Contending with school reform

Neoliberal restructuring, racial politics, and resistance in post-Katrina New Orleans

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Abstract: This article presents a study of state-imposed neoliberal education reform and resistance in post-Katrina New Orleans. In Hurricane Katrina's aftermath, the city's school system was dramatically reformed with most of its public schools replaced by privately administered "charter schools." The article examines the social contradictions created by this reform and characterizes how the city's education activists articulate their resistance to education privatization. Situating the reform within New Orleans's post-Katrina neoliberal reconfiguration, it analyzes how simultaneous processes of education privatization and racial dispossession have made the reform lack popular legitimacy. The article concludes by considering how the neoliberal policies implemented after the storm were conditioned by race, arguing that racial politics should be considered fundamental, rather than adjacent, to the study of neoliberalization in US cities.

Keywords: education reform, insurgent citizenship, neoliberalization, New Orleans, race

This isn't just about John Mac. It's about the survival of this city and all its citizens. The private industries have come in and they're reducing our city to be a poor city where our kids, at-risk kids, get no help. If your parent had an emergency, would you want a certified doctor to operate on your parent, or a plumber with six weeks of training? That's basically what they did to our children. We had the right people to help educate our children, but they replaced them with people who aren't certified and have no idea of the culture of this city.

This quote is from a community engagement meeting I attended in October 2014 at McDonogh 35 Senior High School in the New Orleans neighborhood of Tremé. The meeting was organized by a citizen-led initiative called the John McDonogh Steering Committee, which demanded the return of John McDonogh Senior High School in the Mid-City neighborhood to the locally elected school board. Almost a decade earlier, in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the Louisiana state legislature had authorized the state government to take over and privatize 113 of New Orleans's 126 public schools. John McDonogh

Senior High School was among those privatized. This act of legislation dismantled the city's traditional public school system, transforming it into a decentralized, market-based system of autonomous "charter schools"—schools that are publically funded but privately managed independent of a democratically elected school board (Buras 2010). The education reform was one among a host of privatization measures initiated in the months after Katrina in an instance of what Naomi Klein (2007) calls "disaster capitalism"—a term describing how disasters are exploited to fundamentally restructure and marketize the public sphere.

Based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork, this article examines how "education activists" in New Orleans resisted state-imposed education privatization in autumn of 2014. I outline how the charter school reform instantiates the strategic policy interventions implemented in the city after Katrina while exploring some of the social contradictions created by charter school reform and how the city's primarily African American education activists articulate their resistance to education privatization. The article concludes by considering the relationship between race and neoliberalization, arguing that neoliberal education reform in post-Katrina New Orleans not only has disproportionate racial implications but is, in itself, a project whose lack of popular legitimacy stems from a combination of the democratic deficits inherent in neoliberalization and, as I will show, the racialized emphasis on dispossession that has characterized post-Katrina rebuilding.

The foundation of education privatization in New Orleans was laid when then US President George W. Bush, in a national address delivered a week after Katrina, declared the Gulf Coast a taxpayer-subsidized "enterprise zone," offering significant tax benefits to corporations investing in the region. "The government," Bush declared, "will take the side of entrepreneurs as they lead the economic revival of the Gulf Region" (quoted in Buras 2011: 307). Although the federal government and conservative think tanks paid little attention to New Orleans in the

decades before the storm, they became highly engaged in crafting the "neoliberal policy makeover" that has shaped the last decade in the city (Klein 2007; Saltman 2007).

Within weeks of Katrina, policy makers at the federal, state, and local levels, in conjunction with national think tanks, formulated a "new urban agenda" for the city that sought to encourage investment and expand the role of private industry in redevelopment efforts (Huff 2013). The months that followed were defined by urban-governance strategies that emphasized market-oriented rebuilding, outsourcing and restructuring of public provisions (like education, disaster relief, and rebuilding funds distribution), selective labor-market reforms, expanded crime control, and rebuilding plans intended to radically alter the built environment and demographic makeup of New Orleans (Johnson 2015). One infamous instance of this approach was the "Green Dot Plan" drawn up by the Bring New Orleans Back Commission (BNOB), a commission appointed by then Mayor Ray Nagin to develop a post-Katrina blueprint, which included both city officials and members of the local business elite, underlining the emphasis on public-private partnerships in rebuilding the city. Their original plan excluded the most devastated, low-income, predominantly African American neighborhoods from the rebuilding efforts, replacing them with parkland adjacent to luxury (re)developments. In the words of the BNOB: "The Commission did not consider rebuilding as a way to replace what was damaged, but as an opportunity to create the best city New Orleans could be—not just for people to return, but also to attract people from around the world to visit and live" (2006: 3).

