

**Katrina's Children:  
An Analysis of Educational Outcomes among Displaced Children  
in Colorado**

By

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## Introduction

On August 29, 2005, Americans witnessed one of the most horrific disasters in United States history. Predictions of meteorologists across the country came true as Hurricane Katrina's massive winds and water breached the levee system surrounding the city of New Orleans, Louisiana. As water flooded the city, hundreds of thousands of residents were left without homes, jobs, and family members or close friends. Over one million people along the Gulf Coast were forced to relocate after Katrina's landfall, many of whom were African American and poor. Researchers have estimated that approximately 372,000 people from this group were children (Casserly, 2006; Freeman, 2007). Although a majority of the families relocated to Texas, Georgia, and other parts of Louisiana, displaced children began attending schools in every state across the country except Hawaii (Freeman, 2007).

Following the hurricane and mass displacement, over 14,000 persons from the U.S. Gulf Coast relocated to the state of Colorado. These displaced persons included many families with children (although exact figures are not available). To date, little research has carefully examined the experiences of displaced children and youth in the aftermath of the disaster. For my thesis, I am interested in learning about how school-aged children in Denver, Colorado coped and adjusted following their displacement after the hurricane. Specifically, I focus on schooling and educational attainment among children from New Orleans and how the relocation impacted their grades. To help learn about this topic, I sought to answer these research questions:

1. What have displaced children's and youth's experiences been with schooling in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina?
2. How have their experiences impacted their grades in school?
3. What benefits have children found in their new schools and environment?

In the next section of my thesis, I provide an overview of the existing literature on children in disasters. Specifically, I look at the impacts disasters have on children's educational experiences. Next, the methods section describes how I conducted my research including research design and sample population. Following the methods section, I discuss the impacts of Hurricane Katrina and its relocation on children's experiences and grades. I also analyze the benefits children found in their educational experiences following their displacement to Colorado. Finally, I conclude my thesis by discussing the overarching themes I discovered in my research.

## Literature Review

In a review of the research literature on children and disasters, Peek (2008) describes three types of vulnerability that children face: psychological, physical, and educational. Over the past three decades, most research on children in disasters has focused on their psychological reactions such as stress disorders (like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), emotional reactions, etc. Physical vulnerabilities for children include illness, injury, and death. Disasters also may have a major impact on children's education. However, there is a significant lack of research in the area of educational impacts following disasters (Fothergill and Peek, 2006). For the purposes of this study, I focused mainly on the literature dealing with children's educational vulnerability and the impacts of a disaster on their education.

### **Obstacles to Education**

Children face many educational issues after experiencing a disaster of any kind, whether it is a willful human act such as terrorism or a natural disaster such as floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, and hurricanes. Several of these obstacles are laid out in the following sections:

**Serial Relocation.** Children who are displaced after a disaster may be forced to attend multiple schools in unfamiliar locations. Being displaced without forewarning and then being forced to transition to a new school (or multiple schools) can negatively impact a child's educational attainment.

Picou and colleagues (2007) refer to this phenomenon as “serial relocation,” which causes long term social disruption. Although it is often difficult for children to change schools, doing so under the context of a conventional move is much less disruptive and stressful than being so quickly and suddenly displaced as was the case with evacuees from Hurricane Katrina (Sacerdote 2008).

**Grades.** Following Hurricane Katrina, hundreds of thousands of students were uprooted from their homes and forced to attend school in completely new and different environments. Several studies have shown that there was a significant drop in academic performance among the majority of the students in the years following the disaster (Barrett 2008; Casserly 2006; Freeman 2007; Irvine 2007; Picou et al. 2007; Reich et al. 2008; Sacerdote 2008). Casserly studied children’s academic performance in Texas after the hurricane. Drawing on the Spring 2006 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), he found that while 89 percent of the state students passed the reading portion of the test, only 58 percent of the school-age evacuees passed (2006). In the year following the hurricane, these findings were consistent across the country. Children in Colorado faced a decline in their grades due to the fact that the expectations for academic performance are much higher in Colorado than those in New Orleans (Reich et al., 2008).

**Demographics.** Children who were displaced after Katrina were forced to adjust to schools that often had a substantially different demographic make-up than their old schools in New Orleans. According to Darling-Hammond (2007), American schools are the most unequal in industrialized nations in terms of spending, curriculum offerings, teaching quality, and outcomes. Most of these differences are highly correlated with race because of the significant number of segregated schools in America (Darling-Hammond 2007). Because of the underfunding of segregated schools that are predominantly composed of minority children, minority students (and especially African Americans

and Latinos) perform much more poorly in terms of standardized tests and average grades than their white counterparts (Irvine 2007).

