of learning or teaching happening. And after a couple months of listening to this rhetoric and putting kids out of the classroom, I told her, 'you really do well, but your skills as a teacher is lousy. And here's what I mean,' I listed all these different kinds of things.

This comment was backed up by some of the classroom observations that were conducted as part of this study. The field note excerpts shown below (taken from a high-performing and a low-performing school) show a low level of student engagement and very teacher-centered classroom:

This 7th grade social studies class was doing a "book tour" activity answering 10 questions that made them familiarize themselves with the table of contents, index, maps, glossary, etc. They had started it the day before and it should have taken about 15 minutes- but she let them work on it almost the whole 60 minute period. Some kids were done in 5 minutes. (Field notes, 9/26/07)

In the preceding case, I had asked the principal to take me to an "average" classroom, and he took me to this one in which there was no egregious student misbehavior, but obviously low expectations for student achievement. Another teacher in this same RSD school had assigned a research report to his computer literacy class:

He paid lip-service to using their own words [not plagiarizing], but didn't cover citing sources or any sort of process writing. He kept walking out of the room to get a drink, talk to the custodian, etc. Mostly kids looking at pictures and copying and pasting text. (Field notes, 9/26/07)

In French immersion classrooms in two different high-achieving schools, my field notes read that the students "were busy copying sentences in their notebooks" (Field notes, 9/26/06) and "the teacher did a lot of snapping her fingers for attention and picking kids heads up off of their desks... I got bored." (Field notes, 9/27/07). Ironically, these two teachers were in some of the highest scoring schools in the city, an indication that a student-centered pedagogical approach may not have been the reason for their high test scores. While I entered the classrooms with little context, my experiences as an urban classroom teacher told me that there were still low expectations for student achievement in some classrooms.

This problem of teaching quality is still an ongoing challenge in many urban districts (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999; Peske & Haycock, 2006), so it should not be any surprise that the New

Orleans Public Schools failed to solve it in the first year of operations post-Katrina. Attracting and retaining excellent teachers may be the single biggest challenge held over from pre-Katrina days. Stop-gap measures such as the Teach for America program and The New Teacher Project have provided some high quality new teachers for public school classrooms, and their presence has grown and this trend is likely to continue with increased foundation funding in the wake of Katrina (Simon, 2007c). Principals expressed concern, however, about the short-tenures of many of these non-traditional teachers. While praising their high ability and hard work, their contribution to high faculty turnover was seen as a liability.

Clearly, principals have noticed that some of the problems of pre-Katrina schooling in New Orleans have continued to exist in the new school system. While the organizational structure of the new district has been radically altered, the pre-existing conditions of student violence, academically struggling students, poor parental involvement, community apathy, and low teacher quality are still problems to be addressed. I should stress here that this does not mean that the schools have not changed, in fact they have changed more in the last two years than at any point since desegregation. But the conclusion to be drawn here is that while governance changes have shaken up the system, and allowed a greater diversity of schools and more choice for parents, the old problems of urban education continue to exist. They are not challenges that can be legislated away (Fullan, 1993) but are long-term undertakings that require purposeful, steady work by educators and those concerned with the improvement of schooling in New Orleans. For the public or the district's various administrators to expect organizational changes to lead to immediate improvement on test scores or other outcome measures is setting everyone up for failure.

## Rebuilding Inequality

In his 1956 opinion in a New Orleans school desegregation case, Judge J. Skelly Wright, himself a former New Orleans Public School teacher, echoed the words of *Brown* in writing that the Orleans Parish School Board members:

...are hereby restrained and enjoined from requiring and permitting segregation of the races in any school under their supervision, from and after such time as may be necessary to make arrangements for admission of children to such schools on a racially nondiscriminatory basis with all deliberate speed... (Bush v. Orleans Parish School Bd., 1956)

While this decision was met with inaction, and outright defiance, by many political factions within the city of New Orleans as well as the segregationist governor (Inger, 1969), it marked some federal acknowledgement that the public schools had a natural tendency towards inequality, and it would take targeted and “deliberate” actions if racial segregation was to be eliminated. While the New Orleans public schools currently are in a situation of *de facto* racial segregation as opposed to *de jure* segregation, there has never been a time when inequality was not a part of the system.

Today, over fifty years later, a charter school principal, speaking of her pre-Katrina experiences in the district, recalled the 34 students crammed into classrooms in her 9<sup>th</sup> Ward elementary school, whereas the wealthier public schools uptown had classes of 24. Another charter school principal, recalling his teaching days, noted that even the most talented students in his high-poverty elementary school couldn’t gain admission to the magnet middle schools, which took many students from private elementary schools or the few selective admissions public elementary schools. One RSD principal in the study had trouble pre-Katrina getting talented students to attend his open-enrollment high school:

The biggest problem is that the best kids... try to go to a magnet school. My job... is to make this place so attractive for this community that regardless of whether they tag a magnet title on me or just a regular old community school... they *want* to come here.

This type of inequality certainly exists post-Katrina as well. The spring 2007 testing results for fifth graders show that the highest performing public elementary school in the parish had 92% of their students scoring at or above the basic level in math and 94% scoring at the same level in language arts (Louisiana Department of Education, 2007). On the opposite end of the spectrum, the lowest performing public school had 5% of its 5<sup>th</sup> graders score at or above basic and *zero* students reaching the basic level on the math exam. That is a 90% difference. And this was common. Other grade-levels had intra-district differences between the highest scoring and lowest scoring schools of 85%, 90%, and 95%. These bottom dwelling schools were not special schools for delinquent students or students with cognitive disabilities, they were simply “regular” New Orleans Public Schools where the students were poor, the teaching and facilities inadequate, and the resources available for instruction a fraction of what they were in the wealthier and whiter schools in other parts of town.

Clearly there is educational inequality in the post-Katrina schools system as well. Given that inequality is a problem in the system that survived Katrina’s floodwaters, why wasn’t this discussion included in the previous section on the continued existence of pre-Katrina problems? There are two reasons I have decided to discuss the issue of inequality separately. One, it is not a problem which can be addressed by a single school working alone, unlike most of the issues described previously. Two, it may be a far more important problem that the issues of teacher quality, community apathy, and at-risk students tended to clump together at the poorest performing schools. These issues were likely to be mentioned repeatedly by the *same* principals, particularly those in the Recovery School District, whereas other principals had only minor issues related to one of these. Some principals spent all of their time dealing with these troubling issues, while some spent hardly any. The glimpse into the inequality as experienced by principals that follows illustrates this idea.

It was almost immediately acknowledged by participants that the RSD, consisting of the failing schools that were taken over by the state, would become “the district of last resort” for students returning to the city. Participating principals were unanimous in their condemnation of the RSD. One of their own principals said plainly, “we’re the lowest layer of schools” in the city. One charter school principal, whose school has a large number of middle-class students, recalled a discussion she had had with a parent:

You are familiar with RSD? The Recovery School District. You are not going to get the services that are available here [in our charter school].

Another charter school principal described the efforts he made to fight the growing gaps in quality between the charter schools and the RSD schools:

I think the system is kinda... screwed up. You got a three tier structure. You’ve got the charter schools, you got your Orleans Parish schools, and you got your Recovery schools... Recovery schools were the dumping ground- for everybody. OK. And I didn’t want a dumping ground in the public schools... Now the Recovery school... there was nothing goin’ on there.

The few remaining schools under the control of the school board were those magnet schools that had selective admissions policies and made no secret that they were selecting the top students for their schools. So the fact that these Orleans Parish schools reside at the top of any list of test scores is not surprising. What was interesting, to some, was that the performance of open-access charter schools surpassed that of the open-access Recovery District Schools in most cases (Simon, 2007b). Most of these schools were not able to use selective admissions, but the charters seemed to produce better results. Some charters put together strong staffs and worked incredibly hard to achieve remarkable results with their students. But it also became apparent, from talking to both charter and non-charter principals, that charter schools had a number of advantages over RSD schools, some of which could certainly be understood to screen-out the transient, the poor, and the special needs student. An examination of some of these hidden screens shows how inequality has begun to reconstitute itself in the New Orleans Public Schools.

### **“Selective” Charter Schools**

Principals held various explanations for the success of the charter schools. Some of them had to do with subtle, but legal, ways in which charters might screen out difficult students.

Charter school principals themselves talked about certain policies that were meant to improve the quality of their school, but could also have the effect of selecting only stronger students for their schools. For example, one charter school discussed their policy for not re-admitting students who had been suspended three times over the previous school year:

I'll tell you, there were a handful of children who had that third suspension, which disqualified them from re-registering, that we documented and parents informed, and had their signature saying they understand that, and that has made an incredible difference... the three children who aren't here because of that. The silent ring leaders.

While couched in a discussion on effective discipline at the school, there was little discussion about the fate of these three students with behavior problems. And while there certainly is a case to be made for removing students from one school to another when poor behavior is impeding learning, these students legally had to be educated somewhere. This establishes a flow of challenging students out of the charter schools and into other schools. Since most charters and all Orleans Parish schools had waiting lists, these expelled students were certainly to be enrolled at one of the categorically inferior Recovery District schools for the 07-08 school year.

Another advantage that charter schools had was that they were able to limit class sizes to ratios that they had written into their charter. RSD schools were forced to continuously enroll students returning from their Katrina evacuations, which caused overcrowded classrooms and worsened the teacher shortage. While charters were able to keep their classes to pre-specified sizes and then stop enrolling new students, RSD schools faced large numbers of new students. An examination of enrollment figures published by the Times Picayune (*School by school*



*enrollments, 2006; Schooling the poor, 2006*) shows that while the student population in the charter schools increased 6.5% between September and November 2006, the Recovery School District population increased a whopping 68.3% over the same period. Their ability to focus on improving instruction certainly would be impeded by such growth in midyear. For information on the impact of massive student influx in the Baton Rouge schools, see Sulentic-Dowell (in press). One RSD principal recounted this population surge in the early days of the 2006-07 school year:

In the beginning we had 50-60 people in the class... we started registering 40-50 kids a day. For like the whole month of October. We got to 450 kids... in a 2 week period of time. But the problem, I was only allowed to staff for two to three hundred. So, everyday, somebody came through the door with a warm body, you got a job.

It is easy to see here the connection between increasing enrollments and teaching quality. As population returned, more and more students enrolled, and the picked-over teacher pool was tapped into because principals had to have a teacher for every new classroom. Hence, the problems of over-enrollment and poor teaching quality began to clump together at the same schools. Another RSD principal, while recognizing the need to enroll all students in school, lamented the impact these new students had on teacher-to-student ratios in his classrooms:

mid-year, the community discovered that there were 300 people on the [district's] waiting list, and so once it reached the media... there was a huge outcry, saying we can't do this to children- so the superintendent pushed them all in. So that was a force that REALLY impacted us greatly. Class sizes steadily ballooned.

This same principal placed the blame for this situation squarely on the charter schools and the magnet schools that capped their enrollments:

the charters are trying to look good, so they keep their class sizes small, NOPS is doing the same thing, keep class sizes small and push out kids down to us. And if they wouldn't overcrowd us, I'd say, 'give 'em to us.' You know, the superintendent had a vision of 20 kids per classroom. With a great support staff. We've got a good support staff, but we've got classrooms way bigger than 20... 32 in one case.

With a student-admissions system that clearly favored charter schools over RSD schools, one can begin to see how inequality begins to re-constitute itself after Katrina. There was no

single entity controlling the system, instead it was a patchwork of individual schools operating in their own best interests. And while it is natural for schools to operate in this manner, what happens when there are inherent inequalities built into the system in terms of student socioeconomic status, class size, and teacher experience? We get an ominously Darwinian system sure to leave some schools, and many students, on the brink of “extinction.” With the state-constitution mandating public schooling for all children, and state charter school laws enabling those schools to limit enrollments, the end result appears to be the creation of a sub-class of schools facing many more challenges than other schools. What New Orleans needs to fight this trend towards inequality are system leaders (Hopkins, 2007) who will walk the fine line between the betterment of their own school, as well as the schools across the city (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). This is clearly a monumental challenge when the work of improving even a single school takes a Herculean effort. A helpful insight offered by Hopkins (2007) is that we must view the problems faced by struggling schools as problems with uncertain solutions, problems that can be best addressed collaboratively rather than competitively. This type of thinking, coupled with communication between educators, may foster better solutions for individual schools as well as keep some schools from falling behind.