This approach to restructuring post-Katrina New Orleans reflects a larger development taking place in the advanced capitalist world system since the 1970s, in which cities have become increasingly important strategic spaces and policy laboratories where neoliberal programs are "interiorized" into urban policy regimes (Brenner and Theodore 2002). Jamie

Peck and colleagues (2008) write: “In city after city, policy experiments have been advocated in order to unleash the latent innovative capacities of local economies, to foster a local entrepreneurial culture, and to enhance labor-market flexibility, competitiveness in place-marketing schemes, and place-specific assets.” Neoliberal ideology, inspired by the writings of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, holds that “open, competitive, and unregulated markets, liberated from all forms of state interference, represent the optimal mechanism for economic development” (Peck et al. 2009: 50). However, the global imposition of neoliberalism has varied significantly across spatial scales and regions, both socially and geographically, as well as in its institutional forms and sociopolitical consequences: “We are not dealing with a coherently bounded ‘ism,’ system, or ‘end state,’ but, rather, with an uneven, contradictory, and ongoing *process of neoliberalization*.” Neoliberalization should be considered “the *prevailing pattern* of market-oriented, market-disciplinary regulatory restructuring,” continuously shaped and reshaped by the heterogeneous contexts within which it is implemented and by the resistance that such restructuring generates (51). In the next section, I will examine how the redevelopment of New Orleans’s school system reflects an uneven, contradictory, and ongoing process of neoliberalization, before moving on to consider how the context of post-Katrina restructuring impacts the outcomes of, and resistance generated by, charter school reform.

A perfect storm: New Orleans school reform

One afternoon in January 2015, I spoke to Adrian, then the CEO of New Orleans’s largest charter management operator, about the intricacies of charter school reform:

I think the fundamental difference between people in the charter school world and people in the traditional school world

is this idea of incremental change being effective versus wholesale change. The incremental change process just doesn’t work. It doesn’t give us the results we need. Of course, there are exceptions, but the likelihood of success is going to be bigger if we have a fresh start.

Almost a decade earlier, this “wholesale” approach swept New Orleans. Days after Katrina hit, a group of charter reform advocates—comprising national think tanks, certain Louisiana political figures, and the US Department of Education—began referring to the disaster as a “golden opportunity” to transform the city’s struggling school system through the nation’s largest experiment with charter school reform (Saltman 2007). At the time, Louisiana’s public schools ranked among the worst in the nation, placing 44th and 46th out of 50 states in reading and math, respectively. New Orleans students, meanwhile, scored significantly below the state average on standardized tests (Childress and Weber 2010).

The experiment resonated with Bush’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB) education policy, which incentivized states to identify and close traditional “failing schools,” expand school choice and standardized testing, and increase the number of charter schools (Adamson et al. 2015). The policy was predicated on the assumption that “failing” schools and school districts could be salvaged by a decentralized, privatized public education system in which families are recast as empowered consumers choosing among education services and in which education providers (charter schools and nonunionized teachers) compete in a landscape shaped in the image of the market (Lipman 2011a). NCLB introduced an accountability provision mandating nationwide “high-stakes testing” to monitor school and state progress, provide annual report cards to families and communities, and sanction underperforming schools—for instance, by closing them, converting them to charter schools, or putting them under state control (Childress and Weber 2010).

During an emergency legislative session in November 2005, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco approved Act 35, which labeled all but 13 of the city's 126 schools "failing" and enabled the state of Louisiana to take these schools over from the locally elected Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB). The state government fired 7,500 unionized teachers and administrators (80 percent of whom were African American), closed most schools, eliminated attendance zones, and earmarked \$20.9 million to set up a decentralized, market-based system structured around privately administered charter schools, school choice, and accountability (Buras 2011). A state-appointed organization called the Recovery School District (RSD), based in the capital city of Baton Rouge, was tasked with temporarily overseeing the taken-over schools, with the "primary aim to charter as many of these schools as possible" (Brinson et al. 2012: 15).