Another issue with segregated schools arises after students have been displaced following a disaster such as Hurricane Katrina. Both African American and white students from Louisiana faced racial differences in their new schools upon relocating. African American children often ended up in schools where they were the numerical minority (as opposed to New Orleans, where African American youth made up over 90 percent of all students in the public schools). White children, on the other hand, ended up in communities and schools that were less diverse than those they attended in New Orleans. This caused both black and white students alike to feel unwanted or out of place in their new environment due to the demographic differences in the cities where they relocated after the storm (Fothergill and Peek 2008).

**Quality of Education.** Another issue students struggled with after being displaced across the country was related to how different their new schools and environments were compared to their old schools in New Orleans. Fothergill and Peek (2008) found that some African American children felt their new schools were rougher, more violent, and more dangerous than their previous schools had been (2008). Many students found it difficult to become actively involved with clubs and activities after moving, which made it hard for them to find and meet new friends (Reich et al. 2008). Adjusting socially and academically to a new school environment can be very difficult for any child, especially if the child and his or her family has had little choice in the relocation and selection of the school—as was the case following Hurricane Katrina.

**Financial Instability.** Another problem that impacted displaced student's educational outcomes was the financial instability facing them and their families. Because of the nature of natural disasters, families often have to evacuate as quickly as possible and thus leave most of their belongings

behind. The occupants of New Orleans were no different. Given that over 80 percent of the housing stock in New Orleans was damaged or destroyed in the storm, most of the items left behind were ruined due to the flooding and wind damage. Families were thus forced to start anew when they relocated. Many ended up moving temporarily into the homes of friends or relatives, resulting in substandard and crowded living conditions (Picou et al, 2007). Following Katrina, children who lived households with more than five people showed lower satisfaction with their health and lower academic performance (Barrett et al. 2008). Financial instability also resulted in unstable and insecure transportation for children, which caused delayed enrollment in school and missed school days (Picou et al. 2007).

### **Educational Benefits**

Although children are vulnerable in disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, they are also resilient and can find ways to effectively cope with the resultant stresses (Fothergill and Peek 2006). Several studies have identified certain benefits in the post-Katrina relocation of students and their transition to a different school (Barrett et al. 2008; Reich et al. 2008; Sacerdote 2008).

One of these benefits involves a child's emotional and psychological well-being. Some students who had relocated to a new school found that their confidence actually *increased* (Fothergill and Peek 2006). Barrett and colleagues (2008) found that students who felt as though they belonged to their new school tended to be better off than those who did not feel as welcome. Helpful teachers also made an impact on the displaced students' academic performance (Barrett et al. 2008).

One of the main differences in children's education between New Orleans and other parts of the country was related to the pre-storm quality of the school system in Louisiana. Study after study has found that the schools in Louisiana pre-Katrina were ineffective and needed serious change (Casserly 2008; Darling-Hammond 2007; Fothergill and Peek 2006; Irvine 2007). Segregated schools, like those

in New Orleans, typically lack even the most basic resources like safe facilities, textbooks, and quality teachers a school must have to provide quality education to its students (Darling-Hammond 2007).

In his research on the effects of displacement on student evacuees following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Sacerdote (2008) found several benefits including better teachers and educational facilities in the schools children were displaced to. Sacerdote studied math and English language scores of displaced students in 2006, 2007, and again in 2008. In the spring of 2006, he found a significant decline in test scores for all students who were displaced during the 2005 hurricane season. However, by 2008, students were experiencing gains in their test scores relative to their pre-hurricane scores. Only a few years after being displaced by the hurricane, students were actually performing much better academically than they had been before the disaster (Sacerdote, 2008).

Although still limited, the body of research on children's education helps shed light on the vulnerabilities of school-age children after disaster, as well as the potential for positive change. However, given the magnitude of the loss and disruption caused by Katrina, more research is necessary to identify the challenges and opportunities that emerged after the storm. This thesis attempts to fill this knowledge gap through an in-depth exploration of children's educational experiences in Denver, Colorado. Next, I outline my research methods and describe the sample population.

### Research Methods and Sample

Although researchers have studied children's experiences in disaster for more than two decades, there is surprisingly little research available that actually utilizes interviews with children themselves (see Peek 2008). Instead, most of the research that is available uses closed-ended survey questionnaires, which have been distributed to children or more often to their parents or teachers. This research has contributed much to our understanding of children's post-disaster vulnerability. However, in order to fully understand children's experiences in disaster, it is important that children have the

opportunity to give voice to their own feelings and interpretations of events. With this in mind, and in order to address my research questions related to educational outcomes in the aftermath of Katrina, I conducted a qualitative study with children who were displaced to the state of Colorado.

