“I Had To Teach Hard:”
Traumatic Conditions and
Teachers in Post Katrina Classrooms

Introduction

“The general impact of a natural disaster makes it one of the most challenging crises to be addressed by a teacher” (Damiani, 2006, p 35).

Before Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans on August 29, 2005 and the levee system failed and flooded the city, the jurisdiction for one hundred and twenty one schools in the New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS) was in the process of being transferred to the newly created, state run Recovery School District (RSD. On September 29, 2005, the New Orleans Parish School Board fired all 7500 employees including all teachers. If the change in school leadership and the historical neglect that precipitated the changes were not enough, the disaster brought another layer crises that would confront teachers as they tried to resume educating the returning students to the public schools.

This research study examines the instructional practices of teachers as they prepared lessons for returning students after the disaster and what role writing literacy played in their instructional adaptations. In times of crisis and critical life events, writing has been shown to be a positive vehicle to help individuals alleviate some of the traumatic stresses (Anderson & MacCurdy, 2000; Harris, 2003; Pennebaker, 2000).

In the two year study, the evidence revealed that a disaster event required teachers to make specific changes in disciplinary content and instructional practice. All the teachers acknowledged that teaching after Katrina’s devastation brought unexpected challenges to the classroom. As one teacher stated, “I had to teach hard. I worked harder that semester than I have in my [whole] teaching career” (Personal Communication, August, 2006). Teachers found teaching after the disaster “hard” not only in coping with
their personal stresses but also in dealing with unstable environmental conditions changes in adolescent behavior and adapting disciplinary content throughout the recovery process. For the English Language Arts teachers, oral story telling and written narrative tasks in making curricular adaptations became important tools for coping with the challenges.

**Existing Curricula for Addressing Traumatic Conditions in the Classroom**

A natural or man-made disaster is a critical life event, which may result in traumatic stress brought on by the unexpected change to living without a home, clothing, food or safety. Adults may experience sleeplessness, numbness, recurring nightmares replaying the event, inability to focus, inattentiveness, emotional outbursts, paranoia and more aggressive physical behavior (Dyregrov & Mitchell, 1992). Over time, responses may include physical illness and new physical disabilities or debilitating pain.

In adolescents, the stresses from the disaster can be manifested in poor decisions, involvement in risky behaviors, distrust of adults, violent outbursts and/ or withdrawal. Research on the effects disasters have upon adolescents has revealed similar conclusions (Goenjian, A.K., Molina, L., Steinberg,A.M., Fairbanks, L.A., Geonjian, H.A.& Pynoos, R.S.,2001; Warheit, G. Zimmerman, R.,Khoury, E., Vega, W.& Gail, A.G.,1996; Weems, C. F. & Overstreet, S.,2008; Reijneveid,S., Crone, M., & Verhulst, V.V.,2003).

Directions for educators on how to handle these behaviors through classroom instruction offer general advice (Picard, 2006) and declare the value of school in building an safe environment for building resiliency (Brock, S. Lazurus, P.J. & Jimerson, S., 2006; Jaycox, L. H. Morse, L., Tanielian, T. & Stein, B.,2006; Lerner, M.D. Vogel, J.S. & Lindell, B, 2003; Kruczek, T. & Salsman, J.,2006. Specifically, research and information
about how to address the traumatic stresses that affect teachers and children has varied
disciplinary sources with more research after Katrina and Rita (Bedford, A.& Kieff, J.,2009; Carlson, H.L., Monk, P.E., Irons, E.J. & Walker, C.P.,2010; Masten, A.S. & Obradovic, J.,2008; Wachtendorf, T, Brown, & Nickel, M.C.,2008). Yet this array of information has not focused or analyzed what specifically happens in classrooms when teachers attempt to address the traumatic stresses through disciplinary content and teaching practices and what makes it the most challenging for teachers to handle.

In 2008, *The Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina*, edited by Dorothy Singleton, revealed lessons and literacy activities specifically designed to meet the needs of African American children, but also paid special attention to the effects of education, or lack of academic equity, in the New Orleans schools and family environment (Morris, 2008). Chapter 4, “Culturally Responsive Literacy” suggests writing activities like journaling, storytelling, and personal narrative promote resiliency in young children. These same activities are valuable for older children as well and echo a common theme for building classroom accommodations for children affected with traumatic stress, whatever the source (Bedford & Kieff, 2008; Kliman, G., Oklan, E., Wolfe, H., & Kliman, J, 2005; Tisserand 2007).1 A recurring research theme among all these sources stressed the positive relationship between writing tasks and narrative telling as the initial steps toward psychological recovery from traumatic stresses (Anderson & MacCurdy, 2000; DeSalvio,1999; Pennebaker, 2000).