This legislation and the termination of the city's teachers dismantled the traditional public school system and the African American-led teachers' union, paving the way for the anticipated influx of "education entrepreneurs" from across the country, who quickly settled into the transformed landscape to run charter schools and provide younger and whiter "alternate route" teachers, mostly from other parts of the country and sourced through "human-capital developers" like Teach for America (TFA). TFA recruits graduates who are fresh out of college and gives them six weeks of training before assigning them to schools across the nation, primarily charter schools in low-performing, low-income areas (Buras 2010). From 2002 to 2012, the number of African American educators in New Orleans decreased by half, while the number of white teachers doubled; the percentage of African American and Hispanic students in the city's public schools meanwhile remained roughly 90 percent (Bond et al. 2015: 62). In 2015, the school system's transformation was completed when the final RSD school was chartered, making the RSD the first all-charter district in the United States.¹

In addition to reshaping the public school system in the image of the market, Alice Huff

(2013) writes, the reform was also key to the place marketing of New Orleans after Katrina. This was explicitly stated in the BNOB's plan for post-Katrina education: "[to] develop an educational system that will be a positive, distinguishing feature for New Orleans, attracting both families and businesses to our city" (2006: 2). Beyond opening the market for public education services to the private sector through the charter model, quality schools, as Pauline Lipman (2011a) writes, have become increasingly important within "municipal corporate agendas," serving as tools in gentrification efforts to redevelop formerly neglected inner-city areas in places like Chicago, Detroit, and New Orleans. In New Orleans, for instance, new charter schools were folded into redevelopment plans for whiter, wealthier sectors of the city, leaving other predominantly low-income, African American neighborhoods—mostly those excluded from the original BNOB rebuilding plans—with no or few schools (Huff 2013). Kirsten Buras (2011) and Lipman (2011b) have highlighted the challenges of rebuilding neighborhoods without public services—particularly schools—and argued that the strategy of opening and closing certain schools dovetailed with a vision of New Orleans with a significantly smaller African American population. "This was a strategic move to exclude low-income African Americans from the city altogether," Lipman writes. "They not only had no homes to return to, they had no schools." As the city's population contracted after Katrina, the number of African American students enrolled in the city's schools dropped from 63,000 to 24,000 between 2005 and 2008.

Empowerment or takeover?

In 2012, Louisiana Senator Mary Landry hosted an education summit that presented a report called "New Orleans–Style Education Reform: A Guide for Cities." The report described the transformation of the city's school system after Katrina:

New Orleans overhauled its school system under unique circumstances . . . [Now] it relies on entrepreneurship, innovation, accountability, and empowerment to drive continual progress. In making this shift, New Orleans has moved its education system closer to the more dynamic sectors of our economy. Equally as important, the city has given power back to its educators and families. (Brinson et al. 2012: 12)

The narrative that families and educators have been empowered by charter school reform has been widely criticized, particularly because of the racial dynamics of the “overhaul” or “whole-sale-change” approach. Adrienne Dixson and colleagues for instance, write that the “white takeover” of public education in New Orleans is rooted in a notion that “African Americans are unfit not only to govern but also to teach Black children” and that, rather than empowering the community, charter school reform has allowed “White entrepreneurs to raid the public school treasury and create new markets at the expense of poor and working-class students of color in urban schools” (2015: 289).

My informants similarly used words like “re-colonization” or “takeover”—rather than “empowerment”—when discussing the significant racial shift among public school educators after Katrina and the lack of transparency and democratic input in the early stages of charter school reform. A New Orleans school administrator told me:

It was simply a repeat of prior times when those in charge, those who had the right to make decisions, decided who could exist or not exist, without giving them a voice too. I truly believe there’s an answer [to education inequality], but it’s not a magic answer. It’s not a group of folks riding in on a white horse to save our children. That’s not an answer. Nobody has a right to go into any place and negate the existence of those that existed prior to you arriving in that place.

The issue of dispossession articulated by this administrator has been a central point of contention for the city’s education activists, who have persistently challenged the inconsistencies and contradictions of an education reform they did not choose. Since Katrina, different citizen-led initiatives have mobilized around issues like returning schools to local control, resisting a school millage vote, or redressing the rising pattern of students being funneled from the public education system into the criminal justice system, known as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Kupchik 2014; Sondel 2016). In the next sections, I examine different outcomes and experiences of education privatization through the resistance initiatives I encountered in the fall of 2014.

The authenticity of choice: Accountability to whom?

In many ways, John McDonogh [Senior High School] is a poster child for everything that’s gone wrong with the takeover of our schools since Katrina. The RSD has had an opportunity to directly run the school and to charter the school. We need to take back [John McDonogh] because the RSD has let that school literally rot with our children inside.

