

The Culture of Trauma: A Personal Perspective

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Abstract

My son's personal experience as a New Orleans refugee from Hurricane Katrina has forced me to reflect about how this traumatic event, the subsequent series of displacements and uncertainties, has impacted his school performance at his interim placement in Texas. Distinct "cultural" attributes, influenced by recent emotional turmoil, have been displayed by my son. This experience has prompted me to take a look at the literature to gain insight for all students who may experience any sort of emotional trauma, especially from a natural disaster. In view of the many recent natural disasters throughout our country, educators should be encouraged to consider how emotional trauma can be a facet of a student's culture, with the possibility of causing negative effects to academic achievement.

I've always been amazed and flattered to see how people reacted to my statement of "I'm from New Orleans." Who would have thought that having been born and raised and lived in a place for 45 years would create such animation and enthusiastic conversation with total strangers. However, it is this very same statement that continues to draw ready conversation and now brings serious self-reflection on teaching in general and on my personal teaching philosophy. More than my own background, it was my son's unique experiences which have prompted this examination and gentle expansion of what culture truly is and what does it really include for educators and educational planning.

Relative to the increases of ethnic and racial diversity in student populations in the United States, and especially South Carolina, much has been written about improving and refining the cultural competence of teachers with a need for increased cultural knowledge and sensitivity in our classrooms in order to enhance student performance. There seems to be general agreement that teachers and teacher educators need to be able to maintain classrooms having relevance and meaning to all students—including cultural relevance and social meaning (Howard, 2003). Diversity projections to the year 2050 indicate our student population increasing to nearly 57% of all U.S. students—up from 33% (Howard, 2003).

In looking to define culture, several definitions can be found. The literature also has information as to how culture impacts school learning. The difficulty of defining culture is compounded by the fact it reflects an "essence of who we are and how we exist in the world" (Hollins, 1996, p. 2). I feel this particular statement truly captures each of us and our individuality because no matter what larger cultural group with which we belong, each of us has many facets—like diamonds—and teachers should consider each child's learning potential by looking at those facets to improve understanding of the individual. Human cultures vary along several dimensions (Deweese, 2001).

Most references to culture consider ethnicity, race, customs, beliefs, values, and language differences among student populations. Therefore, much in the literature focuses on strategies for teachers on becoming familiar with various cultures, customs, languages, etc. by incorporating activities for learning and celebrating diversity. Admittedly, this was my own, limited understanding of cultural competence—at least up until a few months ago. What happened a few months ago—August 29, 2005 to be exact—was Hurricane Katrina. I now know that “culture” of an individual includes all that AND religion, AND socioeconomic status (SES), AND past traumatic experiences. Trauma experiences can include physical or psychological abuse, war, illness, rape, robbery, terrorism, natural disasters, or forced relocation (Kerka, 2005).

Since the World Trade Tower disaster in New York in 2001, the U.S. has had nine hurricanes (tropical storms excluded) strike the mainland (excluding 2005 data) (Blake, Jarrell, & Rappaport, n.d.). Comparatively, the 2005 hurricane season had four major hurricanes hitting the U.S. (i.e., Dennis, Katrina, Rita, and Wilma) (NOAA Reviews, n.d.). These hurricanes caused major disruptions in the daily lives of residents, including children of school age. Since Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast area, thousands of school-age children have been displaced from their familiar homes and their community schools. In Orleans Parish alone with a public school student population of over 65,000 (New Orleans Public Schools, 2005), 15 school sites remain closed nearly three months later (LA Dept. of Education, 2005). Shockingly, these numbers are only for one, small area (Orleans Parish) and do not include those schools elsewhere in the greater New Orleans area, or in Mississippi, or any of the many private schools in those areas.

Similarly, and most recently, as a result of the other, recent natural disasters in the United States (e.g., tornados, flooding, etc.), many students have experienced a sort of “educational displacement” which has brought with it, its own unique forms of student diversity in a classroom. Such traumatic events are very powerful and likely influence overall student achievement in ways which are difficult, if not impossible, to measure in short terms or with a good measure of accuracy.

What began for some as a weekend of preparing a home for a hurricane (e.g. boarding windows, purchasing groceries, stocking candles or batteries, etc.) with reasonable anticipation of being away from home for a few days—whether fleeing town or seeking refuge in a nearby shelter, turned into a tragedy beyond anyone’s imagination. (The trauma the adults have experienced is worthy of consideration also, but not for this paper.) It is the school age children who are feeling the fallout of the adult trauma as well as their own inventions of fears of the unknown. Some symptoms of emotional trauma have been manifested by my own son who is a junior in high school. I also have several other family members and friends with school age children who have been educationally displaced and are experiencing similar emotional turmoil. (One family member’s son was so distraught, he refused to attend an interim school until his home school reopened.) The impact of losing an entire home, being in an unfamiliar setting, or witnessing violence or loss undoubtedly will affect attention and focus. This impact can last quite a while and be manifested in a number of ways.