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1 I want to acknowledge here that any discussion about the New Orleans Public Schools presents historical, racial and cultural factors which deeply affect the resources, educational quality and conditions for teachers within the schools. Unfortunately, that will not be part of this discussion. For an extended discussion of the race, inequity and education, see Robinson & Brown II,Eds. 2007.
For its part, English studies, literacy and teacher research has largely ignored the implications of stress and trauma on teachers and adolescents, and relegated the school discussion of traumatic conditions wrought by the disasters to sociologists and disaster research disciplines. However, there is a growing body of evidence that suggests that the effects of disasters and violence on adolescents can produce long-term debilitating mental effects directly related to language use, literacy practices and cognition (Thompson & Massat, 2005; Wolmer, L., Laor, N., Dedeoglu, C., Siev, J. & Yazgan, Y., 2005; Zull, 2002). What is missing in the research is a study that examines the stress effects upon instruction and learning with teachers and adolescents and the role writing plays.

The Research Questions and Methodology

The crises from the disaster inundated teachers with environmental, multiple disciplinary and behavioral stresses that affected the quality of their teaching and the quality of learning their students. In order to study these issues, I developed the following research questions to guide the study:

1. How did the natural disaster stresses affect classroom-teaching practices in English Language Arts?

2. What role did writing activities or story-telling play in addressing adolescent learning and behavior?

The research plan devised to investigate written discourse as an instructional stress relief in the English Language Arts classroom after a natural disaster was primarily qualitative. Guided by ethnographic writing research, (Bishop, 1999; Heath and Anthanases, 1995) qualitative research design with emphasis on ethnography and case study (Fetterman, 1998; Spradley, 1979; Stake, 1995), I included a quantitative survey as part
of the initial interview process to help me define the areas of stress for the teachers and adolescents. (See Appendix 1 for full research matrix.)

**Research Sites and Entrée**

My ethnographic entrée into the New Orleans community, the social and material conditions of the disaster began in May of 2006. I volunteered at various local cultural centers and conducted summer seminars for teachers on writing and disaster through the Greater New Orleans Writing Project. At these seminars, I met some of the local teachers who helped provide me with names and references at area high schools. After visiting approximately 15 high schools and presenting the research prospectus, I found five public high school administrators willing to allow me to conduct research and 10 teachers willing to participate in the project for the 2006-2007 school year.

I conducted the initial interviews and asked each teacher to narrate what happened before, during and after Katrina struck. These initial narratives, along with the hurricane survey (Appendix 3) provided the foundation for the taxonomy about what made teaching challenging after the disaster.

From August 2006 through June 2008, I visited every teacher in his/her classroom as a participant observer, usually staying for two weeks to a month at each visit: August, October, January, March, April and May. At each visit, I took participant observer notes, conducted interviews with the teachers, and collected material artifacts about the disaster recovery as it affected teaching and writing. In the second year (2007-2008), I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission to add adolescents to the research participants.

**Research Participants**
The criteria for teacher participation involved participating in interviews after each classroom visit, completing the hurricane survey, sharing lesson plans and instructional materials used to teach writing or the disciplinary curriculum and video-tape any writing lessons on Katrina.

For each visit, I attended the teacher’s classes, took observer notes, collected artifacts such as lesson plans, writings or other information and conducted an informal interview. Each teacher selected one class of students for the research investigation. All research subject names and school names are pseudonyms.

**Data Analysis**

I first analyzed the hurricane survey for stress markers. The survey results identified the two most stressful areas for the teachers: worry about family, friends, students and fear of losing their jobs. I used these markers to locate related cultural themes in the qualitative data from the teachers’ hurricane stories and initial interviews. I coded the hurricane stories and interviews for themes related to literacy, teaching and the stresses teachers originally identified. One theme emerged from the initial interviews, hurricane stories and teaching concerns: teaching was equated with hardship.