In October 2014, I attended a “community engagement” meeting held as part of a citizen-led initiative to have John McDonogh Senior High School returned to the locally elected OPSB. Residents of Tremé had organized the meeting to develop a proposal for the future of John McDonogh as a traditional, direct-run neighborhood school. Over the previous nine years, the RSD had attempted to “recover” the school by running it directly as a traditional school and then, after closing it because of insufficient test results, chartering it out to the California-based Future Is Now Charter Association in 2012. In 2014, with one year left on its charter, the school was shut down after ranking as Louisiana’s low-

est-performing school in the 2012–2013 school year (Sanders 2015). Meanwhile, a group of Tremé residents had tirelessly, but until now unsuccessfully, pleaded with Louisiana’s Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) to have the school returned to local control (Dixon et al. 2015). After shutting down the school and keeping it closed for much-needed renovations, however, BESE finally authorized a community engagement process led by the OPSB and the John McDonogh Steering Committee. An activist from the committee explained their motivations:

We’re not interested in the RSD. There have been too many lies and betrayals. In July, we came together after we found out the last charter had left town without being held accountable for the damage. We decided to draft our own proposal to bring [John McDonogh Senior High School] back to OPSB, which would be here [in New Orleans], which we know we could work with [without having] to work with people who don’t know this community, and to avoid another experimental failure.

For nine years, John McDonogh, like many schools in the city, was labeled “failing.” In instances where a charter operator, or the RSD, is unable to “recover” a school within the time frame stipulated by the charter (typically, three to five years), the building is chartered out to another operator, who then attempts to turn it around. When a school closes, students and staff must find other schools (Buras 2010). Until the charter expires, however, families must continue sending their children to consistently underperforming schools like John McDonogh. This reflects a contradiction at the root of charter school reform: because of the accommodations that result in the process of remaking a formerly public institution in the image of the market, the system bears little resemblance to the ideal scenario postulated by education reformers, in which empowered “consumers”

choose among “competing providers.” Instead, during the enrollment process, parents list their preferred schools, and, *ideally*, their children are assigned to one of these. Yet families are often forced to accept seats at schools they did not select—far from a true market scenario. At a “community round table,” parent and education activist Karran Harper Royal elaborated:

It’s somewhat of a rigged market because, theoretically, if this market-based model was going to work, of course nobody would be choosing [failing] schools in great numbers, and those schools would have just died out. If the market was going to work, parents would have had another place to go.

Indeed, thousands of students still attend underperforming schools like John McDonogh, and the RSD remains one of the lowest-performing districts in one of the lowest-performing states in the United States (Adamson et al. 2015: 38). Many activists argue that no one is held accountable for this failure, speaking to a different understanding of accountability from those advocating for charterization.

Charter advocates argue that accountability is achieved through “high-stakes testing”—schools are closed, teachers fired, and administrators replaced if their students perform inadequately on standardized tests—and through basic supply-demand logic; if not enough parents *choose* to send their children to a certain school, it must close. However, as Karran noted:

Many times [after a school is closed], parents are forced to choose another school, but that’s not the same as accountability. Or if a school is simply not providing what I think the school should provide for my child, moving my child is not accountability. That comes at great cost to me and my child. The state, of course, they see that as their school performance system shutting down low-performing schools. But I simply don’t believe that’s

being accountable to parents or children to close a school.

These experiences of school reform demonstrate a reality far from the “ideal” market envisaged by charter advocates, where freedom is defined in market terms as “freedom to choose.” Instead, the resulting system constitutes a captive market, offering “customers” an extremely limited range of choices subject to abrupt and disruptive change: schools that fail to meet performance targets might close, families are not guaranteed acceptance at their schools of choice because admission to desirable schools is limited, and, since most schools are no longer operated by an elected school board (overseen instead by the state-appointed RSD), families have no direct means of influencing public education—either with a vote or with their feet.

Because the RSD is perceived as the nexus of these issues, many education activists see eliminating the RSD—and removing schools from RSD control—as a first step against charter reform and toward regaining local control of public education. The state-appointed RSD has come to stand synecdochically for the free market, what Adrian called the “charter school world,” and the private industries. For instance, a New Orleans teacher who was fired after the storm and joined a class-action lawsuit² against the state for unlawful termination—and later advocated for the return of John McDonogh—told me:

The RSD never should have been here, but since they have been here, they’ve run our schools into the ground, and they haven’t educated our children. They’re running this school system as a business model and not an education model, and even as a business it’s a failure. It’s like they see at-risk education as a cash cow.