In this thesis, I draw on a data set of 20 in-depth interviews with 14 girls and 6 boys between the ages of six and twenty at the time of the interview. All of the children in my sample were African American. All of the children were displaced to the state of Colorado in the months following the hurricane, and all had attended school in New Orleans, Louisiana before the storm. In the aftermath of Katrina, most of the children relocated to several different places before they finally settled in the Denver Metropolitan area.

I conducted 15 of the 20 interviews that I draw on in this thesis. I interviewed the 15 respondents in June and July of 2008. My sample included 11 girls and 4 boys. I found all 15 of the children I interviewed with the assistance of Ramonda Pitre, a teenager who was displaced to Colorado after Hurricane Katrina. My advisor, Dr. Lori Peek, introduced me to Ramonda and she ultimately served as a “key informant” for this study. Ramonda, who is African American and a native of the seventh ward in New Orleans, introduced me to a number of displaced children and teens who she had met since moving to Colorado. Ramonda assisted with scheduling interviews and sat in on most of the interviews I conducted. This was very helpful, as Ramonda was sometimes able to ask questions or to joke around with the interviewees, which seemed to put them at ease. Also, because she was able to vouch for me (my character and the goals of my research), I think that it helped to establish a higher level of trust with my respondents.

These interviews were conducted in two different ways. Nine of them were in groups, with the interviewee and one or two of his or her close friends. I tried to have a friend sit in on the interview in order to help lower the power and race differentials between myself and the children. Since I am a

White woman from Colorado, I was aware that my race could potentially serve as a barrier to collecting rich information. The group setting, as well as the fact that Ramonda was often present, seemed to put respondents at ease. The rest of the interviews were conducted one-on-one, with only myself and the student.

My interview questions focused mainly on the youth's experience with schooling, both in Colorado and in Louisiana. Many of the questions asked the students to compare and contrast their school in New Orleans to their new school in Denver. For example, I asked about the racial makeup, uniforms, extracurricular activities, grades, and homework at their old and new schools. I was also interested in learning about the student's future in schooling and if the relocation to Denver impacted their educational or works goals after high school. Other questions I asked dealt with what others are doing to help lessen the children's vulnerability. For example, how adults at school, family members, and friends affected the student's educational goals. Finally, my interview guide contained questions about contact with old friends in Louisiana and youth in general, both in New Orleans and Denver.

I also used five secondary interviews conducted by Dr. Peek from October 2005 to May 2008. Dr. Peek has been conducting a longitudinal study of family resettlement in the aftermath of Katrina, and thus she was able to share with me some of the interviews from her dataset. I read and coded data from the transcripts of three girls and two boys, all African American, who ranged in age from 11 to 19 at the time of the interview. These interviews were also conducted in the Denver Metro area. Dr. Peek's interview guide covered similar topics to the questions that I asked, and therefore the data was comparable. She also asked more general questions regarding loss, displacement, and family disruption. Although I read the transcripts in their entirety, I only draw on the data that she gathered that was relevant to children's educational outcomes.

After conducting and transcribing the 15 interviews that I completed, I then coded those 15 interviews along with the 5 interviews from Dr. Peek's study. To complete the analysis, I used open coding to review all the interviews and pulled out themes that were consistent throughout. Next, I formed connections between and combined the categories through axial coding which helps deepen the framework for the analysis. Finally, I used selective coding to find a structural relationship among all the codes. Essentially, this stage developed into the core concept or "storyline" of my thesis.

In my thesis, I used these data to learn about the educational experiences of children who came to Colorado in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. These interviews specifically help me to describe displaced children's experiences with schooling in Colorado as well as explain what others are doing for children to help lessen their educational vulnerability. I have assigned pseudonyms for all individuals to keep their identities confidential.

## Findings

The findings from my qualitative research project on displaced children and youth after Hurricane Katrina are detailed in the following sections. Most significantly, I discovered that several of the students in my study experienced a significant drop in their grades after being displaced to Colorado. Specifically, of the twenty children I interviewed, thirteen experienced no change in their grades, a slight drop, or a very significant decline in the grades they received in Colorado after the storm. I was unable to obtain data on four of the children due to a lack of grades pre-storm (e.g., the children were too young) or because they could not remember what their grades were before the hurricane. Only three of the twenty children in my sample actually received better grades after the displacement.

Grades are obviously only one measure of educational attainment and learning in school. However, in the United States, educators, college admissions boards, and potential employers place a

high importance on the standard grading system used in the vast majority of schools today. Thus, grades are one of the most straightforward and widely accepted ways to measure positive or negative performance. Given this, I sought to explore the different factors that impacted displaced children's grades. In the analysis that follows, I pay special attention to the challenges that children faced that led to grade decline in the post-disaster context. Throughout, I privilege children's voices in telling their story of educational experiences after relocating to Colorado following the storm.