As I identified the markers for what made teaching hard, two cultural themes emerged: (1) the professional, personal and environmental conditions which made teaching hard related to the disaster, and (2) dramatic changes in adolescent behavior and material conditions within the school which required pedagogical changes. Using these two cultural themes, I constructed a chronological sequence of teaching activities over the two-year period. After each visit, I added data on classroom instructional plans, writing activities interviews and related material artifacts.
During the periodic analysis sessions, the data suggested that writing was more critical in the start of school in January 2006. As a result, I readjusted the meaning of teaching hard and its relationship to writing instruction. Writing and oral storytelling became devices teachers used to quell some of the initial stresses, but the writing assignments and tasks changed with distance from the initial hurricane event.

Study Limitations

New Orleans was a disaster zone. Access to living supplies, food, gasoline and electricity were unreliable, so computers and electronic devices were periodically useless. I struggled with communicating by phone or email with the teachers, since they often changed locations and phone numbers. In addition, I had unreliable and limited living arrangements. Dates and meeting times changed constantly with the latest recovery crisis.

The Institutional Review Board required parental permission before I could contact an adolescent. As a result of out-of-state parent employment and adolescents’ unstable living conditions, I was able to get only 53 permissions in the two years. Therefore, I include some of the student responses to the teaching strategies only, where I have permission and it coordinates with the teacher data.

Data Results

Hard Material Conditions

“Before Katrina’s onslaught, the children of New Orleans were isolated racially, economically, academically and politically in public schools that were financed inadequately, maintained poorly, and governed ineptly. After the storm, the city and its school children were subjected to bureaucratic delays, racial squabbling, and political hostility, a dynamic that could have been predicted easily from decades of neglect, indifference, incompetence, corruption and inaction (Casserly, qtd. in Hartman and Squires, 2006, pp.197-198).
NOHS # 4 opened its doors in January 2006 as a school still under the jurisdiction of the NOPS, since it was not a high school in academic emergency pre-Katrina. Located near the French Quarter and the higher ground of the Mississippi River, the school was not flooded and had many classrooms located in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} stories of the school. As a result, the teaching materials inside the schools were safe and ready to use.

For both NOHS #4 and NOHS # 2, which opened at its old location in February of 2006, the children returning to school were living in difficult conditions. Some adolescents commuted to school from the temporary housing aboard cruise ships or from the temporary housing they found with relatives, since many of their parents were 1\textsuperscript{st} responders, teachers and other support personnel who did not leave the area or returned within a few months.

For all the students at these schools their unpredictable living arrangements continued because of the job displacement of their parents and inability to rebuild their former home or find suitable housing. Some students found ways to attend the same school that they had been attending pre-Katrina, but this often meant that their living quarters were the upstairs of a flooded home, a couch in the home of high school friends or teachers, or the backseat of a car.

Those students returning to school throughout the 2006 spring semester often faced unfamiliar surroundings, new peers and new teachers; for some, demanding and unfamiliar rules of conduct and dress code were placed upon them. NOHS #4, NOHS #1, and NOHS #3 required uniforms, which was difficult and expensive for students who had lost everything in the storm and whose parents had relocated hoping to find employment.
Teachers found themselves teaching multiple grade levels in one classroom. In the remaining academic year of 2005-2006, as teachers attempted to return to pre-Katrina disciplinary curricula, they found these expectations replaced by daily discussions about the latest hurricane conditions and experiences with recovery.

In fall 2006, managed chaos ruled as more schools opened. Students who attended one school in the spring 2006 might transfer to another school for the fall 2006. Lacking sufficient clerical staff to check transcripts for each and every returning student imposed impossible demands upon the school system to verify the correct grade level for each student. In fact with the destruction of many school records, students could self-place in a grade level, at least for a while. Some students had moved so much that they lost an entire academic year of school; others had completed credits, but the credits were not always core academics. For some, the year away was a good experience; for others it meant a year of turmoil and uncertainty.

**Hard Adolescent Behavior after Katrina**

In addition to changes in material conditions, the teachers described the behavioral changes in specific ways: an intellectual passivity, difficulty with maintaining detailed or in-depth study, a numbness to learning, difficulty with acquiring information, prone to more argument and physical violence, and a need for personal affirmation and hope (Personal Communication, August, 2006). In respect to the unique conditions surrounding the New Orleans public schools and educational inequities, Ms. Kelly describes another layer of complication.