Disputing claims of “empowerment” and “progress” made by charter advocates, the activists sought to reclaim John McDonogh by arguing that the reformed system lacks accountability

and does not invite democratic participation; they objected to its emphasis on privatization and attracting nonlocal charter operators; and they criticized the quality of education provided by an increasingly white and inexperienced teaching force (see also Sanders 2015; Sondel 2016). These perspectives, I argue, express an understanding of having a right to public education akin to having a “right to the city,” which David Harvey describes as the act of “claim[ing] some sort of shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and remade, and [doing] so in a fundamental and radical way” (2008: 5). The next section characterizes this perspective further while examining the resistance to school reform in more detail.

“That’s taxation without representation”

One of the initiatives seeking to eliminate the RSD is Justice and Beyond. The coalition of “concerned community members” meets weekly in the Christian Unity Baptist Church to formulate solutions to social and racial injustice in the city. The most important struggle, according to one of the cofounders, is public education:

Education is the most central fight we have, because our struggle to be free is directly related to the education our children receive. Our progress has been stagnant in a big way because they’ve taken control of our schools and [because] the education our children are getting doesn’t allow them to function in society. Our struggle now—we’ve taken on this millage [vote]. These culprits want to give our taxpayer dollars to the RSD. We have the power in our hands to stop this, the voters of New Orleans, and we have to get the word out that this is about a new segregation.

In the weeks leading up to a school millage vote that took place on 6 December 2014—a referendum that proposed to redirect an additional

\$13 million in annual property tax revenue to the RSD (Dreilinger 2014a)—the coalition took two main approaches to prevent the vote from passing: First, they filed a lawsuit against the OPSB (who owned the buildings but did not operate the schools) and seven charter management organizations for using illegal campaign tactics by hanging biased campaign material on public buildings. Second, the coalition used churches and community centers across the city to mobilize and inform the public that tax revenue would be given to the RSD and not just the OPSB—a fact, they argued, that was disguised in the campaign material and on the ballot. After one of these meetings, I spoke to a coalition member about the need for more information:

Often people ask: “Why did we let them into our community?” The fact is, a lot of us don’t know what’s been going on since Katrina, so we’re organizing meetings to explain to people what’s happening. We need to educate and inform our people, because December 6 is the only way to get the RSD out of here. They took our buildings, they then took our children, and they decided who would be in the building and who would run the building. Now they’re trying to be here for ten more years to control this.

Another coalition member added to this, stating: “When you have a school that’s 99 percent black and you have no voice in it—black folks no longer make decisions about who’s going to go there and who’s going to work there—that’s taxation without representation.” While eliminating the RSD and regaining local control is the immediate objective—specifically, regaining African American control of an institution primarily used by African American citizens—the resistance itself is triggered by the experience that school reform dispossesses the community of every aspect of public education, extending from students, buildings, and jobs to the curriculum, and resulting in a diminished quality of education.

These education activists assert a right to determine, or at least influence, what takes place in a public institution and to decide how, and by whom, their children are educated. In fact, for some critics of charter school reform, the discontent is directed more at this lack of local control than at privatization. Initiatives like the alumni group Friends of Landry applied to create their own charter schools although the RSD repeatedly rejected their applications, instead prioritizing nonlocal charter organizations and educators (Sanders 2015). Similarly, the Orleans Public Education Network (OPEN), a group that focuses on building “civic capacity” to increase community influence over public education, is opposed not necessarily to charterization but rather to the current lack of democratic representation (Huff 2013). Although rooted in a critique of the neoliberalized system, the resistance of OPEN and Friends of Landry can be viewed, following Bettina Köhler and Markus Wissen (2003), as reproducing the neoliberalized system, because it fails to produce an alternative political reality. In contrast, Justice and Beyond or the John McDonogh Steering Committee seek to fundamentally overturn the current system by eliminating the RSD and (re)creating a local democratic system centered around traditional public schools (noncharters) and the OPSB.

Although these groups did not employ the slogan “the right to the city,” how they articulate their rights recalls what Henri Lefebvre originally described in 1968 as a “cry and demand,” claiming a “transformed and renewed right to urban life” (1996: 158). The democratic and racial dispossession experienced and articulated by these activists is foregrounded by an urban agenda that increasingly integrates corporate interests into governance—interests that compete with the territorial claims of local communities. These activists articulate a right to the city, and, more specifically, to the public education sector, by challenging the power dynamics behind the urban transformations taking place since Katrina, in which race and privatization play crucial roles. Peter Marcuse (2014) has

described a similar “sectoral” approach, which involves claiming the right to the city—to the *totality* of the city—by fighting the privatization of public sectors one at a time. While the “demands” expressed by groups like OPEN or Justice and Beyond may differ, their “cries” are similar: charter school reform has stripped the city’s African American community of positions of authority and of democratic participation in public education.