### **Language Immersion**

Another practice that, on the surface, provides choice for parents in the district but also serves unwittingly to screen out some students was the use of language immersion programs. Three of the high-performing charter schools engaged in this study had at least part of their school run in such a manner, where all subjects (history, science, math, etc.) were taught in a foreign language. While providing an excellent opportunity for students to begin mastering a foreign language at an early age, and attracting some middle class families back to the district,

this approach also served unwittingly to keep out some students. As one charter principal noted, “you can’t start French [immersion] in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, you gotta start in kindergarten.” All three of these schools have all or part of their school set up as an immersion program, and outside of kindergarten and first grade, they would not accept students into this program without the requisite French or Spanish background to learn in an immersion classroom. While this is certainly a sensible student placement policy, it also has the unintended effect (Fink, 2003) of putting up barriers to families, most often the poorest, who were late in returning to the city and found huge waiting lists at these desirable schools. There is also an admissions bias towards students with prior language abilities. Two programs offer only French immersion and one offers both French and Spanish immersion. The majority of the district is populated with poor, African-American students unlikely to have the requisite language experience to enter these schools at any grade other than kindergarten. While these principals made strong claims about their concern for the poorer students in New Orleans (“I want the RSD to succeed”), they also recognized the advantages of having smaller numbers of poorer students and kept their language immersion policies in place, drawing more middle-class parents to their doors.

Of course the argument could be made that many of the students in these programs would have attended private schools had there been no space available in an immersion program, thus they aren’t really creaming the top students from other public schools. This is certainly true in some cases, but the fact remains that many poor, African-American families in New Orleans cannot enroll their children in these high-performing schools due to waiting lists full of well-connected middle class parents and language requirements for entering at the higher grades.

## Special Education

Based on a report showing glaring discrepancies in special education populations between many charters and RSD schools (Ritea, 2007b), the charters were also accused of passing special-needs students on to the Recovery District. The report showed that charter schools in the East Bank section of the city reported that 4.5% of their student body was classified with special needs, while the RSD schools reported 7.3% of their students with special needs. Similarly, half of these charter schools had special education populations under 5%, while only 10% of RSD schools met that mark. Regardless of the cause, there did appear to be some worrying discrepancies. Speaking with the principals shed some light on the matter. One of the charter principals was quoted by the *Times Picayune* as saying:

We did have a parent who came in and she has a child with autism, and I did speak personally with this lady and I told her we did not have an autistic class on the site and we did not have a teacher for autism, and I told her to please fill out an application for next year. I directed her to the [Recovery District]. When you don't have that teacher and that class set up and we're in February or March, I believe it would be a disservice to the child to bring them in a classroom and then not have a teacher who could serve the needs of that child. (Rita, 2007b, np)

While most of the charter schools in this study employed special education teachers, the majority of them used an inclusion model of special education, in which special educators support students as they spend the majority of the school day in a classroom with the general population. While this is certainly an appropriate placement for many students, those whose disabilities make spending a full day in a regular classroom difficult might feel subtly pressured to enroll elsewhere. Another report published by the *Times Picayune* (Carr, 2008) told of the mother of an autistic child who decided to home-school her son after being turned away from a number of schools during the 2006-2007 school year, some of them charters. She was angered at getting the runaround from several public schools:

I know that my son has the right to a 'free and appropriate public education.' How are these schools allowed to continue to discriminate? Don't they receive federal and state funding? (ibid)

While there is no doubt that charters are not the only schools struggling to build up their special education programs after Katrina, the limited oversight, limited finances, and enrollment caps in place in the charter schools has, at the very least, created a *perception* and some circumstantial evidence that they are not opening their doors to all of New Orleans' students. This inequitable distribution of special education students further underscores the reemergence of inequality in the post-Katrina system. I will clarify the notions of *equality* and *inequality* here as it applies to urban schools. I do not take equality to mean that every student at every school receives the same curriculum and the same pedagogical approach. I do not equate equality with standardization. Students in New Orleans, as in any district, learn in a variety of ways and good schools adapt their practices to meet the needs of individual students. High school students who want to learn carpentry should be allowed to attend a special school where these skills are taught. One elementary school might justifiably use a thematic curriculum and another use a traditional subject-based curriculum if both were found useful. The type of inequality that I point to here is when historically disadvantaged groups (the poor, racial minorities, students with disabilities, etc.) are found in high concentrations at poor performing schools (potentially measured by test scores, teacher experience, suspension/expulsion rates, and community support, etc.). This specific union of historically disadvantaged groups and low-performing schools is the lynchpin of our educational system's ability to shirk its duty to educate all students well and is a central front in the battle for educational equity in post-Katrina New Orleans. What the data show here, however, is a pernicious tendency for students from disadvantaged groups to congregate at poor performing schools. With citywide enrollment patterns and an espoused commitment to student choice, certain groups of students are still found in higher concentrations at some schools rather than others. There are structural aspects of the way we build our urban schools systems that foster

this inequality, and school leaders and external reformers alike should be sensitive to this tendency of our schools in order to minimize the negative impacts such inequality can have.

### **Selective Marketing**

The accusations regarding special education are just part of a larger perception that some schools are targeting certain types of students and marketing themselves accordingly- essentially creating public schools that are meant to serve only certain students:

I am not really a huge proponent of charter schools, or any schools that are going to just hand-pick children or push children out if they are not- if they are not performing up to standards, or if they don't fit the mold that they want. (RSD Principal)

While most charters in the city, and all charters in this study do not have testing-based admissions policies, this perception of charter schools engaging in “selective marketing” certainly has some grains of truth in it. The principals of one high-achieving charter school spoke about specifically wanting to serve the families from the school’s predominantly middle-class pre-Katrina neighborhood:

we had our initial meetings... to work on and a [national] accreditation. ‘Cause that’s a big thing with all these young little yuppie... moms and stuff, I want to track my neighborhood in. I want to say... there are only three... accredited preschools in town.

Framing this undertaking as a way to serve the school community is certainly valid, but there is also the unintended effect of creating a middle class school walled off from its predominantly poor district. Interestingly, another charter principal spoke about specifically trying to recruit poor students, and having to avoid parents who called asking about enrollment because of the threat of a selection effect:

if anyone ever asked me the question, ‘hey are you guys [enrolling]?’ they end up being selective because you end up with the kids where the parents are least a

little bit involved. My answer was always a flat-out, “no” I was like no I am tracking these kids down... I am fighting to find any kid I can find.

Clearly some charter schools are targeting the types of students they would like to serve.

While the instances of targeting high-income students or students without disabilities are certainly harmful, it also raises a larger question. Is a city school district better-off having many traditional public schools, each hoping to meet the diverse needs of neighborhood students? Or can targeted, thematic schools which draw students from across the city be an equitable alternative? Such a “thematic schools” program is also underway in the Pittsburgh Public Schools (Smydo, 2008).

While the word *inequality* has acquired a negative connotation when used in the context of urban schooling, it can also mean doggedly treating all types of learners the same, neglecting individual differences. The benefits of a more personalized education must be weighed against the threat of denying traditionally marginalized groups access to first-rate schooling. This is a question pertaining not only to successful school reform, but the purposes of public schooling and the beliefs we hold about human development. These issues cannot be settled here, I will only add that principals and district leaders in New Orleans will need to examine this issue further if they are to avoid some of the pitfalls of creating boutique schools as a school reform strategy.

### **RSD Bureaucracy**

In addition to the actions of the charter schools that tend to foster inequality in the system, there were also some roadblocks that RSD schools created all for themselves. Principals expressed great concern about their inability to function smoothly due to the RSD bureaucracy. RSD schools struggled with purchasing, hiring, and curriculum, all critical areas for a newly opening school. The oft-cited notion of charter schools being much more nimble and flexible was seen as a tremendous advantage to this RSD principal:

I think charters have an advantage over us, they can be very creative, spontaneously almost... Where as we wait and we wait and we talk to a district official and it has to go through all kinds of... chains of command there. (RSD Principal)

There was a general feeling among principals that the RSD was simply recreating the failed bureaucracy of the past, and impeding real improvement. One RSD principal noted that “the bureaucracy of our state has still not gotten out of the way and let us be principals.” With the implication that principals are individuals who can creatively adapt to meet local needs. This bureaucracy was seen as especially harmful when it did get in the way of meeting perceived student needs:

I didn't understand how much of bureaucracy, and paper trail, paperwork, that's required. It pulls people away from doing just the right thing with the kids. That's disappointing... You want to take a group of kids, you want to do the right thing for them, but oh you can't do that because of this, this law or that law, you have to do this. (RSD Principal)

A specific example of dealing with this bureaucracy is given by another RSD principal:

it seemed from time to time that they were putting more roadblocks...if I wanted to order some chalk... we had to write a requisition, it had to go to Baton Rouge, whenever somebody in Baton Rouge got around to it, they would process it so that the turnaround time normally took 6-8 weeks... The state was not equipped to do this in an efficient manner.

This problem with getting supplies spiraled out of control until, as the *Times Picayune* reported, RSD Superintendent Robin Jarvis met with state legislators to streamline the purchasing process in February 2007 (Scott, 2007). Jarvis eventually resigned from her post after one year, citing fatigue and family concerns (Ritea & Simon, 2007a).

Another area where principals perceived that the RSD bureaucracy hampered school improvement was in the area of curriculum and professional development. Principals in the RSD were required to convene their faculty several hours a week (before or after school) for RSD-mandated professional development sessions. One principal felt overwhelmed with too many improvement projects:



at one point in time I just made an executive decision that nothing is going to change until we simply concentrate on 2 or 3 things,

This is a classic example of “innovation overload” (Fullan, 2001b) or “projectitis” (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow & Easton, 1998) in which too many reform ideas work against each other, minimizing the net effect. In addition to mandated, externally-selected professional development (which is in direct contrast to many popular models of professional development- McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002), the RSD had notable problems in selecting appropriate textbooks for their schools, as one RSD high school principal recalled:

makin’ sure we had appropriate educational supplies for the kids that were coming... in some instances that was a nightmare because somebody who had... no experience doing the job ordered the textbooks and the supplies... The principal didn’t have anything to do with it until after it got in the building... They ordered textbooks for courses we weren’t even teaching and had probably never taught in our high school system...

And even when schools did receive the right textbooks, RSD teachers struggled with mastering new curriculum materials in the few days they had between being hired and welcoming students for the new school year.

It is clear that these feelings of living in an unresponsive bureaucracy existed pre-Katrina, making the strong negative reactions people had to the poor functioning of the RSD bureaucracy somewhat surprising. One RSD principal expressed that the students were being lost in the institution of school, the one place where they should have been the center of attention:

We lost the focus on students being the number one priority. We say it in our pedagogy and what we are supposed to do, but when we make policy and we make decisions, very few times is the student at the center of it. It’s more politics and money. And unfortunately, that’s where we’re at...

A possible explanation for this obvious discouragement is the proximity of a large number of charter schools that were generally free from the far-reaching tentacles of bureaucracy. Whereas before, all public schools were dealing with the same bureaucracy, now there were some schools who had gained independence, and like a series of

oppressed colonies clamoring for autonomy, the idea of freedom from external rule was tantalizing. An RSD principal describes a conversation he had:

I talked just this weekend with the principal at one of the charter schools. And his little school is sailing right along. And so when we share- I mean the obstacles that I have are truly hindrances for accomplishing things... I can see where those schools will be successful for the children that they select.

Perhaps such cross-pollination will be enough to create an urgency on the part of the RSD principals to clamor for increased school-level autonomy. Principals seem to want such a system, and they have a number of bad experiences working in schools where the system, not the student, is the priority. See the section entitled *Not Traditional Middlemen* in Chapter 5 for more on principals' struggles to make the system more responsive.

The re-establishment of unequal schooling in post-Katrina New Orleans, in spite of the legal progress of the 1950s, the Great Society movement of the 1960s, and the race-cognizant accountability practices of today, may be the most thought-provoking aspect of this study. Most charter schools do not use selective admissions, the Recovery District gave large relocation and retention bonuses to teachers who fulfilled their contracts, and the long-bemoaned teachers union was crippled after Katrina voided their bargaining agreement. Yet still inequality persists. As evidence mounts, it seems appropriate to call such a tendency towards inequality a *strange attractor* of urban school systems. Recognizing and confronting this natural tendency of urban schools may be an important first step to designing systems that can counteract this potentially harmful force.

While Katrina impacted all the principals in this study, there is clear evidence that some have bounced back much more rapidly than others and some have been only inconvenienced by the storm. Utilizing the concept from Chaos Theory, one might say that the district acted as a dissipative structure after Katrina, allowing the system to breakdown and organize at a more complex level, a level better suited to the environment. It adapted to this complex urban

environment by re-emerging from that storm as a system with many more types of schools. For the system, this may have been a move in the interests of self-preservation. But while the system may be in a stronger position relative to its environment, what is to become of those schools and students that were not part of this transformation to charter schooling? That is the central problem of applying natural science concepts to social science. In a purely Darwinian model, both the poor residents and the schools that are poor performers would become extinct. This is not what we wish to see happen. We want the poor to become un-poor and the failing schools to be successful ones. Not only do we not want nature to take its course, we want it to reverse itself- which is certainly grounds for a hefty struggle.