## Challenges of Displacement

### **Surviving Disaster**

Moving and changing schools can be challenging for any child, especially when the move is sudden and totally unexpected, as was the case in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Several of the children had attended so many schools following Katrina that they could not even remember the exact number. Most the students I interviewed attended an average of more than three schools in the three years since the storm. So many transitions in such a short period of time made it incredibly difficult for the children to settle in to a new learning environment, to make new friends, and to focus on their school work.

In addition to moving around to several different schools and homes, many of the children and their families were forced to live in a small home or apartment, which was often cramped with more than ten or fifteen extended family members living under one roof. The children I interviewed reported feeling distressed as a result of their living situations. Alexis and her mother relocated to Denver when Alexis was 15 years old. She recalled: "We was staying in a house with 20 people with my aunt and them and we only had one room with air conditioning." Living in a house or apartment with so many people led to more stress for the children, as they were frequently unable to find a quiet space or a quiet time to complete their homework.

One overwhelming pattern that emerged in the interviews was that children of all ages experienced emotional stress and trauma. After being ripped out of their homes under terrifying conditions, traveling halfway across the country, living with large groups of people, and moving around to different schools, children felt stressed and overwhelmed which can cause a major impact on one's grades. With so many stressors weighing on a child's mind, it makes it difficult to focus on school work and achieving good grades. One of the main issues children were forced to cope with after the storm was related to losing contact with close friends, relatives, and other loved ones in their lives. Several of the students talked at length about losing contact with their friends and not knowing where they were or if they were even alive. Erica told one of the most heart wrenching stories. She was only fifteen years old when the hurricane hit. Her mother was worried for her safety, and thus had Erica evacuate with family friends to Texas prior to Katrina's landfall. Erica stayed with the family in a hotel for approximately a month. During our interview, she talked about waiting to get in touch with her mother, who had evacuated to Atlanta, Georgia:

I was with some of my best friends and her family. My mom had dropped me there the night before the hurricane because she thought our house wasn't going to be safe if something did happen. Because we couldn't evacuate so she stayed at our house and I went with my friend's family to another place there in the city... What I thought was going to be a sleepover winded up being a month or two spent with them... We stayed in Texas for a month. I thought my mom was dead. I thought my mom wasn't even... I didn't know what happened to my mom. Cause I couldn't get in contact with her. I tried to call her everyday and of course the phones was messed up.

Erica eventually got in touch with her mother and they were able to meet up in Denver. Even so, experiencing such trauma made it impossible for Erica to focus on her school lessons when she did not even know if her mother was alive. Even after being reunited with her mom, she still had a difficult time attempting to focus on her studies, as she was terrified that they would be separated again.

### **Experiencing Life in Colorado**

Becoming settled in such an unfamiliar environment proved to be one of the major problems the students in my research project were forced to deal with after their displacement to Colorado. First, the schools in Colorado are very different demographically than they are in New Orleans. Public schools in New Orleans were highly segregated, with over 90 percent of all students identifying as African American. Most of the students in my sample attended racially segregated schools in New Orleans that were almost entirely made up of African Americans. After attending predominantly African American schools, and then being displaced to new schools in Colorado that were predominantly white, several of the students felt racially out of place and isolated. This is yet another hardship facing displaced students that brought their attention away from their education.

Another issue with becoming settled in Colorado was related to the uncertainty of the move. Because many of the youth believed they would be returning to Louisiana in a short period of time, they refused to meet new people, make friends, become involved in activities, and put effort into their schoolwork. Erica discussed her move to Colorado and why she struggled with making new friends initially: "I thought that for so long I was going to go back home. So why make friendships with these people, long term friendships which aren't going to be long term?" Like Erica, many of the students simply stopped caring about their schooling, grades, and social life because they were so determined to return home to Louisiana.

Denver, Colorado and New Orleans, Louisiana are two very different places, and most of the children I interviewed suffered from feelings of homesickness after their evacuation following the hurricane. Some of the many things they missed included Mardi Gras, the Bayou Classic, food, music, culture, and even the warm, humid weather in Louisiana. For many of the children I interviewed, the feelings of homesickness were amplified by the strangeness and lack of familiarity with all things in Colorado. Almost all of the young people had never visited Colorado or any part of the Western United

States, must less lived in this region for a prolonged period of time. Corey, who was thirteen years old at the time of the storm, talked about the main differences between the two school systems:

It wasn't the same. I was used to most stuff like I was used to going to school at a certain time. Going to school from 8:30 to 2:30... Up here you have to wake up at 5:00 and be at school at 7:00. So that would give you less time to get ready for school. And you get out of school at 3:45. It was really making it hard for me to pay attention.

