



AMPLIFYING THE VOICE OF THE COMMUNITY

OPEN Participatory Action Research Results Published in Educational Action Research Journal

In 2007, two years after Hurricane Katrina, education and child advocacy groups convened to discuss what it would take to create a sustainable education reform movement in post-Katrina New Orleans. From this dialogue, Orleans Public Education Network (OPEN) emerged as a network of educational advocacy and grassroots organizations and civically engaged community members. OPEN members realized that sustainable reform requires the engagement of a broad and diverse citizenry. This realization presented an opportunity to address the long-standing disengagement and disempowerment of the majority of families whose children attended and attend New Orleans public schools. OPEN joined community groups and outside university researchers to implement a multi-year participatory action research (PAR) project to engage historically marginalized populations and parents in a dialogue about their impressions of and hopes for public education, and have released the results of that study in an upcoming article in the Educational Action Research Journal (Spring 2014).

The study found that in order to create a collective vision for what quality public education looks like, the New Orleans community needs to resolve perceived challenges with quality school access, who is governing those schools, inconsistent teacher quality, inequitable resource distribution, and strategies for serving challenging students.

[Background on the Issues](#)

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, state legislators placed many previously failing

New Orleans schools under the jurisdiction of the Recovery School District (RSD). The takeover resulted in the creation of a decentralized network of schools, many of them public charter schools, overseen by a number of local and state entities. However, the vast majority of schools were run by the RSD, with Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), the previous governing entity, operating fewer than 20 schools.

To put it plainly, even before Hurricane Katrina, poor black children did not have access to high quality educational environments. This was evident in the high levels of enrollment of wealthier, educated blacks and whites in magnet and private schools compared to the majority poor and black children, making up the largest demographic group in the New Orleans public school population.

Post-Katrina, the hope was that finally, families would have a choice in where they sent their children to be educated and that they could have a say in how schools were redesigned and reconfigured with quality education in mind. This did not become reality. Instead, a 'feeding frenzy' began, resulting from the national focus on the need to open and operate a large number of schools, accomplished through chartering* many of these schools. Opening new schools is a huge undertaking in itself: when you add the dynamic of enrolling students who have experienced significant trauma, many of whom were historically academically behind, the challenge exponentially increases.

Engaging A Diverse Cross-Section of the Community

If schools are going to work to become high quality, at the heart of their design should be the interest, concerns, and aspirations of the families and children they serve. The PAR study was designed to interrupt the trend of systemic exclusion, opportunism and marginalization by engaging discounted consumers of public education in the active reimagining and reconstruction of public education in New Orleans.

It was in this context that OPEN concluded that a community engagement process using principles of participatory research was the best conduit for this engagement. Over several months, a partnership between the university-based researchers, the OPEN board of directors, and OPEN's executive director was developed, leading to collaborative work on a pilot participatory research study launched in 2009.

We employed the PAR study to directly address the disempowerment of many New Orleans community members and delve deep into participants' lived experiences with public education and their hopes and dreams for the future. The goal of the pilot project was to frame core issues of educational inequity and identified strategies for bringing best practices to bear to realize the black community's vision for a quality public education.

The respondents included OPSB and RSD representatives, charter school advocates, parents, parent advocates, students, community members representing various New Orleans community organizations interested in public education, and teachers in RSD public schools. A total of 99 individuals participated in interviews and focus groups, expressing a range of frustrations, fears, and hopes for the future of public education for New Orleans' most marginalized children.

The Results

Across the board, the diverse views of different stakeholders communicated the real need to ensure that community members who are impacted by policy decisions at the state level have a voice at the decision-making table.

The participants expressed the hope and desire for quality public education for all. They also expressed their concern with the current system or systems, viewed as confusing and difficult to navigate. Many school and parent participants expressed the belief that the system(s) were confusing by design, to prevent poorer, black children, and children with special needs from accessing the more successful schools. Parents were confounded by the different application procedures, admissions policies, and discipline policies. Those who could not "figure it out" had to settle for sending their children to schools with poor resources, underprepared teachers, and lower expectations. Those who were able to opt out of the system enrolled their children at well-established charter schools or private ones, similar to pre-Katrina.

Conclusions & Next Steps

A key finding that arose in this study is that school reform resulting in real, sustained positive change in educational practices and realities requires a high level of parent engagement. This engagement is especially critical in the New Orleans context, where parents have clearly communicated their sense of exclusion from the pulse of the landscape. Barriers to engagement must be removed so

*Charter schools are defined by the U.S. Department of Education as "autonomous public schools, bound by some local, state, and federal laws, but freed from many policy restrictions imposed on other public schools to make decisions about school operations, with limited public control but substantial public and market accountability." As a result, charter schools can innovate to improve instructional quality and student achievement. Charter schools are approved through a charter authorizer who is responsible for holding charter schools accountable to the goals listed in their charter, which is usually granted for a term of around 3 to 5 years.

that parents can be active members of the creation of a shared vision for the school system.

OPEN continuously works to keep parents and other community members engaged and committed to public education as equal partners, because realizing the vision for New Orleans children requires the commitment of all parties. The study began as an equal and inclusive exchange of experiences and ideas, and will fuel continued partnerships for decisions that impact the public education of their future generation of citizens.

This article is an abbreviated version of the full study, co-authored with Dr. Elizabeth Drame and Dr. Elise Frattura. The study will be available for viewing in the Educational Action Research Journal (tandfonline.com) Spring 2014.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



THEMES	SUMMARY STATEMENT OF THEMES
Theme 1: System or Systems or System(s): Navigating the evolving governance reality in New Orleans	Respondents conveyed conflicting perspectives on the benefits and challenges of having multiple types of schools governed by different entities operating under different rules.
Theme 2: Where you go decides what you get	Hurricane Katrina and the state takeover of schools resulted in a myriad of choices of schools governed by different entities. These choices did not result in pervasive improvements in quality and increased parental choices has led to increased confusion
Theme 3: Closed doors, open doors, cracked doors: Concerns about access to quality public schools for all learners	Despite the elimination of rules governing what schools students can attend, access to all schools is still not a guarantee for many.
Theme 4: What it is and what it shall be: Characteristics and determinants of school quality	Respondents described the characteristics of quality public education, including challenges with ensuring quality. They highlighted the need for including the need for instructional rigor and high teacher capacity, in particular.
Theme 5: The haves and have nots: Impacts of inconsistent resources on quality public education	New Orleans public schools faces challenges with facilities, materials, staffing, the significant needs of students with disabilities, and the presence of large numbers of financially stressed families, to name a few. Lack of equitably distributed resources is a significant barrier to quality.
Theme 6: Who takes the fall when our kids fail?: The need for distributed accountability	Accountability for all stakeholders operating across all types of schools is needed to ensure quality. Many felt that some groups and schools are more or less accountable than others for student performance.