The words that Judge Skelly wrote in 1956 have a haunting resonance to those working for improved schools today in post-Katrina New Orleans:

The problems attendant desegregation in the deep South are considerably more serious than generally appreciated in some sections of our country. The problem of changing a people's mores, particularly those with an emotional overlay, is not to be taken lightly. It is a problem which will require the utmost patience, understanding, generosity and forbearance from all of us, of whatever race. (Bush v. Orleans Parish School Bd., 1956)

### **New Relationships with the External Environment**

Principals in the post-Katrina New Orleans Public Schools spoke at length about a variety of new relationships with the external environment. This is partly due to the lack of a centralized bureaucracy which, for better or worse, had a large influence over most schools before the storm. Most principals in this study viewed the pre-Katrina district leadership negatively, as this charter school principal did:

for the last four years [pre-Katrina], I felt the central administration of the school system was just not doing their job. It was too top heavy. Extremely top-heavy.

Complaints were heard regarding the fact that the school board maintained a staff of over 50 employees while all teachers had been fired and there were no functioning schools immediately after Katrina. The explosion of charter schools and the state takeover left the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) with direct control of only five schools, down from 117 (Ritea, 2005b). This created a “relationship vacuum” in which charter schools, and to a lesser degree, RSD and the five OPSB schools, had to find supports for things ranging from extra-curricular activities to payroll processing and from curriculum to personnel. While forming relationships with outside organizations is a central facet of school improvement under a systems paradigm (Fullan, 2000b; Morrison, 2002), some principals had more experience with this than others. The principals in this study formed connections with external organizations that can be classified as charitable relationships, technical support relationships, and feedback relationships. An examination of principals’ varied experiences with external organizations follows.

### **Charitable relationships**

In the aftermath of Katrina, charitable private donations poured into the region, making up for the relative lack of federal and state emergency preparedness (Buras, 2007). Nationally, donations to the American Red Cross increased 129% in the year after the storm (Annual Report, 2006) Schools received much of this attention, with some groups sending funds from a distance and others making the trip to New Orleans to lend a hand in reconstruction. One charter school principal tells the story of being adopted by a middle school in suburban Chicago:

They found us on the Internet and they adopted us... She contacted [us] last year and we have this ongoing, *to this day*, relationship with them. She got her friend to spend their entire spring break at our [school] teaching art classes...her sister sent this like \$1500 donation, for faculty -- you know, to treat them for something... at the end of the school year I took the money and I treated everybody to Ralph's on the Park, which is one of the Brennan's restaurants.

This charitable relationship was formed out of the blue, a result of a blind Internet search in Chicago, and the charter school has received both financial and extra-curricular supports from their new friends in Chicago. One of the language immersion school principals in the study reported that even as the school board was telling her to keep the school closed, she was preparing to accept a financial gift from overseas:

I had the French government calling saying... 'we are prepared- let us know what damages you suffered and we are prepared, \$50,000 off the top to get you back up and running.'

While the French gift was purely financial, another charter principal explained the financial and public relations support her school received from the Green Cross, an international environmental group:

October 5<sup>th</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev is coming to visit our school. He is in the Green Cross and he works with Global Green, and we... are going to receive a grant to be a green seed school and the Global Green people have been checking out schools- Right now they're just going to replace our windows and make them more energy-efficient. But that's nothing to sniff at. So we'll take that... it's going to be... on CNN. We are going to get a lot of press.

Additionally, many of the schools received brand new playground equipment from the KaBoom organization, a big event for several principals:

I'm very proud of the fact that we just got a new KaBoom playground... We were one of the six and actually they kicked off the whole thing from our site. So Fannie Mae, the CEO, and the CEO from KaBoom, they spent the morning with us here and so- we just had a ball. (Charter Principal)

Schools also received resources from individuals throughout the country, from foundations, from educational publishers, and from the more traditional grant-based programs that had previously been centered at the district level, but were often now pursued at the school level. These gifts were appreciated both for their impact on school operations as well as symbols of support from the outside world that were significant to principals when Katrina began to leave the national headlines and the challenges schools faced seemed overwhelming:

one of the things that surprised me from the beginning, and continues to surprise me, is the generosity of people all around this country who have never seen us, never heard, you know, they've never met us- not from here. So many people willing to help- and that's a wonderful feeling. (Charter principal)

These charitable relationships that blossomed in the post-Katrina period were mostly one-way relationships, with the New Orleans schools receiving resources and the other party providing them. There was little meaningful interaction, or two-way communication in these cases.

### **Technical Support Relationships**

Principals also described forming relationships with groups that could support the school's functioning in terms of curriculum support, counseling services, extra-curricular activities, and services for students with special needs. These groups provided more than just resources, they provided people who added to the educational offerings of the school. One RSD principal referred to a partnership with New Leaders for New Schools, and looked forward to the building of that relationship:

I think that they are going to place- on this campus next year ... an administrative intern...I think they are going to put eight interns in eight schools, and I think one might be placed at the site. In which case, that would be a big help to try to get some more creative things going.

This increase in staff is seen as a good way to enable the school to achieve the principal's goal of instituting more "creative things" at the school. Another RSD principal recalled a meeting he had with a judge in the juvenile court system about how best to deal with his students who were appearing in the courtroom, an attempt to improve the school's success with struggling students. In terms of curriculum support, a charter school principal invited the educational staff from a nearby NASA facility to visit the school for "Space Day" and raved that despite the hard work and planning, it was a wonderful opportunity for the kids:

It was moon walking... things like that. They did mission control, they did odyssey... flight simulators, rocket propelled jets, water propelled jets... they had a real jet there. I mean one of those small little jets... And they had space food, space toilet. They had all this- and they loved it... all we got were raves from NASA,

Two of the eight schools in the study (both charters) were in negotiations with both the New Orleans Public Library and the New Orleans Recreation Department to create new libraries and recreation centers in collaboration with the schools. One of these schools had even loftier goals in terms of community services:

Well I have four... buildings... that I don't want to use as classrooms. They are portables... I want to put a mental health unit in one of them, and the medical doctor in another one, social worker in another one, and a dentist in another one. That's what I envision for the community... then we still have the fitness center right across from the area. Then the public library...

This type of community-based schooling was much more challenging pre-Katrina because principals had to navigate the public school bureaucracy to get permission for all of these relationships. Principals interested in this type of a school are having a much easier time moving forward under the new, flatter, system. Not all of these external relationships were completely successful, however, an RSD principal felt frustrated with the outsourced maintenance contract the district had entered into:

Maintenance is an ongoing problem. We call and call and call to try and get things repaired. They've contracted out Sodexo. We rarely see them here.

This contractual relationship with Sodexo appeared to be a strained one for some schools. One principal, whose office doorknob was kicked-in during looting, waited eight months for them to appear with a replacement.

Some of these technical support relationships were not contractually-based, but were much more serendipitous- as this RSD principal explained:

In public schools, social workers and counselors are saddled with so much busywork tasks, that they really can't spend time that they meet with students. And the number of students who are needy...they're so great that two people we have can't possibly keep up with it. So, I mean, I do anything I can. [goes over to

his desk] ... I saw this in the newspaper. [hands me a clipping offering psychological services offered by Tulane University] So, I called Tulane. And I said, 'I wanna support this, I want it for our kids. So, can I send this information out to all our children and encourage them to take advantage of it?' 'Oh, absolutely' and they gave me little brochures.

It does appear that creating external relationships is indeed easier with a flat organizational structure, but forming new bonds is still not a trivial undertaking. Principals now have to reach out into the world a bit more than they did under the old administration, and this takes time and effort that takes away from working with teachers and tending to classroom instruction. Once principals adjust to this new role, it seems plausible that these tentative first steps will result in some solid, long-term relationships for the benefit of New Orleans' public schools.

### **Feedback Relationships**

The relationships discussed thus far, however, are only providing specified services, and not engaging holistically with the functioning of the school. Because there is little chance that these outside organizations will question the practices of the schools, it makes sense to call these charitable relationships and technical support relationships *low-risk* relationships. As they are set up, there is minimal risk that the relationship will upset the current mindset or the current trajectory of the school. While they often were viewed positively by the principals involved, they are not likely to help the schools move towards sustainable improvement. At best, these relationships might provide information about progress toward pre-defined goals- Argyris and Schon's (1978) single loop learning, but it is unlikely they would give information about the appropriateness of these goals in the school's ecological context (double-loop learning). In a systems sense, these relationships do not provide feedback to principals about the core processes of teaching



and learning. In the complexity paradigm, schools *must* take feedback from the environment in order to gauge expectations, and to adjust their functioning accordingly. This can result in negative feedback which provides information about a school's progress towards its goals, or positive feedback, which gives information about the appropriateness of a school's goals. Without both types of feedback, schools might cheerily check-off items on their to-do lists, without realizing that important items aren't even being considered.

Given the importance of feedback relationships to a healthy system, the relative lack of them presented here is a bit troubling. As relationships go, low-risk relationships are more of the passionate one-night-stand variety as opposed to the productive give and take of a long-term relationship. If urban schools are to co-evolve with their environments, then they will need to fight against this tendency. It seems reasonable to call this tendency the strange attractor of *low-risk relationships*. These are relationships in which schools interface with other organizations, but do so with notions of *their school* and *their plans* held rigidly in place- seeking affirmation, but not critique.

Fullan (2000b) discusses the "inside-out" portion of educational reform in which schools reach out to their environments for information that can help them improve. Sometimes this learning requires questioning ingrained practices and carries with it the risk of upsetting the status quo. This learning process is not straightforward or clear from the outset, but school leaders should be aware that:

Schools need the outside to get the job done. These external forces, however, do not come in helpful packages; they are an amalgam of complex and uncoordinated phenomena. The work of the school is to figure out how to make its relationship with them a productive one. (Fullan, 2000b, p.583)

I might add that the principals, situated at the boundary of the school and its environment, are the best-suited individuals to undertake this type of sense-making work. Unfortunately, very

few of the leaders in this study discussed actively seeking these types of bi-lateral relationships with outside organizations. I will refer to these types of relationships as *feedback relationships*, due to the potential impact the relationships might have on current practice. I view the idea of disrupting (perturbing) current practice *positively*, as a means to improving practice in historically underperforming schools. Some principals were, however, taking tentative steps down this path, and a discussion of this journey is essential to understanding the differences between feedback relationships and low-risk relationships.

An principal in a struggling RSD high school saw a key part of his role as building ties between his secondary school and its feeder elementary school across the street:

we doin' a lot of programs [at the elementary school] across the street. I have a creative writing program here called Students at the Center and we send kids... across the street once a week to work with the English classes to help them develop learning how to write.... I'm not gonna do anything here without including [them]. Because that's my kids. And I gotta grow a better product so I can take the whole further.

While the ongoing writing program between the two schools is significant, what may be more important is the feeling of this principal that what happens across the street is partially his responsibility. This type of serious school-to-school connection is the type of relationship that can provide lots of feedback to educators in both schools.

As a more formal example of a feedback relationship, one participant's school was a part of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), which is a national group of charter schools that have had notable success in improving test scores for low-income students. He explains the "first-year visitation" process that this group uses:

they send a first-year inspection team, which is another school leader from another KIPP school somewhere and someone from their instructional support team. [They] come in for two full days and assess everything that they can in two full days... Getting to sit down, talk with another school leader and say, what about this? And this? And this? ... But, then getting to get all of those things out and then getting to hear from other folks... having them help me see the forest through the trees, and that- and while we had some things we could work on and

tighten up in different regards, that what we're creating was -- was pretty solid for our kids.

This KIPP principal experienced some nervousness relating to this “evaluation” of his school, but in the end, relished the opportunity to have a respected group of educators look at his school with fresh eyes. This is a good example of a feedback relationship in that this visitation team, led by a more experienced administrator, might have had a long list of negative comments about this school, and that certainly could have led to a lot of changes in the status quo. The principal had to risk a negative inspection to get this type of feedback. And if the goal is a high-performing school, we can see that the “risk” is somewhat smaller than one might expect.

This feedback may prompt either small or large changes to the operation of the school, but both of these are less risky than the possibility of the school failing and being closed down by the state, which grants charter extensions only for successful schools. In fact, entering only into low-risk partnerships is certainly the riskier venture if a high-performing school is the goal. These relationships don't provide sufficient feedback and potentially insulate the school from the constantly changing environment. One concern about this specific relationship is that the inspection is led by principals from other KIPP schools who are likely to have the same training and goals in mind. The involvement of a more diverse group of educators in this inspection process, especially some from the local community, would ensure that the feedback is as broad as possible.

Another more formalized feedback relationship is the connection of one of the charter schools with a local university. The school, chartered only after the storm, reserved two spots on its board for university faculty, and tentatively set up a formal partnership shortly after the storm. But the principal reported some initial apprehensions about making this connection:

I needed expertise in... accounting, I needed expertise in human resources, and I needed a legal person. I turn around and... the chancellor is standin' right behind me...He said, 'I can help you do all of that. [our university] is there for you... let's open this school.' And I thought to myself, this is great, but I was scared

because [they] run two other schools very much in depth... to the point where the teachers have like 8 ½ hour school days, they are involved in all this professional development, and I knew that the problem [with us] wasn't with teachers, it was just because of the district and the facility issue... So I said, ya know, lets explore our options and see what kind of relationship we can have... I didn't want them running us.