The education activists, however, are not “lionizing” the pre-Katrina state of public education, which nobody denies had its problems. Instead, they argue that the reform, beyond depriving them of influence and lacking accountability, has in fact exacerbated education issues and inequality within the city. Karran pointed out:

If we look at the children who aren’t being served well and who are pushed out of so many schools in the city, it seems the reform in the city and in the school system is creating a whole new generation of young criminals. And that’s something we don’t think about when we think about accountability. We only think about, “If that school isn’t working, we’ll just close it.” How is that accountability to those families?

No excuses: Solving education inequality

Charter school reform is based on the premise that privately administered schools, held accountable by the free market and a data-driven system of performance measurement, will deliver a better education than publically administered schools. Critics, however, argue that economic incentives and the relentless focus on standardized testing incentivize schools to discriminate against challenging and challenged students (Buras 2010; Sanders 2015). Hannah, a former TFA teacher and cofounder of the New Teachers’ Roundtable initiative, which assists new educators seeking to engage with issues of

racial and social justice in New Orleans public education, spoke about the charter school where she once taught:

If parents had any complaints, and they had a lot of legitimate complaints, the standard line was: “You can find another school. This is a choice-district now; enroll your kids elsewhere”—if those kids were seen as low-performing or challenging students. If they weren’t, then maybe the school would work with the parents a bit more, because it was all about test scores and keeping whatever kids you had that might have the highest test scores.

When a school’s “survival” on the market—as well as its teachers’ salaries and, often, employment—depends on how students perform on standardized tests, higher-performing students are made into a superior “commodity.” This circumstance has led to selective enrollment procedures, excessive expulsion and suspension rates, and discrimination against English-language learners and special needs students at charter schools. For example, in 2014, the Southern Poverty Law Center won a lawsuit on behalf of New Orleans children with special needs who were denied access to certain charter schools and necessary education services (SPLC 2014). These exclusionary practices, which result when education is treated as a competitive “market,” are referred to as “skimming the milk” or “cherry-picking.”

Critics have accused these practices (along with the regimentation and discipline at the city’s charter schools) of contributing to the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Students who are expelled or suspended from school face a higher risk of entering the juvenile incarceration system (Kupchik 2014). At one charter school, Carver Collegiate Academy, 69 percent of students were suspended at least once during the 2012–2013 school year (Dreilinger 2014b). New Orleans-based groups like Stand Up for Each Other, Center for Restorative Approaches, and Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated

Children seek to redress the school-to-prison pipeline by advocating legislative change and promoting “restorative techniques” as an alternative to zero-tolerance measures at charter schools. In September 2014, I participated in a “community workshop” with these groups, where Chris from Stand Up for Each Other explained the need to reform the disciplinary systems:

We’re in a situation where black kids are being disproportionately discriminated against and disciplined in a system of white authority figures. And the problem is, it doesn’t work. Suspending students doesn’t rehabilitate. It sends them back to the streets where they learned that behavior in the first place. What [charter schools] don’t seem to agree with is that students aren’t the problem: students have problems.

These exorbitant suspension and expulsion rates stem from zero-tolerance policies used at most charter schools as part of the “no excuses” pedagogical framework. To increase test scores and bridge the “achievement gap” between students of color and their white peers, this framework focuses on giving students “increased structure” to set them on the “right path” and asserts that teachers cannot let students’ private lives affect their school performance: there are “no excuses” for poor academic achievement (Ladson-Billings 2014; Sondel 2016). I spent a day observing this pedagogical approach at a charter school. In addition to zero-tolerance measures, hallmarks of the “no excuses” approach include policies like “walk the line” and “silent hallways” (students must walk quietly down hallways, hands behind their backs, single file on one side of a line taped to the floor), teacher “tracking” (a practice where students are reprimanded if they fail to keep their eyes on the teacher), and merit/demerit behavioral systems—an environment of ubiquitous surveillance reminiscent of Michel Foucault’s (1977) Panopticon. After the lunch break, as students reentered the classroom and were finding their

seats, the (TFA) teacher, whose classroom I observed, told the students, “Stop, do it again!” We spoke about this later that day:

If they don’t walk in correctly and start on the do-nows [assignments performed by students in the first few minutes of every class], a common practice for teachers is to have them do it again. So that phrase “do it again” is an often-heard phrase. It’s about creating structure.