All of the schools are segregated in New Orleans, you have black schools; you have white schools. And so the black schools are the low performance schools and when you’re in an environment of low performance it breeds apathy. These kids weren’t accustomed to coming to school on time, going
to class, getting books, doing homework. They were accustomed to going to school for whatever. Go there to have fun, ya show up at 10:00, ya walk around all day if you get ready. That was what was going on in New Orleans Public Schools before the storm, so when they came here into this strict learning environment they didn’t want to be here. So you have one of two kinds of children in your class. You have children who hated being here, and of course they were dealing with all the stresses from the storm too. They didn’t want to be in a disciplined environment. They wanted to be at “my old school.” That’s all they kept saying, “I wanna go back to my old school” And then you had a group of kids who had come from those kinds of schools who were happy about being in an environment where they could really learn. (Personal Communication, August 2006.)

This managed chaos and hard adolescent behavior describes what these teachers experienced at the initial start of schooling whether it was the early spring of 2006 or the fall of 2006.

At NOHS #4, Ms. Kelly, described found more disturbing behaviors from the adolescents in her classroom. She also noted that no guidance or professional support was available for the students responding poorly to the stresses.

So as far as risky behavior goes, it’s not just sex: it’s alcohol and it’s drugs. There are kids who smoke weed everyday before they come to school and I would never point them out because I don’t think that’s really anybody’s business, but I know. Some of them I send them out when they come in because their eyes are all red and they smell like marijuana and I tell them, go and wash your face go and clean yourself up. I can’t show you but I got a bottle of perfume in here and guys use it too, everybody, anybody who smokes regular. I tell them, “go in the bathroom, go wash your face off, spray some of this on you.”

They drink a lot now. They smoke a lot now, and like, nobody’s addressing the psychological issues of these kids now. Everybody’s addressing everything else (Personal Communication, January, 2007).

Another example of this hard adolescent behavior manifested in physical violence among adolescents and in the blatant disregard for formerly held personal values and beliefs. In one instance, the principal found two adolescents having sex in a commonly used stairwell. According to Ms. Kelly no such behavior had ever occurred to her knowledge within the school anywhere.
I interviewed a student in Ms. Kelly’s class, who had attended 3 different schools since he evacuated from New Orleans. After months of moving, he finally ended up in Florida with his father. While there, he committed a robbery on a military base and spent a night in jail. He said that while sitting in the jail with the shackles on his hands and legs, he had a harsh wake up call and asked himself what he was doing (Personal Communication, January 2007).

**Hard to Teach English Language Arts**

Of the ten teachers who committed to this research project (Appendix 2), I present the data of two teacher informants, Ms. Thomas and Ms. Kelly. These two teachers offer the clearest evidence of the hard pedagogical changes and the role writing and oral narratives about the disaster played in their instructional pattern. I provide evidence in two specific phases in the disaster: the resumption of school in the remaining months of the 2005-2006 school year, and the first full academic year after the disaster, 2006-2007.

**Teaching English Language Arts After Katrina—January 2006 to June 2006.**

Ms. Kelly approached the teaching of English Language Arts as a literary-based dialogue about real lived experiences. In January 2006 when school reopened, she said that she and the students talked their way through the classes. Her attempt to teach British Literature to seniors was almost impossible. An important point here is that NOHS #4 did not lose its materials to the wind or water damage.

I was just trying to get to know the ones who had come back, just to re-familiarize myself with the kids who I hadn’t seen before the storm. So that was one thing different, but as far as curriculum goes I kinda used the same syllabus that I had last year but I tried to incorporate more journal writing because I found that kids, this is just in January when we first came back, I found that kids who had experienced all of the things from the storm needed to journal more and so I tried to incorporate more journal writing and more free writing where they were able to express themselves more openly and freely. Sometimes they just want to
get all of that stuff off they minds, so I would just let them do free writing just like five or ten minutes before class started just to clear their minds of all of the stuff (Personal Communication, 2007).

Teaching meant listening to hurricane and recovery stories: student experiences before the hurricane, their evacuation story, their story about staying through the hurricane, the immediate days after the hurricane, or what they had been doing until they returned to school.