So while this partnership engaged in lots of technical activities during the first year, slowly more instruction-focused activities were undertaken:

I've requested a middle school institute for my middle school teachers and they're putting that together for me. They've put together a gifted cohort... they're starting in April. Intersession, they're taking an online "Introduction to Gifted" course.

With the university faculty members on the charter school board, a number of teachers engaged in tailored graduate coursework, and with a large number of the university's student teachers placed in the charter school, it is hard to imagine the university not having a compelling stake this school's success. The principal, while initially expressing some anxiety about losing control of her school, is now feeling that this relationship will provide her with a strong connection to the outside world and ensure that the school is able to get the feedback it needs.

Other examples of *feedback relationships* are the locally-based charter school groups that have begun to appear. Although none of their schools were part of this study, the Algiers Charter School Association (ACSA) is a group of charter schools from one section of the city that have banded together to create a mini-school district (Ritea & Warner, 2005). While some educators have reacted negatively to this partitioning of the school district (Perry, 2007), there is the potential here for the sort of close school-to-school, high feedback collaboration that could bring about meaningful improvement. A separate charter school network on the city's East Bank has been formed recently and principals involved in this study felt that it was important to join the group- although its purposes were still unclear.

we are entering into a relationship with 11 other charters right now... I think our participating in it is really important... We may just buy pencils together the first year, the potential is there for combining services, one central financial office?

... Legal fees that we are all coming up against. Issues about charter law, so we'll have access to legal support, lobbying on behalf of charter schools in general for MFP [state funding] and other things. (Charter School Principal)

Another charter school principal that was still undecided about whether or not to join this group explained her doubts:

we are not a member of that right now, but five or six East Bank charter schools *are* members, so we'll see what happens with that... And I think you're somewhat giving up your independence if you do that -- we are just going to go back and do a little bit more homework before we commit for \$8,000 dues, per year... but are those some of the services that we need? Are those services that we can't get through our board members and other things?

While still unsure of itself, this East Bank charter school group certainly has the potential to evolve into a feedback intensive group, using each other to provide peer critique and direction for school improvement. There is a concern, as mentioned above, that schools will only join for the technical support they can receive, and not form the stronger relationships that will be able to provide the necessary feedback to participating schools. The strange attractor of *low-risk partnerships* will certainly be at play in the development of this group, and only a conscious effort on the part of school leaders will overcome this tendency towards engaging strictly in low-risk partnerships.

### **Seeking Long Term Improvement**

Participants in this study shared the perception that educational change post-Katrina was a long-term rather than a short-term undertaking. Despite the loud public outcry for quick change, and the quick-turnaround rhetoric from new RSD superintendent Paul Vallas (Simon, 2007e), most principals spoke about a reform process that would occur slowly and over multiple years. As a principal in one struggling RSD school noted:

No schools are going to be successful given the plight that you are going to inherit, plus, even if there wasn't a Katrina, nothing is going to happen this first

year. This is a year for baselines. And then once those baselines are going to be established, then at that point you can start developing prescriptions, one prescription for each child that you have.

The medical terminology used by this principal indicates that curing the illnesses of the troubled school system would take sustained efforts over time. While there was some excitement that changes would be faster in the new, decentralized district, principals felt that things would still not be as fast as some wanted:

they are happening a whole lot faster than they did when we worked for Orleans Parish, but some things still take time (Charter Principal)

Even principals who started the 2006-07 school year with high expectations of quick reform, had to reassess the situation during their first year in operation:

I think things will continue to improve. I'm going to have to readjust my timeline. It's going to take a whole lot longer than I originally thought. (RSD Principal)

Another RSD principal equated the rebuilding of New Orleans' schools with the expected slow rebuilding of the city itself, stating that both would be uncertain and slow processes because they had failed as a city to, "understand the ramifications of what really happened to us." There are several characteristics to this conception of change as a long-term process that are notable and are discussed below. The following discussion focuses on the slowness of sustainable change, principals' focus on academics in year 2, and raising cultural expectations for student achievement.

### **Slow Change**

A New Orleans school reform advocate, Sarah Usdin, while hopeful for change, noted the challenge of reversing years of mismanagement:

There's tremendous hope and promise for the school system. But when you start from scratch ... it can't be done overnight, especially in a system that had the

challenges ... and the decades of inequity that New Orleans public schools have had. (Teicher, 2006, n/p)

The sense of needing time to get settled and take stock was reiterated a bit more succinctly, by another RSD principal: “Aawwww! Jesus. What can any of us do in one year’s time but get confused?” The feeling of recovery being the first priority, and then reform coming after was a clear message:

I saw a lot of stuff happening, but didn't do anything about it. I didn't do anything about it because at that particular point in time, I was at the mode of survival. And sometimes in surviving you see what needs to be done, but you keep your mouth shut because... you've got these other battles to deal with. (RSD Principal)

This principal’s division of tasks into *managerial tasks* (“other battles”) and *improvement tasks* (“what needs to be done”) clarifies a very real constraint on school principals’ ability to lead educational change. There are a certain number of first-priority managerial tasks (bussing, facilities, student safety, etc.) that have traditionally fallen under the purview of school principals and frequently require immediate attention. In the case of post-Katrina New Orleans, principals faced an overwhelming number of such tasks. Principals understandably felt obligated to attend to these tasks first, before delving into school improvement initiatives. In some cases, this resulted in school improvement being delayed whenever a managerial issue arose. This leads to the idea that perhaps distributed leadership is an appropriate model for educational change (Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, & Hopkins, 2007). If different people are ultimately responsible for these separate tasks, there may be less of the situation observed here where managerial tasks take precedence over improvement tasks.

While principals perceived that the instabilities of the first year post-Katrina inhibited serious reform, many felt that the situation would become much more amenable to change in year two:

now we've got some stability. So I know which teachers will be more inclined to try some things... and that hopefully will be contagious... I'm giving myself three to five years, two to four more years, to have this place being very different

from what it is- was this year. I think it can be done too, but, more work. (RSD Principal)

A principal at a newly created charter school perceived reform as a long term endeavor not because of the instability of the 2006-07 school year, but because reform requires a community (of both teachers and students) that had to be constructed in year one:

I think the number one thing that... we've done is we've created a culture within our school where kids just feel safe, kids feel like it's a community that they want to be a part of and that they can't imagine not being a part of. So they take a lot of pride in them coming here. And they have gained a lot of pride in who they are, and what it means to them to be college prep... and to be leaders... and that sense of... team and unity and purpose.

While this principal admitted that there were some problems at his school, specifically in terms of teaching for mastery and catching struggling learners earlier in the school year, there was a sense of confidence that these things would be much easier to accomplish in year two because of the culture that had been established during year one.

Again, the notion of requisite stability is raised by principals who felt a need to overcome the turbulence of opening/reopening their school and building momentum before serious efforts at change could be made. This conception, common among the participants, discounts the older model of change as punctuated equilibrium (Abernathy and Utterback, 1978) which sees change as more of a response to external forces rather than driven internally. Instead, Weick and Quinn's (1999) theory of continuous change is a closer fit. This conception of change, much more in line with the view of schools as complex adaptive systems (Dooley, 1997; McQuillan, in press), emphasizes all members of an organization to being focused on learning and experimenting to improve performance, and that out of these small, individual changes, organizational change emerges. But when teachers in a school are focused on survival and rebuilding, there are few emotional or physical resources left for this type of emergent change, hence the need for time. Placing Maslow's hierarchy of needs on the context of teachers in many New Orleans schools, it is certain that too many lower level needs were unmet, postponing the attainment of higher order



needs such as self-actualization and realizing unmet potentials. These latter needs, essential for school reform, would have to wait.

While there was some guilt about not being able to bring the school to optimal performance in year one, most principals came to terms with the challenges they faced in the post-Katrina environment:

we felt so darn guilty about not being able to do the things that we were taught to do- and then we realized, well, when were we going to do that?... Between 2 AM and 3 AM?! (Charter Principal)

The tension between the demand for improvement and the realities of working in a turbulent setting led a number of principals to vow to focus on improving instruction in year two.

### **Year Two Focus on Academics**

Nearly every principal in the study, regardless of the number of rebuilding activities they engaged in, was disappointed in their lack of instructional leadership during 2006-07. Most anticipated a renewed focus on instruction in 2007-08 as a part of a long-term strategy of tinkering with curriculum and pedagogy to improve student learning:

the focus this coming year is curriculum, curriculum, curriculum.... Every single day, I will have at least two hours... in instructional observation. (RSD Principal)

Another school leader wasn't quite as ambitious, but still intended to increase his focus on instruction in year 2:

the school principal is the instructional leader in the building, but... I'll be honest, it has been so overwhelming, that has been the part I had to pass on to other people... [Next year] I'm definitely going to spend more time in classrooms, doing walkthroughs... working closely with teachers. (RSD Principal)

Notice here that there is a disappointment that he had to assign instructional leadership activities to other people. Ideally, he would have preferred to spend a great deal of his time in classrooms,

not attending to managerial tasks. An unstated assumption here is that principals should hold some sort of instructional expertise that they can develop in their teachers. The notion of distributed leadership is useful here as well.

There was a general sense from principals that schools were at their best when principals were engaging teachers in developing their teaching skills. Distributed leadership would focus our attention on skill development, but deemphasize the direct role of the principal in that activity. This is in direct contrast to the norms of *bureaucratic control* and *teacher independence* listed in table 4-1 that tend to guide American school systems. The emphases on instructional improvement and bureaucratic control are seen in the words of the principal of a high-achieving charter school:

this year [07-08] it's moving toward refinement where we're doing a lot of teacher observation, we're giving them proper feedback.... If we're all working on this, let's work on it the right way so we get the best—the most bang for our buck and the best results for our students.

The “we” here refers to the principal and other non-teaching administrators at the school. This administrator-led mode of instructional leadership is clearly time-intensive, but was often held up as the model participants aspired to. Even those who took a less formal view of instructional leadership felt that 2006-07 was just too difficult to engage in meaningful improvement:

I'm the kind of person who likes to sell the staff on new ideas, let's try it this way... try to stretch them to do things a little bit different. This year however... it was just make it through the day. And tomorrow is going to look just like today, you try to make it through tomorrow. (RSD Principal)

I could sense the strain in this principal's voice as he explained that he wasn't leading the school as he believed it should be led. He had lowered his expectations of himself for this first year, and was seeking to raise them the next year. It may be that the combination of adherence to principal-led instructional leadership and uncertain teacher-leadership capacity made the bureaucratic approach a safe option for principals in 2006-07. It is conceivable instructional leadership in

2007-08 may be facilitated by the fact that principals will have a better assessment of the instructional leadership capacity of their new staff members.

### **Raising expectations**

Another common thread was principals' espoused desire to raise expectations for student outcomes as part of a long-term improvement strategy. These goals were often mentioned in reference to "next year" or the next "four to five" years, an admission on the part of principals that they wisely saw such activities as long-term, cultural changes, rather than as administrative ones. The temptation to equate higher expectations with higher standardized test scores was obvious in both higher achieving and low achieving schools. An RSD principal whose students scored quite low on the 2007 statewide exams set some reasonable targets for his staff to meet:

our math scores were low, even our English scores, were low...I said that would be our aggregate, that would be our baseline. Our baseline is gonna be 15% to 25% more than that, now how do you get it there? And so those are gonna be the questions that I'm gonna be opening up the first day I meet the teachers

At another school, even though their test-scores were relatively high compared to other public schools, the principal made very explicit student achievement goals:

our goal is to make sure that our kids continue, number one, to be prepared academically, but we are kind of raising the standard, as to what our expectation is. As an example, we expect all of our kids to be in the 80th percentile and above when it comes to standardized tests. (Charter Principal)

While these two principals made explicit, numerical goals for their students, there were also other forms of raising expectations that principals described: raising students career expectations, taking field trips to Africa, and offering algebra classes in middle school. While there certainly were ambitious goals in many schools, many principals admitted to having to "lower the bar" this year in order to meet students and teachers at their current ability levels:

I feel like we had lower the bar... to give awards to kids. Because- in many cases we were stretching just to give an award. To try to honor some kids who couldn't or wouldn't really perform.

In addition to lowering the bar for academic awards, one RSD principal mentioned even lowering the bar for himself once the 2006-07 school year began to take its toll on his mental and physical health:

lowering the bar, just taking it day by day, let's get through this year, with the hope that next year will be a new beginning and some fresh ideas.

For school leaders to survive the year, they needed to prioritize certain issues first, and save others for later. Some chose to tackle facilities issues, some chose setting a collaborative school culture, some were able to focus on little else besides hiring teachers for the ever-growing number of students at their doors.