Many students I spoke to were unhappy with the strictness of their education environments. One student said, “It just doesn’t feel like a real high school, like what high schools are like on TV and in movies.” I spoke to another former TFA teacher about this student’s perception:

I mean, they’re walking in lines, they have no lockers, tightly controlled lunches—that just doesn’t feel like a real high school. And then the response back to them at my school would always be: “Well, this is what you need. We know what you need.”

Gloria Ladson-Billings writes that the strictness and regimentation of the no-excuses approach reinforces the notion that poor children and children of color are “living chaotic and unruly lives,” and is rooted in the assumption that “poor children (and their families) do not value education” (2014: 10, 13). Indeed, the developers of the “no-excuses framework,” Abigail and Stephen Thernstrom, have written: “Meeting the demands of schools is harder for members of some racial and ethnic groups than for others. Some group cultures are more academically advantageous than others” (2003: 271). This approach resonates with an approach to public policy criticized by Richard Valencia (1997) as “deficit thinking.” The concept refers to assumptions about internal deficits or deficiencies in certain groups—typically groups that feature a combination of racial/ethnic minority status and economic disadvantage—as the causes of (their) social issues, like education inequality.

Through the lens of deficit thinking, these practices argue implicitly that to “optimize” the African American population, education must be seized from the hands of the community, and students, because of their “demonstrated” incapacity to “self-govern,” must be submitted to technologies meant to modify their behavior (see also Buras 2010). Rather than treating education inequality as a political issue stemming from structural causes like funding disparity, concentrated poverty, and racial isolation (Ladson-Billings 2014; Sanders 2015), it is rendered a technical issue in which different (racial) groups of students are subjected to different educational environments, or technologies, based on strategies developed by “experts” like Thernstrom and Thernstrom.

Discussing the no-excuses philosophy, one parent I spoke to noted:

We all know those charters don't suit our children. We all know charters are pipelines to the penitentiary. And most parents wouldn't accept that for their children. But there are people who have decided they know what's best for our families, and there's something really wrong with that.

While presenting its market-based system of competition, charters, and choice as a way to empower communities, improve the overall quality of public education, and ultimately bridge the achievement gap, charter school reform has produced very different outcomes. Since Katrina, an education reform steeped in deficit thinking has enacted a form of “recolonization” within the city's predominantly African American community that has dispossessed them of positions of authority and offered a singular education model that places students in highly regimented, prison-like charter schools—many of which continue to be categorized as “failing.”

Furthermore, the reform has exacerbated education inequality in a system stratified by race and class. In 2014, the OPSB controlled a

handful of consistently high-performing traditional public schools, while the RSD oversaw a cluster of high-performing, selective charter schools that cherry-picked the most resourceful students, leaving the rest to a second-tier system for “undesirable” students (Adamson et al. 2015). Other students, meanwhile, are pushed out of the public school system altogether. This includes some of the disenfranchised students mentioned by Karran Harper Royal; a decade into charter school reform, the number of “opportunity youth,” young people from ages 16 to 24 who have “dropped out” of school, is approximately 26,000—a number alarmingly close to the 43,000 students currently attending school in New Orleans (Adamson et al. 2015: 46).

Race and neoliberalization

While dispossession of publically held institutions into market hands is a typical feature of neoliberal capitalism, what distinguishes education reform in New Orleans is the racialized emphasis on seizing public education from African American control. Seen through the lens of deficit thinking, we can view charter school reform in New Orleans as a form of dispossession—in terms of both public education administration and the actual pedagogy in schools—that pathologizes the African American community, all while cloaked in a discourse of equity, efficiency, and choice. This presupposes that the community's dysfunction has perpetuated the “achievement gap,” creating the need for reform. Rather than “merely” restructuring public education after the image of the market, schools are first taken from the community's hands and then subjected to a market-based logic meant to “break the cycle” and provide a “fresh start.”

In turn, among the city's education activists, it is a combination of the democratic deficits inherent in neoliberal reform, the diminished quality of education and an ill-suited pedagogical approach, and the racialized emphasis on

dispossession that elicits resistance. This kind of political mobilization is reminiscent of what James Holston calls insurgent citizenship: “The political transformation that occurs when the conviction of having a right to the city turns residents into active citizens who mobilize their demands through residentially-based organizations that confront entrenched national regimes of citizen inequality” (2010: 2). The activists, however, are asserting their “right to the city” not exclusively based on residency but rather based on a shared experience of disenfranchisement as African American users of a public institution mobilizing *against* the predominantly white outsiders privatizing and diminishing public education.