In these early months of teaching, Ms. Kelly used writing to complement the oral storytelling. She separated the writing acts of journaling from free writing. Not all students wished to verbally narrate their Katrina experiences, so she would engage students in a special form of free writing. In Ms. Kelly’s free writing instructions, she asked the students to take out a sheet of paper and write for 10 minutes about what was happening to them that day. Then, she asked students to voluntarily share what they had written with the class. After this discussion, she told the students to crumple up the paper and throw it away. The act of throwing it away was a symbolic but physical gesture toward throwing away the emotional troubles and stresses Katrina has brought to the adolescent’s world. A whole class period might be devoted to the unfolding student experiences, while attempting to engage students in some language arts content.

The disaster conditions forced teachers to change their pacing and content in order to meet learning changes that the students brought to the classrooms. As school resumed in the first stage of disaster recovery, the students needed to be talking, telling and writing about the instability in their lives.

**Teaching ELA 2006-2007 Academic Year.** The first anniversary of Katrina coincided with the official opening of RSD schools in fall of 2006. Ms. Kelly’s returning
students had not all had the same experiences while away. In order to create a common understanding and frame of reference, Ms. Kelly began the school year with recapitulation of the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina as it was reported through a series of *Time* magazines.

I got the *Time* magazine and I just watched their reactions when they first opened up the pages. Some of them were astounded by what they saw. Although there were kids who stayed, there were lots of kids who evacuated pretty early who were out of the city who didn’t experience all of the horrors of Katrina. Of course they were away from their school away from their home, but they didn’t actually experience all of the stuff you see on TV. So for them to see it up close was really emotional for some of them and they had an opportunity to journal. They also had to do more formal writing, essays and some other things in relation to those particular articles in the *Time* magazines (Personal Communication, 2007).

Ms. Kelly explained that the writing assignments she devised would complement the magazine readings.

Everybody was given all three of them [magazines], and I told them to pick one article from each magazine. And after they had read all three of them I told them do like a focus free writing on one, and that one is just you tell how you feel about it whatever’s on your mind. They can use profanity. Whatever they think, however they think it that the way they write it [?]. And then the second one they had to do a journal and the third one they had to do a critical journal response, not they had to do a response to the reading in the journal from the third article, so that one was the most formal one where there is a particular format that they have to use when they respond to what it is what they read. They give a critique of it, that’s basically what it is. (Personal Communication, January, 2007)

This is the first example of the evolving writing curriculum Ms. Kelly created in the second year. She continued to use journaling and reflective informal writings as a central activity for establishing a common frame of reference about how Katrina affected the people in New Orleans but then she added the objective writing tasks through an examination of outside materials, not just the students’ own hurricane stories and experiences: three issues of *Time* dedicated to Katrina and Spike Lee’s *When the Levees Broke*. In the second year as distinct from the first, she began informative readings about
the disaster, and then brought her pre-Katrina literary and writing back into her 12th grade English curriculum.

In the 50 minute class period, Ms. Kelly would first assign literature readings from the classroom textbook and told the students to answer the questions at the end of the chapter and then attend to housekeeping duties for about 20 minutes. Then she began the instructional class with a review what the students had read and written (Participant Observer Notes, August 2006, January 2007) as a traditional question and answer activity. Ms. Kelly shared the canonical interpretations of the literary selection, and then linked the literature lesson to the present realities in New Orleans for herself and her students.

Actually, it’s easier, believe it or not. The connections are so much better than they were before the storm. These children before Katrina, I mean the Big Easy, they’ll tell you, the Big Easy, New Orleans, they just poke fun. It was just, everyday, everyday always going on. So that when they read things about tragedy in literature sometimes it was difficult for them to make connections with the truth. Now it is so much easier. And we did an American Living. We did a plantation and everything that has to do with the Pilgrims coming over. They could totally relate to going into a place that was a new surrounding it. They could totally relate to it, easy, so easy to make the connection. When we did Beowulf, we talked about the hero, about the universal theme where you had this fight between good and evil. Easy to, they talk about how the hero is not always, the here doesn’t always fight the physical person, sometimes they’re fighting the government like FEMA. Katrina is in everything that we do now. Every single story, everything we do. Somebody puts Katrina in it, in everything. (Personal Communication, Fall, 2006).