All in all, principals felt that they were preparing for a long struggle in improving their schools, and certain things were going to have to wait. There seems to have been little impetus on the part of principals to use the storm's immediate aftermath to immediately change the core functions of teaching and learning in their school. The one principal in this study who returned to her pre-Katrina position continued to work on the objectives she had set out prior to the storm. The remaining school leaders who were thrust into the leadership role post-Katrina went about leading their schools in the best way they knew how. Despite the state and district level rhetoric claiming that the post-Katrina period was a perfect opportunity to initiate reforms, these reforms mostly applied to the district level structure, not everyday classroom practice. They could be made quickly, via political action, and only the minds of a few elected officials had to be changed. From the perspective of these principals, educational change is always a slow process, even under the perfect conditions, and conditions here were certainly far from perfect.

This echoes a finding of Muncey and McQuillan's (1996) ethnographic study of the Coalition of Essential Schools in which they emphasized the importance of examining change from multiple levels of a system:

An incomplete picture emerged at our sites if only one view of reform was examined. Therefore, to understand the nature and degree of change experienced in restructuring schools more thoroughly, institution wide changes as well as changes in individual classrooms should be examined. (p.281)

This finding not only provides an excellent recommendation for future research on post-Katrina educational reforms, but it underscores the loosely-coupled (Weick, 1976) nature of education in the USA. While this study deals with the school level and the school district level, the principle is the same. Change at one level of the system does not necessarily mean change at other levels. In fact, change at one level is likely to be actively resisted at other levels (Reigeluth, 2006). The reformers who insisted that post-Katrina was the perfect time to reform the New Orleans schools may be proven right, but they will need to wait a few more years. Only then will we be able to see if the structural changes at the system level result in lower-level changes that are implemented by teachers who operate virtually independently from the politicians and reformers who have led the changes to-date.

### **Requirements for Long Term Improvement**

In the previous discussion of the long-term view principals are taking of post-Katrina reforms, three ideas emerged from the data: the slowness of change, the difficulty of focusing on academics in the immediate aftermath, and the need to raise expectations for student learning. All of these things supported the general view that current reforms in New Orleans are not short-term projects and will take many years to run their course. This is consistent with a number of change theorists who cite time as a key resource when change is viewed as a collaborative process, and

not a one-time event (Corcoran and Lawrence, 2003; Jenlink, Reigeluth, Carr & Nelson, 1998; Peck & Carr, 1997; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Spillane, 2002; Wheatley, 1999).

It is also important to note what plans principals have for this extended timeframe: *what do they intend to do to ensure that long-term improvement really happens?* While this was not initially a focus of this study of principal's experiences, participants' insistence on long-term reform efforts naturally led to discussions of future plans, and there is much information here worth sharing. This is a common occurrence in exploratory work such as this (Rossman & Rallis, 2003), where the negotiated meanings between researchers and participants often result in unforeseen data emerging throughout data collection. One of the clearest messages coming out of principals' experience in the post-Katrina period was the need for school autonomy.

### **School Autonomy**

Principals in this study wanted the autonomy to run their schools the way they saw fit. The ability to change practice based on perceived student needs was viewed as necessary in an effective school. Without that flexibility- principals saw little chance of success. Charters obviously have a huge advantage here over RSD schools in that they don't report directly to anyone about school operations- but are only accountable for results. The importance of this freedom is described by one charter school principal:

The quality of a school is determined by the people inside the building... would the school have the autonomy needed to consistently do what it believes is best for students, or will policy and practice be shaped by outside expectations, procedures, and decision makers?

Of course, with this independence comes accountability for results. There is no district infrastructure to blame when a charter school fails. This same principal explained the dual-nature of this freedom:

overall we had the ability to build the school we wanted to build.... I think our successes are a reflection of what we have worked hard to create. Our shortcomings are things that are shortcomings because we didn't get the job done... I think it's an example of what charter schools would claim is good about charters.

This combination of freedom from micro-management coupled with accountability for results has long been a hallmark of advocates for market-based reforms (Chubb & Moe, 1988) and seems to have taken root in many of New Orleans' new charter schools. Another charter principal expressed some trepidation about adjusting to the newfound independence of a charter school: "I feel like I have choices. I definitely felt 'where's my mother?'... Where are my directions coming from?" While there was certainly some fear from principals who were used to the traditional hierarchical district structure, the benefits of the independence generally outweighed this fear, as one recently-converted charter school principal recalled her thoughts in the days after Katrina:

...we just need to become a charter school. And if we become a charter school then we can go where we want and just be a really good school.

The independence that comes with a charter label was seen by many principals as essential to meeting the multitude of needs their students brought to school each day.

The RSD principals, on the other hand, seemed acutely aware of the lack of freedoms they had in their newly created district:

I wish we had more autonomy, I like the non-public school model. I like a lotta things they can do. But I would want to be one of those schools that serves every child, not just, you know, hand selected. (RSD Principal)

Clearly these principals want autonomy. But, besides a general human-desire to control our environment, what exactly are the freedoms principals want? There were a number of specific areas where principals explained why school-level autonomy was vital. One was discretionary use of funds.

### *Financial Autonomy*

The financial autonomy desired by principals took many forms, some of them rather surprising. One charter school principal described the importance of having flexibility to spend extra money on teacher recruitment, going well above what the pre-Katrina district would have spent:

there's still this huge teacher shortage, but I didn't have the time to go flying, to make one... coordinated trip, stopping in multiple cities, watching teachers teach, so instead if we had a candidate that we liked we flew them in and had them sample teach and... those [costs] build up.

Interestingly, with the arrival of Paul Vallas, the RSD adopted a similar approach of increasing the amount of money spent on teacher recruitment (Simon, 2007a), although principals in this study were skeptical that this would lead to an increase in teacher quality. A different charter school principal explained her decision to offer high teacher salaries to compensate for the fact that they were doing their hiring late in the summer, when the pool of available teachers was getting pretty shallow:

now we may revamp this, but we were looking at trying to attract as good a faculty as we could get in here as quickly as possible. We had... a good two weeks to hire... We did what we could... [and] these people are getting paid. They will not have regrets from a salary [perspective] after this year. I guarantee you.

The story was starkly different in the RSD. While teachers there were on a traditional salary scale based on education and years of experience, principals in the RSD struggled to find money to pay for even basic items for their schools:

A disappointment too has been there has not been as much site-based management as I thought there would have been... We can't spend a dime here for anything other than *the students*. So when the custodian says I need some bleach to clean the mops, I don't know how we get the bleach. Because it is not for the students directly. And if I want to do something for teachers, to show appreciation... I pay for it myself. (RSD Principal)



Another RSD principal also bemoaned his inability to use school funds freely, noting that in the RSD, principals lacked even the meager discretion that existed under the pre-Katrina system:

schools didn't have checking accounts, or student activity funds to do anything with. I didn't get my checking account... until February.

Another RSD principal faced the dilemma of having money to pay his teachers to do weekend tutoring, but only being able to disperse it in 8-hour increments. When he realized that his elementary school students could not physically sit for the eight hours, he was left with a dilemma to waste the money, cancel the tutoring, or violate district policy.

This desire for financial independence is a complicated issue here. Given the long history of mishandled public funds in the New Orleans Public Schools (Roesgen, 2005; Russell, 2006), one can understand the caution on the part of the RSD. New Orleans' desire to overcome its reputation as a corrupt city, coupled with the large amounts of recovery money flowing into the district's coffers, led to a tightening of the financial procedures that RSD principals found unacceptable. In addition to the surface level need to purchase items for their schools, this raises the issue of trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). While it was not made explicit in our interviews, there is the potential that this situation could cause a ripple effect that damages feelings of trust at all levels of the system. If trust is as important a resource for reform as Bryk and Schneider argue, then giving schools increased financial autonomy, with oversight, might be in the district's best interest.

### *Curricular Autonomy*

Schools also felt a need to control the curriculum offered in their school. Based on my personal experience teaching in the district before the storm, schools were more or less

free to proceed with curriculum as they saw fit. But under the RSD, the district was much smaller, and there was a re-commitment to providing a uniform curriculum across the district. Principals who worked in the RSD prior to the storm, as well as those who took positions after felt negatively about the lack of control over curricular matters:

the educational philosophy wasn't really an issue that we could even deal with internally because, that was, you know, a directive to us. No choice. Just, "here."  
(RSD Principal)

Another RSD principal wanted curricular freedom so that he could offer unique and challenging courses so that neighborhood kids wouldn't leave the community for magnet schools, but would attend his neighborhood high school and serve as role models for other students:

I gotta have the courses here, and the personnel that could teach those courses [so] that when a couple of kids do take the chance to come here, they have positive things to bring back home and into their own social communities.

In the area of curriculum, it was clear that independence was a good thing in many of the charters, as they were able to internally plan how their instructional day would be spent. One charter principal explained their curriculum development process with the Success For All (SFA) reading program:

my facilitator and I went to the SFA conference... in Orlando we just sort of brainstormed what we needed to do and where we're going to get- just sort of an action plan. And already we've done so many more different things.

Even in the area of physical education, one charter principal explained some of the curricular choices they had made and how they impacted the culture of the school:

we certainly attract a lot of people who live outside... of the box... And they are comfortable sending their kids to a school where... they are going to take a circus arts... your kid is going to learn how to ride a unicycle or walk on stilts here. It's different than playing football or soccer or baseball... We are really, really diverse here.

The smile on this principal's face while she said this conveyed the importance for educators to have control over pedagogy in their schools and classrooms. This was a woman was not trained as a principal, in fact, she did not even have classroom teaching experience prior to

taking on this role, but loved her job because she got to see children be educated in a way that was meaningful to her. For school districts to deny educators this opportunity on the rationale of wanting uniformity across the district or improving the efficiency of professional development might be a destructive practice. Teachers and principals may nod and submit to curriculum measures adopted from on high, but there is a great likelihood that these reforms will be subject to poor implementation, or even outright sabotage, once they return to the school-site (Cuban, 2001; Fishman, Marx, Blumenfeld, Krajcik, Soloway, 2004).

It should be noted that two of the three RSD principals included in this study did make some statements about the need for some level of district conformity, mentioning graduation requirements, student discipline policies, and human resources policies. Principals felt that useful policies in these areas were not in place during the 2006-07 school year, and that a collaborative process to generate some would be helpful. Fullan's (2001b) notion of simultaneous top-down and bottom-up change is supported here. But it should also be noted that these areas are more peripheral to the school's core function of student learning (see Hartman, 1999, p.182; Resnick, 1995; Schlechty, 1990). It may be that principals expect autonomy on issues that are closer to the instructional core of a school than on issues further from the classroom.

Under Vallas, school-level autonomy in the RSD, at least in the area of curriculum, seems to be diminishing even further. Using common materials and pedagogy system-wide are touted in his talks (Merrow, 2007). This certainly sounds like a rational, logical plan to improve schools: pick an educational program and train teachers to use it well. But without broad input from teachers, this is simply more top-down, Newtonian paradigm change that has failed so often in the past (Carr-Chellman, 2006; Eisner, 1992; Fullan, 2001b; Sarason, 1990). So the question must be asked, how can system leaders prepare the public for a change process that complexity advocates say is uncertain and cannot be outlined in advance? How can both leaders and the public learn to be comfortable with ambiguity? Just as stockholders in a company might be

reluctant to support a change that was not *guaranteed* to raise profits, citizens might be, understandably, reluctant to support educational reforms that don't have a clear path to improved results. So the temptation for leaders to provide direct answers to the problems of change is obvious. They can gain public support, which is essential for public school change (Cuban & Usdan, 2002), by communicating reforms in a way that reify our mechanistic, and false, understandings about the process of change. This leads to a pacified public that is disappointed again and again when promised reforms don't work. Support then wanes, and the cycle starts again. In order to address this "predictable failure," of reform (Sarason, 1990), school system leaders must take on the work of convincing the public of the complex, slow nature of change espoused by principals here. One potential approach may be authentically engaging the public in change efforts so that the complexities can be appreciated and failures are less likely to be dismissed as a result of incompetent teachers or district leaders. It does not appear that New Orleans, at least not the RSD, will be a test bed for such a battle.

### **Stakeholder Participation**

In addition to autonomy from bureaucratic regulation, many principals also expressed a desire to engage a wide range of stakeholders in their long-term school improvement process. One charter school principal noted the importance of including many voices in the creation of its charter:

in the planning of the charter... we met several times with parents and teachers, to get input, and former parents, who have had success stories...

While seeking input from students who *did not* have success stories would also be a useful activity (Carr-Chellman, Beabout, Almeida, & Gursay, 2007), this is the beginnings of a stakeholder-based approach to reform. In addition to creating a charter application for the state,

charter schools were also able to seek out a diversity of opinions as they selected their board. And while most charter boards had a relatively diverse group of individuals (business community, parents, teachers), two charter principals expressed the tensions this diversity created between their personal vision for the school and that of the board, which is the legal entity ultimately responsible for all aspects of the school. Principals of these two schools spent tremendous effort warding off unwanted board actions and explaining to the board their vision for the school. Even with these tensions, principals noted the importance of casting a wide net to generate dialogue, debate, and hopefully broad support for their school.