Another reason the children noted that the Colorado environment felt different was because people "act different" than in Louisiana. Several of the students explained that they felt isolated and separated from everyone else because of the contrasting attitudes in Colorado versus New Orleans. For example, the children and teens described people in Colorado as "to themselves" or as having a "nasty attitude." Brianna emphatically discussed these differences in her interview:

In New Orleans, when we walk into somewhere we be like, "Hello, hey, how ya'll doing?" stuff like that. Then when we came up here, not too many people do that. They just walk in and keep going on about their business.

Becoming adjusted to so many differences in a new state can be very difficult, especially for children, and the process may take precious time away from their academic achievement, thus causing a decrease in their grades.

### **Finding New Friends**

Not only did children feel isolated from the general public in Colorado, they also felt secluded from other students in their schools. Candice was a junior in high school when she moved to Colorado. In a conversation about expenses during senior year (prom, vehicle, senior pictures, etc.), Candice described her feelings of isolation within the school:

I never got my pictures. I was in the yearbook, and the picture that they took, they didn't put it in the yearbook, or they forgot to put it in the yearbook, so that made me feel even less a part of the school.

This was very hard for Candice to cope with, as she was already saddened that she had to complete her senior year in an unfamiliar environment and school, away from all of her old friends. Being left out of

the school yearbook simply seemed to underscore that this was not her home, and even made her feel unwanted in her new school. When children feel unwelcome and isolated in their new school, they may be much less likely to achieve high academic performance, simply because they lose the desire to work hard to attain good grades.

In some cases, the children chose to isolate themselves from other students in Colorado for their own comfort. Because the students who were from New Orleans were all experiencing a similar transition, they stuck together in one large group. These teens were so homesick for their lifestyle back in New Orleans, they found comfort in being surrounded by others who had gone through the same experience and had shared a similar culture and lifestyle back home. Alexis described this feeling very vividly:

I didn't like nobody, none of my peers, and then I met Brianna and Isiah – I met a group of New Orleans people and it was like 20 of us. It was like 20 of us all together boys and girls combined and I felt like I was home again.

Although finding people from New Orleans seemed to help with some of the feelings of homesickness, having such a tight and secluded group of friends made it even harder for the students to find connections to their new school, and thus feel more welcomed and settled in. Indeed, the high school students in my research project were much more likely than their younger counterparts to seek out friends from New Orleans, and to delay making connections with youth from Colorado.

Involvement in extracurricular activities such as sports, clubs, and groups in elementary and high school helps children and youth get to know other students in their schools. Not only does such involvement allow youth to meet new people, make new friends, and do something they enjoy, involvement often times motivates and helps children attain better grades. Unfortunately, many of the students in my research project were not involved in any activities through their school or community for several reasons. Some of them were anxious to go back to New Orleans. Others felt like there was

nothing to do in Colorado that interested them or they were simply not informed of the possibilities at their school. Many of the young people came from low-income or working class backgrounds, and thus their families did not have extra funds to spend on extracurricular activity fees. Still, some teens were afraid or nervous to join a club or tryout for a team in their new school. The few children I interviewed that were involved in activities in Colorado reported good grades and close connections to other students and their teachers.

After relocating to Colorado, children also encountered safety issues with other teens in their schools. Six of the children I interviewed talked about the prevalence of gangs in the Denver Metro area, which affected their feelings of security and ability to focus while in school. Adrian, who went to West Harrison High School in Denver, described the difference between the gangs in Colorado and the wards in New Orleans: “Out here they got a lot of gangs and stuff like that, but in New Orleans, you mostly kinda roll with your family. We don’t have gangs. We have hoods and wards.” Experiencing such a change in attitude and group makeup upon relocating can make it very hard for a child to make new friends and become accustomed to life in their new location. It also makes it difficult to focus on school, as Corey mentioned during his interview: “In New Orleans you don’t hear nothing about Krips and Bloods in school and up here you hear a lot about it in school. And I guess that’s why most people can’t focus. Cause their mind is on too much gang stuff.”

The insensitivity of others, in many cases, made what was already a difficult transition even more challenging for the children and youth. Many of the students in my study were called names, teased about the way they talked or dressed, and asked overly personal questions about the hurricane. Several of the young people had very thick Louisiana accents that were easily detected in Colorado. Because of this, other students would often ask questions about their experiences with Katrina, which were often too traumatic for the students to recall. Children and their parents were also mistreated and

accused of not leaving New Orleans despite knowing the hurricane was approaching. Monica talked about how she felt these accusations were inconsiderate and insensitive:

And they always try to make it a point, “Ya’ll knew it was coming. Ya’ll should have left and ya’ll should have did this.” But ya’ll wasn’t there to tell us. How was we supposed to get out if we didn’t have a car? How was we supposed to get out if we didn’t have no money? Stuff like that. They would always try to make it seem like it was our fault that we stayed instead of leaving.