As this above citation illustrates, Katrina issues provided Ms. Kelly’s a social, personal and cultural context through which she could introduce canonical literature and reestablish disciplinary content in the ELA classroom. In the desperate conditions surrounding a disaster, Ms. Kelly found a way to address the continuing need for students to discuss Katrina and regain the curricular goals for her 12th grade classes.
In a final quotation, Ms. Kelly explained how she survived the first full year of teaching after Katrina:

It’s difficult. It’s very difficult. And I can tell you that everyday when I leave this building people say all the time, “Kelly, you don’t bring work home. I see you leave just leaving here everyday”. I leave here everyday with my purse and my sanity. If I don’t have that I don’t have anything else because when I get home I have to have something to give to my own children and this place… and every other teacher who is teaching right now children who were affected by Hurricane Katrina, it drains you. It is draining. There are so many problems. There are so many things going on in their lives, they gotta come to somebody with it. So it’s going be the teacher. It’s going be the teacher that is open to what they have to say who’s not going to judge them, who’s not going to say look what she’s doing.

Ms. Kelly realized that she had to change what she did in the classroom in the months immediately after Katrina; her educational responsibilities had more to do with psychologically assisting her students’ desperate emotional needs and her addressing her own personal stresses while trying to maintain her disciplinary content. 

**Teaching 8th Grade ELA at NOHS #2: January 2006 to June 2006.**

Ms. Thomas articulated her teaching method from January through June 2006 in the following way:

If I had something I was going to try to teach, I’d try to teach everything at least 6 to 9 ways. They would still just be starting to get it. And then, I’d do those 9 ways again with more guided practice the following week. And in some ways, it was a very delightful year, because everything felt very fresh, and there was a lot of passion. I love that. We also had a lot of kids that were just plain totally exhausted, and couldn’t keep their eyes open in class, especially kids on the cruise ships. They would be up all night playing video games in the game room. They had some, you know, we had so many kids this year that had such small spaces to live in. And our kids had much much more anxiety about projects that required any materials. I tried to minimize the materials they might be asked to use. I did a project where people in ordinary household items that everyone would be expected to have around. Some of them don’t have them this year (Personal Communication, August 2006).
Ms. Thomas discovered, like many of the teachers, that the students displaced by uncertain living conditions and family stresses diverted learning energy to surviving. Ms. Thomas, also found that she had to still prepare students for the required standardized tests. This limited what she assigned in terms of writing tasks.

It really has more to do with what I am expected to do as an English teacher than anything else. When you come right down to it, I have these GLE’s (grade level expectations), and I have what my kids are going to be tested on. And I know that when they take the standardized writing tests, they will have either a persuasive or narrative essay (Personal Communication, August 2007).

She engaged students directly in the Katrina issues, but contained them within mandated tests genres or assignments that taught writing concepts not just writing that would allow emotional release.

**Teaching Hard and the Healing Curriculum.**

Ms. Thomas had the opportunity in January of 2006 to participate in the *Healing Curriculum*. Through the collaborative efforts of the School of Psychology at Tulane and Walden University, the administration at NOHS #2 provided training and information for the teaching staff about the effects of the disaster upon children based upon *The Healing Curriculum* written by Stacey Overstreet and Bonnie Nastasi, The professional psychologists took the teachers through a detailed process beginning with an activity to address different emotions, which asked participants to communicate their feelings both verbally and non-verbally.

Then we came in and they sort of explained you know that they wanted to actually give some time and sort of a formal way for kids to process this, and we did a sample lesson. Or maybe it was like four sample lessons done in a very shrunken kind of way in a faculty meeting, to which there was a great range of reactions. Then we were sort of given this binder and everybody was assigned a partner of some kind, somebody who was going to work with them in their classroom. Then everybody sort of went into their classrooms and taught that curriculum however they thought was best. For me, it was a really, really, really
good experience. And for my students as well, they loved it, they looked forward to it (Personal Communication, January, 2006).

Ms. Thomas’s situation with the Healing Curriculum and the psychological services highlight the disparity in psychological help and resources available to schools and school personnel in the two years after Katrina.

**Responding to the Needs of Adolescents January to June 2006.**

Ms. Thomas adapted the healing curriculum into her 8th grade language arts class including celebratory occasions, which encouraged the students’ academic performance. She hoped to restore some hope and normalcy in the adolescent’s classroom life.