In the RSD, one principal described the necessary tension of collaboratively creating a school vision statement:

it took us a week to write a mission statement. Which I think is not necessarily a bad thing, but it shows how strong and opinionated people [are]- there was a lot of give-and-take in the writing of that statement. People wanted certain things in, people didn't think certain things were apropos. So it took meetings for five days... in a row to get a mission statement. And I think we can all live with the one that we finally drafted.

While this was described as a faculty-only process, there is a clear commitment on the part of the principal to the *process* of change, and the generation of public dialogue as an important tool in school improvement. In an example of even broader participation, another RSD principal describes his efforts to reach out to the community for input:

I went to about five or so pastors and I asked them if they would simply assign one or two members of their congregation who live in that community to sit on our... principal's PTO [Parent Teacher Organization]... I decided that was the way to operate.

While this parental group didn't get going the first year, after which this principal moved to the central office, it shows the commitment to broad stakeholder participation in school improvement that was held by some principals. There were, of course, some principals who held strong-visions for their schools in their heads, and decided that parental and community involvement, while important, wasn't worth the effort required to obtain. These schools pursued

their vision without much parental or community input, and at this point, there doesn't seem to be much of a penalty for doing this. It does, however, raise an interesting point about the notion of community involvement in low SES schools.

Principals in this study with good numbers of middle class parents had good involvement before the storm, and this didn't change. Schools with high concentrations of poor students lamented the fact that there was low parental involvement, gave convincing testimonials to the importance of parental involvement, but seemed to universally fail in getting low-income parents involved in the schooling of their children. This may be a case of schools concentrating resources and energy on things they can control (instruction, materials, special services) and not wanting to "waste" resources on a parental involvement plan whose success is perceived as beyond their control. Clearly high-stakes testing and public accountability practices factor into this decision, perhaps to the detriment of the long-term health of these high-poverty schools (Fullan, 2000a; Sirotnik, 2005).

Participants generally agreed on the need for school autonomy and community participation as elements of their long-term improvement strategies. These stand in stark contrast to the quick-strike improvements that have included new leaders, new curricula, and new instructional technology that have been attempted in the RSD since Katrina. While these changes may be beneficial, principals did not place these items as central to their vision of the school change process. These twin goals of autonomy and participation are reminiscent of the well-documented Chicago school reforms of the 1990s, which had uneven results at best (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow & Easton, 1998). The lack of support for school leaders and community members who engaged in the school reform process in Chicago has been cited as a reason for the challenges many schools faced. At this time, it does not appear that New Orleans has learned the lessons of the Chicago reform, as principals do not perceive such supports. This is ironic in that

RSD Superintendent Paul Vallas was the superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools from 1995-2001.

These experiences of principals leading schools in the turbulent post-Katrina environment show a variety of themes that will influence the likelihood of change. While the need for *requisite stability* certainly made a focus on instructional improvement challenging during the 2006-2007 school year, the city, and the schools, are becoming more stable as time continues to pass. Focusing on the problems of ill-prepared students, community apathy, and teacher quality will become easier as the post-Katrina rebuilding process slows down. A challenge not likely to diminish with time is the *strange attractor of inequality* that seems to be reasserting itself in several ways in the reconfigured school system. The prospect of some new schools succeeding while larger numbers continue their history of poor performance seems very real, and solving this issue will require the work of “system leaders” (Hopkins, 2007) that work both for the benefit of their school and of the system as a whole.

The most crucial finding in combating continued inequality may be the potential for forging *feedback relationships* with external organizations. Once schools are meaningfully connected to the outside environment, the isolation and neglect that exacerbate already challenging conditions in such “ghetto schools” might be successfully held in check (Anyon, 1997; Corcoran & Lawrence, 2003). Of course, principals describe the relative ease of creating low-risk relationships and the uncertainties that come with such feedback relationships. It will take courage on their part to establish meaningful feedback relationships that can provide important support for a school undertaking change efforts.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

This chapter provides an analysis of the findings of this study of principals' experiences with educational change in post-Katrina New Orleans. The first section summarizes and comments on principals' experiences in this unique instance of relatively unplanned school change. The second section discusses the implications that principals' experiences in New Orleans may have on the study and practice of educational change more broadly.

#### Principals Experiences with Change

<b>Principals' Experiences with Change (from the literature)</b>	<b>Principals' Experiences with Change (from participants in New Orleans)</b>
Felt pressure for immediate reforms	Felt that pressure for immediate reform was alleviated somewhat by the recovery process
Felt like middlemen between community and school's administrative bureaucracy	Charter principals felt bureaucracy demands lifted, RSD principals felt the tension between their <i>personal</i> vision and the district bureaucracy
Felt that standards-based reform de-skilled their jobs and inhibited instructional leadership.	Felt expectation to be instructional leaders for their schools, managerial tasks emerged, but were not assigned to them.
Constantly shifting environment makes change planning difficult	Yes the environment is shifting, but they can reasonably predict the type of students they will serve.
Felt unprepared for large instructional roles	Variety of instructional leadership approaches (delegated, hands-on, laissez-faire)

Comparing and contrasting the extant literature on principals' experiences with change to the perspectives of principals in the post-Katrina New Orleans Public Schools reveals some interesting findings. Due to the minimal extant literature on this topic, this discussion centers around the findings of a small number of qualitative studies of principals which directly or



indirectly deal with educational change (Fink, 2003; Johnson, 1998; Oplatka, 2003; Orr, Byrne-Jimenez, McFarlane & Brown, 2005; Riley, 2004; Spindler, 1963, 1979; Wolcott, 1973). Table 5-1 compares some of the major themes from this literature on principals' experiences with school change with the experiences of participants in this study.

### **Limited Pressure for Immediate Reform**

The generally recognized pressure for immediate reform, especially in low-performing, urban schools (Orr, Byrne-Jimenez, McFarlane & Brown, 2005), was indeed felt by New Orleans principals in this study. However, the extreme challenges of rebuilding gave principals a mental “free pass” in the first full school year after the storm. While high-stakes tests were given and schools were ranked in the newspaper, principals, especially those in the RSD, saw the 2006-07 school year as a washout- just a year to collect baseline data on their newly reconstituted school. They were concerned with addressing the trauma experienced by teachers and students, getting the neglected buildings functioning again, and establishing relationships with their new school communities. They felt that beyond these immediate concerns, there was no time for engaging in authentic reform processes. As one RSD principal put it:

...when you have to open schools almost overnight, you don't have time to think about doing it any differently than what you know. The traditional- so you just slap it together the way you know because you *know* that. I can truly say there were very few times the school year that I had the opportunity to sit around the table to plan with staff members. It was- and to me that's where real school reform can occur. When you talk through all the issues, you look at what's not working, and you make plans and... There were very few opportunities for that.

Undoubtedly, the school leaders in New Orleans showed great personal and professional courage in returning to attempt the Herculean task of rebuilding an academically failed and physically demolished system of schools. The unique tasks of operating a school in this context have been painstakingly described previously, and readers must not forget this context as I turn to

the implications for reform later. In what principals all described as the most difficult year in their professional lives, they were not able to institute the educational reforms they had hoped. They faced the decision of blaming themselves for this situation, and most, with the exception of one charter school principal, recognized the limitations of working in the post-Katrina setting, and vowed to return the next year with a focused agenda on school improvement. While two of the three RSD principals were removed from their positions after the arrival of Paul Vallas, the rest of the participants continue to work at their schools during the 2007-08 school year.

### **Not Traditional Middlemen**

The description of school principals as middlemen caught between the educational system and the community takes a somewhat different twist in post-Katrina New Orleans. Wolcott (1973) noted that the principal he studied sometimes *was* part of the bureaucracy his community faced and sometimes *fought against* this same bureaucracy on behalf of his school community. It seems that the idea of bureaucracy has much to do with the context of a particular person in a particular context. New Orleans principals had vastly divergent views about bureaucracy based on whether they were in a charter school or an RSD school. Charter school principals felt that the tensions inherent in being a part of a bureaucracy were generally gone, and they felt that they were interfacing with the school community in a much more direct, unmediated way. Charter principals still dealt with the state and the district on matters such as finance, information technology, and building leases, but felt that they were able to educate children how they best saw fit- without having to follow policies created by others. Of course, the lack of bureaucracy meant more tasks were assigned to people at the school level and schools had to solve many problems that previously would have been passed up the chain (food service,

transportation, student discipline policies). A pair of charter school leaders commented on their increased workload:

with me doing extra jobs, and her doing extra jobs around the school, and these two people, were doing three people's jobs ...we had four people's jobs.

There was total agreement among the charter school participants that they were facing much less of a *middleman* role than many other studies of school leaders might suggest. And on the whole, principals much preferred the independence, even with the increased workload, as they saw the autonomy as a key building block for school improvement.

RSD principals, of course, still dealt with a district bureaucracy, similar to what existed prior to the storm. There were some concerns raised by participants that the new state-run district would fare no better than the school board in running public schools in New Orleans.

Significantly, the tensions RSD principals had were not with feeling caught between the community and the district, but a feeling of discord between district mandates and their own *personal* educational philosophies. The community did not enter the equation, and this may have freed up mental resources for the principal to closely examine the relationship between their school and the district. One RSD principal colorfully described his feelings about the district administration:

[the RSD] really had no clue about what we were doing, and you gotta listen to us... unfortunately I felt this way, it's 'ya'll the *plantation owner* and we just the *old po' people in the field*.' And what we have to say has no value and what you say is right, even though you never grew a crop in your life.

Other RSD principals echoed the same sentiments towards the district, but none of the three mentioned being caught between the district and the community. The focus was consistently on the tension between their *personal* educational philosophy and the decisions made at the district level. Absence of a community influence may be due to the low-levels of school-community relations and principals' perception that parents had little interest in working with the schools. The challenges of forging relationships between urban schools and the families they

serve has been well documented, (Noguera, 1996; Taylor, 2005) and that may be why principals experienced little community influence. Perhaps the massive rebuilding efforts have left otherwise involved parents without enough time to work with their children's schools.

In any case, principals were in the relatively unique situation of actively identifying areas where their personal philosophy differed with the district. This is different than the often-seen subversion and avoidance of unwanted changes by principals (Stein, Hubbard, Mehan, 2004). Wolcott (1973) noted that principals "have become ritually preoccupied with *talk* about change and expert at initiating continual minor reorganization within their own domains" (p.323). This same effect has been seen at the federal level in Europe by Weiler (1989). Unexpectedly, while the three RSD participants admitted to accomplishing very few reforms during the 2006-07 reopening year, they were passionately struggling to establish "coherence" (Fullan, 2000b) between the instructional realities they faced in their schools and the administrative realities faced by district leaders. In essence they are working to make the bureaucracy more responsive to student needs. This is a struggle, as one RSD principal explained:

I was often the bearer of bad news [from the district]. 'We need this, we need it right now', 'this has to happen', and other stuff. That was the reality for folks in central office... in their reality, which is 'we need this to make decisions and you've got to get it some kind of way.' I'm in a position where I can see both sides. I want the order that is needed here in order for teachers to do their job. Understanding at the same time that the district doesn't have answers to every single question. But they are trying to... build the plane as we fly it and all the struggles that come with that.

This difficult search for coherence is a rather promising sign for the beleaguered RSD, it holds the potential for building an improved school system for the most at-risk of New Orleans children. Perhaps significantly, this is happening in the perceived absence significant parental influence in the RSD. While the experiences of three principals should not be used to make the case that limited parental involvement is good educational policy, it may be that having one less force pulling on the school can free up the principal just enough to begin thinking systemically

about how the existing institutional arrangements can be improved. I do *not* advocate limiting the role of parents, especially in urban schools where cultural differences between students and educators are apt to be quite wide (Tatum, 1997). Home-school partnerships are an important element in the overall development of youth (Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005) and ignoring them would be to the detriment of children. What this situation *does* suggest is that principals are so often overwhelmed with the number of competing forces they have to juggle, that integrating their school with district priorities is done only superficially. In the RSD, some serious thought is being given to the district structure by principals, and if there is a bright light for the RSD, this may be it.

### **The Goal of Instructional Leadership**

Studies of principal behavior have certainly noted a lack of principal activity aimed directly towards the improvement of teaching and learning in the classroom (Mintrop, 1999; Wolcott, 1973), emphasizing the symbolic, social, and managerial aspects of their work. Instructional leadership was the theme addressed by the third and fifth items in Table 5-1, and both will be addressed here. The first item in the table concerning instructional leadership is that standards based reforms have traditionally been seen to deprofessionalize principals' work (Fink, 2003; Johnson, 1998). While the existence of an accountability system in Louisiana might have been predicted to increase the amount of time principals spent on instructional matters, this did not bear itself out. Principals in this study, with the exception of one, rarely discussed working directly with teachers to improve their teaching.