The insensitivity of others within their school system pushed these students even further away which made it difficult to make new friends and become connected to their new environment.

### **Becoming Acquainted with the Scholastic Environment**

As discussed previously, children and teens can be insensitive and cruel to each other at times. Not only did the students from New Orleans experience troubles regarding questions about the hurricane, but they also felt out of place when it came to the lack of school uniforms in Colorado. I asked students about their feelings regarding not having uniforms in Colorado, and two major issues arose from their responses. The first was that several of the students had very few clothes after moving, because they simply could not bring their whole wardrobe with them or because all of their clothes had been lost in the hurricane and subsequent flooding. The other major issue with not having uniforms came from the stress of worrying about what others thought of the individual. Erica was one of many students that really enjoyed wearing uniforms because they eliminated the teasing and judging of one another based on what the students wore to school. She described both of these pressures when I asked her if she had to wear uniforms in her new school:

No and it was frustrating cause I had to wake up every morning to find a new outfit when I had barely a pinch of clothes. Then I had to try to figure out what I was going to wear for the second time around... It adds to the peer pressure. That’s too much stress to be worrying about somebody looking at you and what you got on... So to me the uniform is better.

Teenage years are filled with worries about what one is going to wear and who one will be impressing, and these teens were no different. The lack of uniforms in Colorado was just one more stressor added to the list of issues that drew children's attention away from their education. By focusing on clothing and appearances, students were less attentive to their schooling and homework which caused a decrease in their grades.

Upon asking the students what they believed caused their grades to drop, the majority of the answers I received involved problems with the teachers and the curriculum differences in Colorado. Specifically, the school systems were viewed as being much more difficult, stricter, and faster paced in Colorado than in New Orleans. Students relayed two major issues with the teachers in their new schools. The first was that the teachers were not accepting of their differences and educational levels being from Louisiana. Erica explained to me how she tried to blend her southern accent with the accent here in Colorado because her "broken English or slang" was not appropriate for the teachers. "I had one of my teachers ask me a question and I responded to her question and she said, 'We don't talk like that. You need to use proper English.'" The other problem with the teachers the students encountered was that they moved through the material too quickly. The pace was moving so fast in Colorado that several students simply could not keep up, and this issue was revealed in their diminished grades.

Another major problem for the children in my research project was the difficulty of the educational curriculum in Colorado. Nearly every single one of the students whose grades had dropped since relocating after the hurricane stated they felt the curriculum was much harder in Colorado than in New Orleans. In a conversation with Adrian about grades in New Orleans, she compared the workload and motivation in Louisiana to that of her school in Colorado. "Everybody had good grades in New Orleans. Everybody had straight A's... All you had to do was show up and they give you an A. That's it. And read a book... well a paper cause we didn't have no books. Read the worksheet." It is only to be

expected that students who were displaced to Colorado after the hurricane would not perform as well as they had in Louisiana because the workload is vastly different. Students have more homework and projects in Colorado and they have to come to class prepared for the lecture as well as actively participate in discussions. Louisiana was so different, it is no wonder the evacuated students struggled.

Not only did the trauma of the hurricane, the move to Colorado, and the stress of adapting to a new environment and school have a significant impact on children's grades, it affected their future in education as well. For most of the children, the decrease in their grades impacted their ability to attend college and obtain scholarships to help pay for higher education. For example, Albert faced a very damaging situation in regards to his schooling. Upon relocating to Colorado with his family after the hurricane, Corey went to both middle school and high school in the Denver Metro area. For several reasons, however, Corey ultimately dropped out of high school. He talked to me about this experience:

Like if I would have stood in school out here it would have been real hard. In other words, if I would have stood at school in New Orleans I would still have been a straight A student. Because it was helping me... I would have had a better chance of graduating out there than graduating out here.

## **Benefits of Living in Colorado**

Although children are vulnerable and need help from adults after disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, they have been proven to be resilient and adaptable during such major events in their lives. Children do find ways to effectively cope, even after experiencing the trauma of a natural disaster (Fothergill and Peek, 2006). Even though the children in my study faced enormous challenges and generally had lower grade outcomes after relocating to Colorado, they acknowledged that there were many advantages to being in school in Colorado as well. These advantages ranged from safety, to the quality of teachers and motivation of peers, to the school system, all of which are described in the following sections.