Middle school is a time when people can be very unsure of themselves, anyway. I felt that there were some of the same kids who seemed much more sure of themselves before the storm, seemed more unsure of themselves afterwards. Sad to say, I found that for that age, I’d never had a group of kids, ever, at any school I’d every taught at that age group, who were more cynical. I don’t mean in personal relationships, but cynical. They have no expectations that, anything that they were told by an authority was true. Or would actually be helpful to them.

I felt I wouldn’t know exactly how to articulate what led me to this conclusion, but I felt that they were very in need of triumphs and celebrations. So, I orchestrated a lot of triumphs and celebrations than I ordinarily would (Personal Communication, August 2006).

In this passage, Ms. Thomas addressed one of the major responses of adolescents who were facing traumatic stresses: a numbing cynicism toward people in authority and with all that was happening around them over which they had no control. Given these classroom realities, Ms. Thomas said her intuitive teacher knowledge lead her to the idea of promoting celebrations for the learning accomplishments students made.

Ms. Thomas’s instructional time began when the bell rang. She used every moment of classroom time to create a positive and inviting classroom exchange. When taking role, she would address each student by name and with a personal, academically affirmining appellation: “Elaine, my intelligent student, where are you?” Then, class
instruction would immediately begin with an oral announcement about what the day’s lesson already written on the board, and followed with instruction. The formal instruction began with an explanation, followed by examples, Q & A about the examples, practice with teacher, seated work on the example, followed by a little celebration before returning to address the goals for tomorrow’s class. Instructional strategies were sequenced to repeat and rehearse the lesson. Ms. Thomas kept her classroom routine tightly structured yet filled with support and meaningful learning.

Again, I could be wrong, but they were slower to learn. Although they learned a whole lot of stuff, you know to actually complete an objective, what would have taken me a week to teach took three weeks. I basically threw my usual scope and sequence out the window. I taught harder, you know, taught harder to get the same results (Personal Communication, 2007).

**Ms. Thomas’s 8th grade ELA 2006-2007 Academic Year.**

When I saw Ms. Thomas at the beginning of the 2006-2007 school year, she was determined to return to her goal of preparing her students to pass the state mandated exams and not allow the Katrina debacle to interfere with her students’ progress. “I would certainly say the three goals for my class are improved reading, written expression and verbal expression.” (Personal Communication, August 2006).

During one springtime visit, I observed Mrs. Thomas giving a test to her 8th grade language arts students. She began the class period with a systematic review of the language arts concept, and she still employed the positive, affirming appellations for each student: “My budding geniuses, we are going to have a test today.” During the first section of the class, she reviewed with the students by asking questions, and then calling on the student to respond, complementing each answer with yet more positive
affirmations about their intellectual ability. If the student had trouble, she would refer the question to other students for assistance.

After lunch, she started the class by playing Bobby McFerrin’s song “Don’t Worry. Be Happy.” The students were allowed to stand up and move with the song. At one point, students stood up on the seat of the chairs and danced to the rhythms and sang along with the song. Students did not become unruly or too loud but kept to the spirit and intent of the celebration. Then, the students took the test. I interviewed one of the students afterward and asked about the music and the dance. The student told me that she really liked it, and it helped her to relax and take the test.

In these subsequent writing activities, Ms. Thomas took indirect approaches to address the residual feelings about Katrina by creating an objective writing assignment that utilized the students’ personal interests in Katrina.

Then, they also do oral history. And that touched upon Katrina a great deal. I had kids interview people on the Army Corps of Engineers, I had kids interview Betsy survivors, and Camille survivors and you know their families, who had worse times with Katrina. Lots and lots of Katrina stuff.

(Personal Communication, June 2007)

These types of writing assignments for 8th graders show the variability and development of writing genres while keeping the focus on Katrina and advancing the subjective genres to the more objective genres, such as the report writing and oral histories.

Conclusion

In the post-Katrina classrooms, effective instruction meant hard work to accommodate the dramatic changes in adolescent behavior and material conditions. In spite of difference in psychological support, the two teachers illustrated the dynamic effects a disaster has upon instruction and disciplinary content. Their stories outlined the
importance of allowing students to discuss or write about their hurricane experiences and stresses. Once teachers resumed instructing in disciplinary content, they kept lessons to small increments with repetitive practices and varied rehearsal. Teachers also had to create learning activities and writing opportunities that allowed students to discuss, examine and reflect upon their experiences over time and not just after the immediate incident. This includes integrating disciplinary content with continuing disaster recovery experiences. Building a positive classroom environment in the bleak disaster environment included finding cause for celebration and personally positive incentives for learning.