While principals shared a sense of disappointment that the state and the district seemed to only care about test scores, and a desire to work closer with teachers in the future, principals in this study did not feel deprofessionalized by the external insistence on standards and

accountability. They recognized a variety of social, emotional, and developmental needs in their students and took it as their professional goal to meet these needs despite an evaluation system that did not recognize their needs. The presence of an accountability apparatus that only measures a small amount of the work being accomplished was not described as deprofessionalizing, but as simply misguided policy that they were content to work around. Why this difference from the literature? It may be that, given the low status of most schools in New Orleans, they were not worried about what poor performance on tests would do to their schools' public perception. Most of the schools in this study had already been through this public ridicule, and had learned to live with it. The principals in the highest poverty schools in this study gave off an air of working outside the system, and emphasized the importance of meeting the perceived needs of their at-risk students over succeeding in a testing system that was biased against their students. It might be said that the presence of an accountability system made these principals feel *more*, not less, professional, in that they had to perform the challenging balancing act between mandated testing and perceived student needs

The second item in the table referencing instructional leadership is the notion that principals were not always prepared for instructional leadership roles (Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006). This idea has certainly been confirmed by this study as, with the exception of one principal, there did not seem to be much attention given to instructional leadership in the eight schools involved in this study. Ironically, in two of the highest performing schools in the study, the principals often had difficulty even *speaking* to many of their teachers because they were language immersion teachers whose English may not have been very strong. In these cases, instructional leadership was not something the principal could have engaged in very easily, yet the schools seemed to function very well. This raises the issue of instructional leadership as a building-wide capacity, not necessarily the action of the principal in charge (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002). If there is sufficient capacity in *the field* for teachers to improve their instruction,

it may not matter what role the principal him/herself plays in this activity (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999).

Regardless of how they enacted instructional improvement in their schools, principals in this study also had a wide range of instructional leadership skills and experiences at their disposal. On the upper end, several principals (notably females) had spent long careers in the classroom and as assistant principals and staff developers who possessed very strong instructional leadership abilities. On the opposite end was a principal with only 6 years of classroom experience and, almost unbelievably, another principal who had never been a classroom teacher or administrator until being tapped to lead a charter school in the wake of Katrina. It should be noted that this last principal was at one of the most successful schools in this study, so having an instructionally-savvy principal may not be an essential characteristic in a successful urban school. Other principals fell in between these outliers, but it was clear that principals in this study had a wide variety of instructional backgrounds. Notably, university-based principal training, which most, but not all, of these individuals had gone through, did not seem to impart any sort of common set of instructional leadership practices to their graduates. Most cited their classroom work experience as being the source for their ideas about instructional improvement.

### **Shifting Environment, Similar Students:**

Leaders planning for change in the post-Katrina schools face the daunting tasks of a transient student population, a new organizational structure in the district, a large percentage of new teachers in the district, and no central body where the future of the district can be planned. Katrina has made New Orleans an extremely *unpredictable* environment for principals to function in. While principals struggled with the issues mentioned above, the fact that this was, and is, an

urban school system may have minimized the impacts of this shifting environment on principals' lives.

In a relatively stable system, the storm might have uprooted stable families, prompted poor families to relocate into previously middle-class districts, and disrupted school-support networks. But in the public schools in New Orleans, transient families were a pre-existing condition, there was no influx of middle-class families (Ritea, 2006c) and there was little meaningful district support to be disrupted. In a sense, the constantly shifting environments principals have described elsewhere (Riley, 2004) were old hat in New Orleans. Principals were used to turbulence. Participants spoke of old problems being *exacerbated* by Katrina, but not of facing entirely new problems, as was noted in some districts in Mississippi (Gouwens & Lander, 2008). Principals in post-Katrina New Orleans were charged with educating poor students in a relatively chaotic environment, which is what they have always done. A charter principal describes his advice the school district in October 2005, only weeks after the storm:

you ought to start to plan many schools for low-income children. It means that you better start thinking about putting your class sizes 10 to 15, and making your schools smaller... population-wise. Then, have an effective program.... Have a respected, honorable, interaction with the child. Materials, teachers, and time. That's what you need. I mean if you've got 10 to 15 kids in the class, the teacher can devote more time, and I said to put an aide in every classroom... you see you put your money closest to the kid.

This principal was not talking about being hampered by a shifting environment post-Katrina, but was using the storm to put in place some structural changes that would better meet the needs of the same type of students that were in the district pre-Katrina. If anything, this principal viewed the shifting environment as an opportunity instead of a challenge to his ability to run a school. This type of thinking captures precisely the idea of *strategic thinking* as opposed to *strategic planning* (Wheatley, 1999). Under a complexity paradigm, the environment is constantly changing and we cannot accurately predict the future. This is in direct contrast to decades of Newtonian-paradigm leadership literature stressing management-by-objectives and reductionist



thinking (Taylor, 1947). But it may be that urban principals, dealing with a variety of unpredictable economic and social forces, had given up on such linear thinking long before the scholars did.

The comment above suggests that at least some principals in the post-Katrina district *do* view schools as complex human systems. Such leaders *are* focusing on the interrelationships between different forces in their schools, and are looking at information gathered from the outside environment. So, indeed, these principals predictably see a constantly shifting environment in front of them, but it is certainly not a uniquely post-Katrina phenomenon. To at least some participants, the changing environment was viewed as an opportunity rather than a challenge.

### **Implications for Educational Change**

The essence of this study is an analysis of principals' experiences with educational change in post-Katrina New Orleans. This was described in the previous section and expands our knowledge of the phenomenology of change as experienced by those who carry it out (Fink, 2003; Fullan, 2001b; Orr, Byrne-Jimenez, McFarlane & Brown, 2005). Likewise, understanding the phenomenology of change is one essential piece of the broader agenda of understanding educational change in general. In addition to the phenomenology of change, work remains in understanding how to implement change successfully as well as how to develop and test alternative configurations of education so that schools considering change have options at their disposal. I sketch out these connections to a broader area of research as an introduction to my discussion of the implications of this study for those concerned with educational change more broadly.

### **Requisite Stability**

While there were some pre-Katrina schools that, by all accounts, had grown stronger by the end of the 2006-07 school year, the data here show enough examples of storm recovery taking energy and resources away from school improvement activities to arrive at the conclusion that *schools require a certain amount of stability to successfully change*. This does not mean that schools in totally static environments are the best candidates for change. Clearly, if nobody wants a school to change, it is unlikely to do so. But, schools in which there is some dissatisfaction with the status quo, yet enough stability for educators to safely make probes into better ways of doing things make excellent places for change to happen (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997). What do I mean by “safely” making probes? For a teacher, this might mean being respected as a professional, having a curriculum that I am comfortable teaching and having some colleagues who respect me as a good teacher and encourage me to try something new. Maybe there is a new principal and maybe student demographics are rapidly changing, but I can still feel secure enough to begin implementing a new curriculum because I feel supported in doing so. Take that same teacher, but have the new principal giving him a hard time about skipping faculty meetings to pick his baby up from daycare, and all of a sudden this is a teacher who might not have enough stability to engage in change. He doesn’t feel valued by his principal, and even the familiar curriculum and supportive friends aren’t enough to make him feel comfortable trying out the new lessons. This feeling of safety is important to initiating the change process.

You may notice that at the beginning of the previous paragraph I talk about schools, and in the example above I am talking about a single teacher. The scale has changed, but the ideas are the same. Individual teachers or groups of teachers who sense enough stability to implement change will often do so. When enough teachers in a school building feel this same level of stability, even if some teachers aren’t with them, the school will be ready for larger-scale change.

The same can be said for other open-systems: districts, states, and society at large. This perception of “just-enough” stability is crucial in the complexity paradigm of organizations. As Doll (2008) notes, “the steadiness of an open system is a dynamic or unstable steadiness... the system maintains an ‘imbalance’, neither too great or too small, but of ‘just the right amount’ for the system to be continually active” (p.197). Substantive changes cannot be mandated, and silver bullet solutions sold by fast-talking reformers are bound to fail unless teachers and administrators engage in meaningful thought, dialogue, and action around improving education for their students. Change happens when individuals and groups come up with better ways of doing things and start implementing these better ways. Ideas can come from the outside. Pressure and support can come from the outside. But meaningful, lasting change, change with a moral purpose (Fullan, 1993) can only occur at the level of individuals or communities of practice operating in a sufficiently stable field.

How does this help explain how some schools were able to improve in post-Katrina New Orleans, while others floundered? DeGreene (1996) notes that societal fields can vary over time and space. While all New Orleans schools certainly operated under a field of instability during the 2006-07 school year, schools responded to it in different ways. Some were able to succeed due to a very strong leader that re-established trust when the instabilities of the environment impinged upon the life of the school. Some had a large percentage of pre-Katrina faculty return to the school, adding to the sense of stability. Some schools had too many unstable influences: constantly enrolling students, new administrators, new teachers, new buildings, or new curricula that overwhelmed any sense of stability. The only reasonable thing to do in these situations was to fall back on old habits of schooling, and wait for the day when things would settle down enough to begin trying again. Unfortunately, this happened in many schools in New Orleans, particularly in the RSD, who were impacted by new students, new curricula, and new leadership to a greater extent than the other types of schools in the city.

## **Perturbance**

An important concept in the application of complexity theory to organizational reform has been the idea of *perturbance* (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Dooley, 1997). Perturbance is a disruption of everyday practice in a way that the members of a system re-evaluate the purposes of their work as individuals and as a group. The system is then placed out of equilibrium, and tends to make adjustments to bring itself back into equilibrium. These adjustments are argued as a natural place to begin the process of organizational change (Suchan, 2005; Wheatley, 1999). In the K-12 context, Reigeluth (2004) notes the economic shifts in the US from an industrial economy to an information economy as the cause of a current major perturbation on our educational system nationally. At the school level, this might mean bringing together parents, teachers, and students to discuss student performance and school goals (Peck & Carr, 1997). The case of New Orleans provides additional insight on how perturbation functions in school reform.

Katrina jolted the school system from its normal operating procedures, and enabled both organizational and physical changes to the New Orleans public school system. From a state-level perspective, Katrina ostensibly provided an opportunity to eliminate an inefficient bureaucracy and create a new, more nimble and responsive school system that could meet the challenges of educating large numbers of poor students. Prigogine's idea of the dissipative structure is brought to mind. As Wheatley (1999) notes:

In a dissipative structure, anything that disturbs the system plays a crucial role in helping it self-organize into a new form of order. Whenever the environment offers new and different information, the system chooses whether to accept that provocation and respond. (p.21)

This concept suggests that when a system is far from equilibrium (as the New Orleans schools were post-Katrina), it will often change its structure, giving off a lot of energy, in order to survive in the new environment. The state takeover and the rapid chartering of many of the city's schools approximates just such a process. The old system was too disliked and generally

unsupported by the citizens of New Orleans. Katrina provided a politically feasible way to rearrange the structure of the district into one more suitable to the environment, one consisting of large numbers of high poverty, racial minority students. Of course, whether or not this new system structure is better suited to meet the educational environment of New Orleans is a matter of debate (The slime molds that biologist Ilya Prigogine studied undergoing the massive transformations were hundreds of millions of year old- and had learned this process over time. We have only been actively reforming our public schools for 50, maybe 100, years, and can't yet give guaranteed solutions to most of the problems we face). From the state-level perspective, New Orleans looked primed for a renaissance of urban education, boosted by the fact that Katrina allowed a massive restructuring of the system with little organized opposition. But the experiences of principals show a different story altogether.

### **Turbulence & Perturbance**

According to the principals in this study, so much of the human structure of the district was destroyed by Katrina that it actually made change much *more* difficult, rather than much easier. Many of the change readiness factors that have been identified were no longer present, including proven leadership, financial stability, and organizational learning capacity (Ely, 1976; Nias, Southworth, & Campbell, 1992, Senge, 1990). Principals in this study appeared to work diligently in these areas all year long, and many began their second year still lacking significant change capacity. The lesson may be that perturbation is good, but that there needs to be an upper limit to turbulence if principals are to engage in the change process.

Related to chaos and complexity theories, Turbulence Theory (Gross, 1994, 1998) may provide some clarity on the matter of “over-perturbance” and “under-perturbance.” I will distinguish words *turbulence* and *perturbance* by defining turbulence as a change in a school's

environmental conditions and a perturbation as such a change that has been analyzed by school-people and gotten them to consider, however briefly, organizational purposes and the way in which their work contributes to them. As such, it would be possible to have turbulence that did not become a perturbation if it did not bring about some consideration of organizational goals and purposes. People can ignore turbulence or can attend to it without implicating organizational practice and the system remains unperturbed.