Consider this scenario which has been repeated hundreds of times across the Gulf Coast region. A family is forced to relocate due to one of the four hurricanes this year. The school age members of the family interpret the trip as unexpected “holidays” from school—initially a real joy in their mind. For a week or so, no one anticipates this “trip” lasting very long so education alternatives are not a top priority. After a couple of weeks of living out of a suitcase and watching grim news reports, the adult members begin to locate alternative or interim school

placement for their children. The children are subsequently enrolled in a school but the children are viewed as new, different, strange, and likely are not thinking the current situation will be lasting much longer so may not take the class work seriously or may think the home-based school will not “count” the work done at the interim school. A couple of more weeks pass (now six weeks since first relocating), and everyone begins to realize the seriousness of the situation but a lot of crucial time has lapsed. For some children, there may not have been an interim enrollment period, in which case, severe academic effects will certainly be seen. In either scenario, the effects of the trauma play a major role in a student’s ability to focus, to learn, and to achieve.

Educators are much more familiar with considerations of students’ responses following a more transient (not to discount the experience) traumatic experience, such as a divorce, a family death or the death of a beloved pet. Trauma from a natural disaster may be similar to the experience of the death of a close relative or friend in which some symptoms manifested may include depression, sleeplessness, and/or substance abuse (Rheingold, et al., 2004). What this targeted population is experiencing is continuing trauma—some showing manifestations of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Several common symptoms of trauma can include: marked disinterest in activities, decline in cognitive performance, feeling of detachment, or enduring personality changes (Obiakor, Mehring, & Schwenn, n.d.). Any of these may affect academic performance for any age student.

All students, regardless of culture or background, need exemplary teachers who are truly connected to their students (Murrell, 2002). Teachers who are disconnected from students’ culture and background are at a severe disadvantage and this disadvantage can affect the overall achievement of the students. Each teacher becomes a classroom “architect” (Murrell), in a sense, to build the class community to reflect cultural differences, to welcome diverse traditions, and to consider the unique experiences each student brings. Traumatic events can exacerbate the learning process yet it may not be readily apparent that a learner is experiencing the effects of trauma (Kerka, 2002). The teacher’s “connectedness” will help identify those students who may have greater difficulty in learning due to trauma. Human responses to situations and consequent human behaviors may differ across cultures, even when initial responses are similar, the subsequent actions might vary (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000).

Students will likely expend more cognitive and emotional energies relative to traumatic events, thereby diminishing their full attention to the curriculum at hand (Gray & Lombardo, 2004). All media (i.e., print, video, radio) tends to provide a heavy focus on the series of events after many natural disasters. The students cannot avoid exposure to these media coverages, yet they can be torn between wanting to see more and the effects of seeing so much. Young students may spend a majority of their time, wondering if the event will repeat itself (not knowing the science of cause of hurricanes) or wondering if, or when, they can go home (expecting their home to be in the same condition as when they left).

On the other hand, tragic events can shatter assumptions about the safety or stability of the life of the student (Mahoney & Clarke, 2004). Some students may not feel safe no matter where they are or what verbal assurances are provided by adults. For some, emotional fallout may manifest itself similar to that of a death, for example, the death of a community, so responses may include grief and depression over the loss of their home and traditions within their neighborhoods. School counselors and school psychologists would be good resources for teachers to help students in the school setting.

Generally speaking, what can teachers do to help students who have experienced trauma? The National Association of School Psychologists' (NASP) website (www.nasponline.org) has offered several documents related to classroom considerations or parent tips. The listing below is adapted from one of those documents ("Help Students Cope," n.d.)

- Give students the opportunity to talk and express feelings. Equally important is for students to feel comfortable expressing pride or rage (Banks, 1999) in communicatively appropriate ways.
- The climate of the classroom can make students feel more comfortable about sharing. A positive communicative climate can foster trust and friendly conversation (Socha & Albada, 2002). Teachers can be pivotal in setting the climate of the class for sharing.
- Don't force students to talk. Some students may be eager to share their experiences but others may feel reticent about sharing and may feel more comfortable in listening to others or may only ask occasional questions.
- Give students a purpose. Especially for those in classrooms due to forced relocation, some students may feel as though they don't belong or that their time spent in a school may be much more temporary than it actually will be. They may also feel that their efforts or their work will not "count" when and if they return to their home-based school.
- Get extra support for students who need it. It is possible that some students who generally perform well and without special services or assistance may perform poorly directly due to the trauma experience. These students should be provided the appropriate psychological and academic support as needed.

Teachers' cultural competence encompasses much more than ever before. In addition to the traditional considerations related to culture (ethnicity, race, customs, beliefs, values, religion, and language differences), teachers must now consider the "cultural" aspects and the impact of trauma and the effects it has on student learning and achievement. I encourage educators to seriously consider how emotional trauma can be part of a student's total culture, with the possibility of causing negative effects to academic achievement.

What has always been a tough job for educators is becoming a monumental task. Cultural competence is growing to include aspects of emotional stability and genuine sensitivity in the event students suffer from incidents of fire, ravages of tornados, the terror of lock-downs or become refugees from a natural disaster. Are we ready for all that? If not, how do we prepare?

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