Finally, there is evidence that teachers and students need psychological support immediately after and for an undetermined period beyond the disaster event.

These teachers been *Katrina’d*, too. Even though it was difficult to face the unruly student behavior, the unstable material conditions and the necessary instructional adjustments, they were still teaching. That’s hard enough.

**Implications and Future Research**

As a discipline, English Language Arts is uniquely situated to be a crucial area for pedagogical development and training related to the effects of trauma on developing adolescent literacy. We need research examining the process of recovery from critical life events and the role of that writing and literacy play in affecting resiliency among adolescents. This has broad implications for teacher educators as we consider the required subject knowledge and pedagogical preparation for our student teachers in English Language Arts.

For responsible action, the school administration needs to take action and provide 1st responder status and training for teachers (See Lazurus, Jimerson and Brock NASP
2007, Chapter 23 on Natural Disasters). In preparing for the safety and security of the children, a role of 1st responder formally and professionally mandated will provide the needed assistance and psychological support needed by those who serve in these roles (Dyregrov. A, 1991). If our professional responsibility is to educate, then as educators we need training and psychological and monetary support to meet the challenging crises the disaster and its effects bring to our classrooms.
## Appendix 1 Research Questions, Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Research methods for collecting data: Qualitative &amp; Quantitative</th>
<th>Data analysis method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ1 How did the natural disaster affect classroom teaching practices in English Language Arts?</td>
<td>PO notes, interviews, teacher oral narratives; Hurricane Experience Story Hurricane Survey on Stress after Hurricane</td>
<td>After transcripts were made of interviews, all notes, interviews coded for themes and taxonomic categories of disaster, teaching and changes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ2 What role did writing or story-telling play in addressing perceived changes in adolescent learning and behavior?</td>
<td>Teacher lesson plans, interviews, classroom tapes of instruction</td>
<td>Atlas ti5 for coding interviews, participant observer notes, material artifacts completed by students, and focus group analysis cross-coded with all quantitative data. All these were correlated to a time line sequence for co-occurring social events, personal conditions, classroom activities and writing or telling events and then coded for that event. I followed this procedure looking for co-occurrences of events, personal conditions, writing results, and changes in behavior.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 2  List of Schools & Teachers Participating in the Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School name</th>
<th>*Teacher name</th>
<th>Grade level of ELA</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Academic Status</th>
<th>Ethnicity, geographic identity, Area of Certification</th>
<th>Type of School Post-Katrina</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NOHS #2</td>
<td>Ms. Thomas</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>Arts and Academic Program</td>
<td>Euro-Amer.;6 years living in NO; originally from Penn; ELA 7-12</td>
<td>Charter NOPS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOHS #4</td>
<td>Ms. Kelly</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>College Preparatory HS</td>
<td>Afri.Amer.;native to NO.; ELA 7-12</td>
<td>NOPS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* All teacher names and schools as pseudonyms
Appendix 3

Hurricane Information Survey (Warheit et al. 1996)

Please answer with the following selections: Never, Sometimes, Often or Always for each of the following conditions which directly relate to you about your experiences immediately after Hurricane Katrina.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NEVER</th>
<th>SOMETIMES</th>
<th>OFTEN</th>
<th>ALWAYS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I had trouble sleeping</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. I had bad dreams or nightmares</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. I feel upset and restless more than usual</td>
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<td>4. I felt the need to be alone</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. I got into more verbal arguments than usual</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. I got into more physical fights than usual</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. I cried more easily</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. I was concerned about where I would go to school or work</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. I missed other family members</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. I felt very sad about damage to our home or things</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. I felt very bad about being away from my own home</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. I worried a lot about what was going to happen to me and my family</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>13. I felt worried and anxious about things in general</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. I was very sad, moody and depressed</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. I got into more trouble at school than usual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Bedford, April, Kieff, Judy, (Eds.). (2009). Surviving the storm: Creating opportunities for learning in response to Hurricane Katrina. Olney, MD: ACEI.


Winston.