### **Adapting to Life in Colorado**

Although students felt homesick and uncomfortable in Colorado upon their relocation after the storm, they also took steps to become adapted to their new life and began to see some benefits. Some of the students even preferred Colorado over New Orleans after living in the state for several months. Thirteen-year-old Taneisha acknowledged that although she misses some things about New Orleans, she still wants to remain in Denver. She said, “Well, right now I do [want to stay in Colorado], ‘cause there’s nowhere and nothin’ to go back to in New Orleans. But then I don’t, because I really miss it. But I don’t want to go down there and get shot and die.”

Taneisha’s quote underscores the fears that many children expressed regarding elevated rates of violence in New Orleans and the safer feeling context in Colorado. Many other young people made similar comments regarding feeling “safer” in Colorado schools and neighborhoods than they felt in New Orleans. One out of four, or twenty-five percent, of the students I interviewed stated that there was more violence and fights in their schools in Louisiana. Several of them talked about regularly witnessing or hearing about post-Katrina shootings in New Orleans in the media or from friends and family.

Children from New Orleans were also forced to adjust to the differences in racial makeup in Colorado versus Louisiana. Pre-Katrina, New Orleans was approximately 67 percent African American and about 23 percent White. This can be compared with the population of Denver, which has a population made up predominantly of Whites (68%) and Latinos (35%) with much smaller proportions of African Americans (10%) and Asians (3%) (U.S. Census Bureau 2006). The change in racial demographics was quite shocking to several of the students. Many of them commented on the number of White and Hispanic persons in Colorado. Even though this represented a major change for most children, they reported that they liked being around new and different cultures because it offered them the opportunity to learn about other groups of people. Erica shared how she felt about the diversity at

her new school in Denver: “The people were so diverse. I think that the fact that I could go to school with people from all over the world, it was interesting. I got to learn more. I got to be open to more than just black people.”

### **Positive Peer Influence**

Peers can have a major influence on children’s academic progress and educational attainment. Social groups, cliques, and peer attitudes all impact how hard students try in school and thus what kind of grades they get. One of the positive things about Colorado that emerged from my research was that Colorado students really helped the relocated youth in their academics both directly and indirectly.

Generally, the displaced youth reported that students in Colorado care about school and encourage others to do the same. Although many of the displaced students from Katrina may not have realized it, this indirectly helped them with their own schooling. Adrian is one of many students that struggled with her grades when she came to Colorado. In her interview, she described to me how her new friends in Colorado encouraged her to keep trying and pushing herself in school so she could graduate along with her classmates.

Not only do students in Colorado care about school, but they also think about helping other students with their school work. Even though most of the teenagers from New Orleans typically made friends with others who had relocated to Denver, they also realized that the students in Colorado put a great deal of effort into making them feel more comfortable in their new school as well as to help them with their classes and homework. Both upperclassmen and students from their own year in school showed the new students around the school, introduced them to teachers and other students, and offered to help with school work. Janay really liked Colorado and the school that she attended in Denver. Part of the reason was because she felt her peers were welcoming and had treated her very well:

Everybody was nice out here. If you new in New Orleans, they gonna give you the coldest shoulder in the world. They’ll look at you like you just retarded. But out here

they actually talk to you and be nice. But in New Orleans, nuh huh. They don't care. They gonna test you. See how hard you is out there. They gonna try to fight with you.

### **Positive Teacher Influence**

One of the reasons the majority of student's grades dropped post-Katrina was because of the more difficult expectations of teachers in Colorado as compared to those in New Orleans. However, many of the students saw this as an advantage as well. The youth depicted the teachers in Colorado as "more serious" and explained that the teachers placed more emphasis on school work and learning. Unfortunately, having teachers who held high expectations for their students was not always the case in Louisiana. Indeed, several of the young people noted that their former teachers seemed uninterested in the students' education. Adrian described some common behaviors among her teachers in New Orleans:

Oh the teachers in New Orleans, they would be cursing in front of you. Like if you go on break, the teachers would let you go on break with them while they go smoke them a cigarette all up in your face. They did not care. They'll curse in front of you. They'll be on the phone while they're supposed to be teaching you a lesson. They'll give you a worksheet. They explain to you and then they hop on the phone with their girlfriend, or their cousin, or their auntie, or their best friend, or whoever.

With such a negative influence from some of their former teachers in Louisiana, the children realized that the strictness and hard work of the teachers in Colorado had a positive impact on their education. Many of the teachers in Colorado would spend extra time trying to get the students from New Orleans caught up and feel more comfortable after the hurricane. They would do things such as stay late after school or use their lunch break to help the students with schoolwork. The hard work put in by the teachers in Colorado was obvious and the students noticed. Many of them commented that they wanted to try harder simply because the teachers were trying so hard. Erica explained the effect this had on her life and outlook toward school:

I liked my teachers. I liked the fact that they were more stern about their teaching. More seriously involved. It made me want to be more seriously involved cause I knew that my teachers weren't playing.