In Gross' theory, turbulence is demarcated with the simple terms of: *light, moderate, severe, and extreme*. Light turbulence signifies an issue that requires some attention, but poses little threat to the school system's functioning. Moderate turbulence poses measurable challenges to the system, and must be addressed in some way so that the school can continue to function. Severe turbulence is a strong disruption to the school system that could lead to collapse if immediate action is not taken. Since Gross' (1998) study examined curriculum reform, he applied the *extreme turbulence* label to places in which a reform project had been abandoned altogether. In this instance, I might extend his meaning to the broader arena of system reform and apply extreme turbulence to cases in which schools or school systems ceased to operate. Cases such as war, massive political revolution, and certainly natural disaster, would qualify here.

Given Gross' typology of turbulence, it is hard to imagine Hurricane Katrina as anything *but* a case of a school system undergoing extreme turbulence. While some aspects of schooling in pre-Katrina New Orleans still exist, it is clear that the pre-Katrina structure has been wiped away and replaced with something qualitatively different. The New Orleans Public Schools, as represented by the locally-elected school board and superintendent, expired in the days after Katrina and something new took its place. At least for those at the state level, Katrina was a situation of extreme turbulence that *was* considered and perturbed the system sufficiently to create an entirely new district structure represented by the RSD and the massive growth of charter

schools. From the perspective of the state department of education, Katrina seriously impacted how they see their work and the purposes of their work vis-à-vis New Orleans.

But, given the challenges principals describe in setting the stage for change, it is clear that the turbulence level was so high that the reflective process of re-examining the purposes of their school and how individual educators fit into this system was unlikely to happen immediately. The amount of extra attention given to school buildings, teacher recruitment, and the Katrina-weary students just beginning to heal took attention directly from instructional improvement that would be required for meaningful educational change. While the removal of district bureaucracy (at least in the case of the charter schools) removed some of the barriers to change (centralized staffing, externally designed reform initiatives, budgetary freedom) the omnipresent urban schooling issues remain and need to be addressed (students behind grade level, low parental involvement, large numbers of inexperienced teachers, decrepit school buildings). There was a sense that the 2006-07 school year was a year for “getting open”, or “surviving” so that meaningful reforms could begin in 2007-08. For some schools this may very well be the case. For RSD schools, a new superintendent, continued staffing issues, and budgetary problems will mean significant attention will be paid to non-instructional issues. The challenge of reforming urban schools in the best of circumstances has been widely noted (McLaughlin, 1990; Tyack and Cuban, 1995; Ravitch, 2000; Hopkins, 2007). So a washing away of the failed New Orleans Public School system in no way guarantees a quick turnaround of a system that Louisiana BESE board member Leslie Jacobs described as academically, financially, and operationally “bankrupt” (Inskeep, 2005).

In terms of optimal perturbation for school-level change, it seems reasonable that moderate turbulence at the school level would be ideal for instituting educational change. This type of turbulence gives the school some time to learn about the problem and to collaborate on next steps in a way that higher levels of turbulence might not. The necessity of quick, executive-

type solutions in cases of extreme turbulence does not allow for the slower process of learning that has been suggested for sustainable educational change (Stein, Hubbard & Mehan, 2004).

### **Perturbance in Nested Systems**

It seems appropriate therefore, to look at turbulence operating differently on different levels of the system. If changes at the classroom level are to be considered the “gold-standard” in education reform (Eisner, 1992; Elmore & Burney, 1997) we must be careful not to assume that perturbances at one-level of a system will have similar effects on other levels. It is important to remember that schools are nested systems (Hutchins, 1996; Carr, 1997), and school change operates across many levels of systems (individual students and teachers, whole schools, districts, entire communities, states, etc.). The basic useful insight of this concept is the structural fact that schools contain systems and are contained in other systems, each with their own purposes and actors. Schools contain departments, classrooms, and committees, while they are at the same time contained within neighborhoods, districts, and cities. Examining a reform’s interactions with only one level of the system is unlikely to give a clear picture of what is changing or not changing and why (Muncey and McQuillan, 1996). When looking at the district level and the individual school level, the changes in NOPS take on a very different character. From one frame (that of the state), Katrina can be seen, quite reasonably, as an ideal perturbation to alter the practice of schooling in New Orleans. But from another frame (that of school principals) Katrina hindered change much more than it acted as a catalyst. What was a big bump at the state level was a total crash with only a few survivors at the school level. This idea of *differential perturbation* in nested systems buttresses the idea that schools are complex human systems that cannot be understood from only one or two perspectives.



### **Loosely coupled change**

Much has been written about organizations functioning as loosely coupled systems (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Orton & Weick, 1990; Weick, 1976) and this attention has spilled over into recent debates about educational reform (Fusarelli, 2002; Rowan, 2002; Tye, 2000). At first glance, this notion is useful to explain the difficulty of implementing policy initiatives at the level of individual classrooms, where relatively independent classroom teachers often work behind closed doors with little collaboration. Much of the recent attention given by education researchers has been to add subtlety to this well-used concept: examining mechanisms for creating tight coupling, broadening the sources of couplings, and examining the impact of stronger coupling on the utility of the loose coupling model itself. Obviously, the idea of loose coupling provides one explanation for the shortcomings of mandated school change efforts (Sarason, 1990; Fullan, 2000a). Loose coupling lends support to school-based efforts at reform because of its acknowledgement of teacher independence at the classroom level. An important finding of this study is that principals seek support, not mandates, from higher-level administration. Principals in this study were dealing with a variety of impediments to change, some related to Katrina, some not, but they still desired to seek their own path to school improvement. As one charter school principal commented:

I really think it needs to go to that school-based management paradigm. Where you have the decision-making at the school site. Now this is the thing, you are going to have to get some very knowledgeable, intelligent individuals- who really believe that they are empowered to run the school- at the school level.

While looking for autonomy, this principal does realize the importance of building level capacity for improvement. And while the move towards charter schools is certainly in line with granting schools greater independence, it also raises concerns about what supports for change will be available for both RSD and charter schools. They might come from a traditional state-run organization, or from non-profit organizations, which have already begun to appear in the city to

support charters (Ritea & Simon 2007b). Alternatively, some have argued that this increase in autonomy undermines the ability of the schools to serve the public good, emphasizing competition that benefits the few rather than improvement that benefits all children (Dismantling a Community, 2006; Perry, 2007). It remains to be seen if these two differing views on the role of public schools can coexist productively in New Orleans. For the moment, in this city, autonomy and decentralization, not system-wide improvement, seem to have gained the upper hand.

If there is a lesson to be taken from this study, it may be that serious attention needs to be given to change capacity at the school level. This will require school leaders that center the school around improving teaching and learning (Elmore and Burney, 1997) and fight off the tempting role of charismatic leadership by distributing leadership functions across the school staff (Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, & Hopkins, 2007). This helps a school build consensus around change efforts (Carr, 1997) as well as identify and address the inevitable unintended consequences of school change (Fink, 2003). Schools that are able to share leadership and focus on teaching and learning are likely to address the problems that were essentially silenced under the bureaucracy of the old system. While new reformers are bound to make some mistakes, building this culture of learning (Hubbard, Mehan, and Stein, 2006) is the best defense against institutional failure.

Some questions remain. How can trust be built up within school buildings? How can space and time be carved out for teachers to engage in collaborative learning about their work? How can we support autonomous principals so that they can engage in the important task of really *listening* to the feedback that their school gets from its environment (students, parents, community, district and state officials)? While there will always be managerial aspects to school leadership, there needs to be some mechanism by which we can ensure that our urban principals are operating with their heads out of the sand. Those seeking change in the New Orleans Public Schools would be wise to listen to principals' voices asking for autonomy and support, not

mandates and enforcement. This requires running in the opposite direction from the current trend towards accountability and “shame and name” policies of change, and because of this, will require difficult struggle.

### **Limitations of the Study and Future Research**

As mentioned previously, examining the phenomenology of educational change is a project requiring a myriad of perspectives. While those of school principals have been highlighted here, those of students, parents, teachers, and district and state administrators have not been dealt with. Additional research is needed to capture these voices and provide a full complement of perspectives. Of course, this is, in some ways, a race against the clock. As the distance from Katrina grows longer, the immediacy of the opportunities presented by Katrina fades, as does the ability of a researcher to gather the pre-cognitive experience of participants that is sought after in phenomenological inquiry. As residents in New Orleans move on with their lives, their Katrina experiences will get woven into larger narratives about life and education in New Orleans, and the job of the researcher becomes more challenging.

As stated at the outset, this study examines an extreme case of educational change as experienced by school leaders. Since the vast majority of school change efforts are planned, conscious efforts made by educators, and not responses to a natural disaster, it is also important to examine the phenomenology of change in districts undergoing planned change. Perhaps Gross' (1998) levels of turbulence might provide additional guidance in selecting schools that are engaging in change with various levels of turbulence. It seems quite reasonable that the experience of living through change brought on by light turbulence would differ significantly from that brought on by severe turbulence. Examining change in a variety of these contexts would provide a broader picture of how individuals' experiences affect the change process.

Given the slow process of change as predicted by study participants, the short-term period of data collection is certainly a limitation of the study. One principal laughed heartily when I told her that my data collection period would last less than a year, adding that to learn anything from the post-Katrina reforms in New Orleans one would have to study the schools for ten years. And while it was important to capture principals' experiences at the outset of this historically unique change effort, her point is well taken. If reforming New Orleans' schools were a marathon, what is presented here covers little more than the first mile. A significant point in time will be the 2010-11 school year when all RSD schools are re-examined by the state for being returned to local control. If the district remains relatively decentralized, with few neighborhood schools, there will certainly be a need to examine if thematic schools (as both the charters and Paul Vallas seem to be doing) work to improve equal opportunity, or if they further the racial segregation already endemic in New Orleans.

An important follow-up to this study will be to collect data from participants on whether or not these plans for increased instructional focus actually occur in 2007-08. Interviews with both principals and teachers might be useful in determining this information. This will allow us to examine how, if at all, life at the classroom level has changed in response to the structural changes enacted after the Hurricane. The data here suggests that many principals still face very real challenges to creating the schools they envision, and documenting changes in instructional practice over time would be a useful endeavor. Another useful study would be to examine testing data to look at the variance in test scores pre- and post-Katrina to find out of inequality (at least in terms of test scores) in growing or shrinking under the new system. Even without data on the instructional practice of schools pre-Katrina, many schools, especially those in the RSD, are only now beginning to address issues around teaching and learning.

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**Appendix A**  
**Interview Protocols**

**Interview Protocol #1**

When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?

How did you get into the field of education?

Describe your early experiences working in the schools.

How have your feelings about schools changed since you began your career?

If you were talking to a group of undergraduate education majors- what would you tell them?

What is your favorite memory of working in the schools?

What has been the biggest challenge in your career in education?

### **Interview Protocol #2**

What was your experience during Hurricane Katrina?

What changes did this school need prior to Hurricane Katrina?

What were your first thoughts in seeking and accepting the job as principal after Katrina?

What has re-opening a school in post-Katrina been like?

- What objectives/priorities did you have for the immediate re-opening?
- Have there been any surprises along the way?
- What have been the biggest challenges?

How is your experience as principal different now?

- for teachers? Students? Parents?

Principals are often solitary figures, where do find support in this position?

Are the district needs you spoke about earlier being met?

If you could change anything about your school with the wave of a magic wand, what would it be?

**Interview Protocol #3**

If this year had been a movie and you were the director, who would be the main characters and what would be the plot?

What have been your proudest achievements this year?

What have been the biggest “rebuilding” accomplishments this year? “Reform” accomplishments? Has this been a year of getting a school open or reforming an urban school?

What were the strongest forces acting on the school this year? How have you addressed them?

How has the past influenced this school year?

What does your family think of your job?

Do you feel like an outsider or an insider in your job?

What has this year showed you about how schools change?

## VITA

**Brian Beabout**

### WORK HISTORY

<b>Lecturer: Workforce Education Department</b> <i>Penn State University, University Park, Pennsylvania</i>	<b>2007-2008</b>
<b>Instructor/Supervisor: Curriculum and Instruction Department</b> <i>Penn State University, University Park, Pennsylvania</i>	<b>2006-2007</b>
<b>Research Assistant- Instructional Systems Program</b> <i>Penn State University, University Park, Pennsylvania</i>	<b>2004- 2006</b>
<b>Lead English Teacher- Grades 6-8</b> <i>Williams Middle School, Chelsea, Massachusetts</i>	<b>2003-2004</b>
<b>Technology Director/Computer Science Teacher</b> <i>Colegio Americano de Durango, Durango, México</i>	<b>2002-2003</b>
<b>English Teacher and Staff Developer Grades 9-12</b> <i>Marion Abramson Senior High School, New Orleans, LA</i>	<b>1998–2002</b>

### EDUCATION

<b>Ph.D. - Instructional Systems</b> <i>Penn State University- University Park, Pennsylvania</i>	<b>2008</b>
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