Strict teachers can seem like a very negative thing when a student is in school, but they also have their benefits and children realize this as well.

### **Higher Quality Facilities**

Another benefit to displaced children in Colorado was related to the quality of the physical school facilities. Students from Louisiana frequently remarked that the school buildings and classrooms were nicer and cleaner in Denver. Also, the classrooms were less crowded and more nicely maintained in Colorado as compared to New Orleans. Janay is one of few students who moved back to Louisiana after her initial relocation to Colorado. She liked Colorado schools better and stated that she wanted to return to Colorado as soon as she could so she would be able to finish school in Denver. During our interview, she described what her school looked like in New Orleans:

The stairs were dirty. The paint was coming all off the walls. The books were tore. We had no new books. No air conditioning in some of the classes. The classes was overcrowded. It was bad. It wasn't a good looking school at all.

Several other children made similar comments about the cleaner and more modern school facilities in Colorado. By attending schools with better facilities, children are more able to focus on their education and grades, which creates more positive outcomes.

Other benefits of Colorado school districts that the children identified included the availability of books, science labs, and extracurricular activities. Erica explained that she did not have computers or computer labs at her school in New Orleans. Adrian talked about the lack of resources at her old school:

We didn't have a lot of books. We used to work on a lot of worksheets and stuff. They didn't have a lot of school supplies and stuff like that. It wasn't really... They didn't have a lot of money. The school board wasn't really supporting the school down there.

Because Denver schools offered so many benefits to the displaced children, many of them realized that moving to Colorado likely helped their future in education. Although the majority of the students struggled with their grades, many of them began to strive to go to college, which may not have been the case in Louisiana. Monica was one of many students who explained that she felt more able to attend college after Katrina and her relocation to Colorado:

I knew I wanted to go to college when I was in Louisiana. I wanted to go. I just didn't think it would have been probable if I was out there. I wanted to go. But now that I'm out here, it seems more in reach going to college than it probably would have been if I was out there.

Jahmil, who was 12-years-old when I interviewed him, understood that his life experiences may hinder him from going to and finishing college. However, he explained how attending school in Colorado changed his perception on continuing to higher education. He told me: "When I got to Colorado I was like, I'm gonna be... I'm going to finish college, no matter how long it takes me, like if I were to fail sixth grade, seventh grade, all of that, I would still finish college."

## Conclusion

Hurricane Katrina was one of the most devastating disasters in our nation's history. The effects of this event continue to impact the lives of the over one million persons who lived in the direct path of the storm. For those who continue to be displaced as a result of the storm, the disaster has no clear end.

This research examined the experiences of children and youth who were displaced to the state of Colorado in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Specifically, I explored how the process of loss and displacement impacted children's grades in school. In order to acquire data, I analyzed interview transcripts with twenty African American students who were all displaced to Colorado after the storm.

Upon analyzing the data, my research revealed that more than half of the children I interviewed had a slight or significant drop in their grades in the months and years following the disaster. I found that there are a number of factors that help explain the educational downturn among displaced youth.

These issues included, but were not limited to: Serial relocation (i.e., attending multiple schools in the years following the disaster) and residing in overcrowded living conditions, becoming separated from close friends, relatives, and other supportive adults and peers while trying to adjust to life in Colorado, and working through the challenges of becoming accustomed to demographically dissimilar and more difficult school systems. Although one or two of these problems can create difficulties for any child, it was the accumulation of so many hardships that caused a strong negative impact on these children's grades.

Although displaced children faced many significant challenges upon relocating to Colorado, they also found effective ways to cope and discovered significant benefits in their new environment. Several children began to feel adjusted and comfortable in Colorado after one to two years. They also found positive influences in both their peers and teachers at their new school. Most significantly, displaced children realized that going to school in Colorado had positive impacts on their future in education because the school systems in Denver were of much better quality than those in New Orleans. The teachers and peers cared about the displaced students and their grade outcomes, whereas the teachers in Louisiana often did not show as much interest in the children's future educational attainment.

From my research, it is clear that there are significant benefits to displaced children attending schools in Colorado after a disaster such as Hurricane Katrina. However, the trauma and stress combined with many other factors had a detrimental effect on children and especially on their grades. This research adds to the literature of educational outcomes among displaced children after disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. By allowing children to give voice to their own feelings and interpretations of events, this research provides a unique look at children's experiences as reported by children themselves.

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