The existing literature on neoliberal restructuring, however, largely neglects or inadequately addresses the significance of racial politics to these projects. As David Roberts and Minelle Mahtani (2010) write, most theories trace the racialized results of neoliberalization rather than examine the co-constitutive relationship between racial politics and neoliberalization itself. Similarly, Lester Spence argues that understanding racial politics helps us understand the specific shape neoliberalism takes in the United States—particularly in racially diverse cities—and that race should be viewed as a “fundamental” rather than “extraneous” part of neoliberalization. Spence shows how gentrification efforts and neoliberal policy experiments are shaped by a notion of the “black city” as a place “unable and perhaps unwilling to properly govern itself or be properly governed, falling into disrepute and disrepair as a result” (2014: 26)—a place that must be repopulated and restructured, its population displaced.

What Spence describes mirrors a form of “deficit thinking” at the scale of “the city” that shapes urban policy, as white Americans seek to repopulate the increasingly economically vital urban spaces they abandoned in the 1960s and 1970s. Although urban policy initiatives like those outlined early in this article are presented as initiatives that will revitalize, redevelop, and

promote progress (Johnson 2015), they are in fact also conditioned by racial politics, resulting inevitably in racial dispossession or displacement. In 2013, New Orleans’s last remaining social housing complex, Iberville, was demolished as part of a larger effort to revitalize the Tremé area and downtown; over the past decade, rent in some areas has increased by up to 40 percent; and from 2000 to 2013, the city’s African American population dropped by almost 100,000 (Data Center 2015)—changes that were anticipated and intended as part of the government’s “clean-slate approach” to post-Katrina recovery. And charter school reform, itself shaped by “deficit thinking,” is closely intertwined with this agenda.

Conclusion

In November 2014, BESE rejected the plan in development by the John McDonogh Steering Committee before reviewing it and issued a call for bids to charter the building. A week later, the school millage vote passed by an 18 percent margin. These setbacks, however, were not conclusive. Ultimately, the John McDonogh building was returned to the elected OPSB, which currently oversees the charter school that opened there in August 2016. In May 2016, the Louisiana state legislature decided to return all RSD schools to the OPSB by July 2018, citing its lack of popular legitimacy as a partial motivation (Dreilinger 2016). Although critics have referred to this decision as a “Trojan horse” (*New Orleans Tribune* 2016)—since the OPSB is barred from converting returned RSD charter schools to traditional schools—it shows that the resistance of local initiatives since Katrina has undoubtedly impacted the course of neoliberalization, albeit without reversing it. These recent developments also suggest that targeting the institutional manifestation of school reform—the RSD in New Orleans, or similar institutions like the Renaissance School Fund in Chicago—is not enough; those concerned with local control

over public education should fundamentally contest charterization itself to reclaim a right to the public education sector, because the charter school model produces democratic deficits and dispossession, regardless of the institutional framework within which it exists. This becomes increasingly important as other urban school districts tend in the direction of New Orleans (Lipman 2011a; Sondel 2016).

Finally, it should be noted that the policies implemented after Katrina did not denote an entirely new urban policy approach. The municipal government had long been diverting federal funds intended for low-income areas into the tourism sector, business district, and corporate headquarters; from 1997 to 2005, the city council eliminated 85 percent of the public housing in the city, adopting a voucher system in its place (French-Marcelin 2015); and, even before the storm, Governor Blanco had sought to pass legislation that would enable a state takeover of New Orleans's public school system (Saltman 2007). In analyzing the specific dynamic process of neoliberalization in New Orleans, it is important to acknowledge that the devastation of Katrina and the subsequent influx of federal rebuilding grants facilitated an acceleration and entrenchment of already existing neoliberal agendas, and the passing of previously rejected legislation by local and state governments. That is, the process has been continuous while subject to fits and starts; the chaos of Katrina served to accelerate "creative destruction" (Brenner and Theodore 2002), enabling previously attempted policies to be scaled and federal aid dollars to be funneled toward large-scale, private redevelopment projects. However, neoliberal ideology itself does not suffice to appreciate the motivations and consequences of post-Katrina policy initiatives like charter school reform or the resistance it generates. To grasp the scope of the changes to New Orleans since Katrina, we must also consider the racial-political context that underlies it—a context that is not extraneous or adjacent to but rather constitutive of neoliberalization.

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Notes

1. On 10 May 2016, the Louisiana state legislature voted to reunify New Orleans's schools under the OPSB by 1 July 2018. RSD schools must, however, remain charter schools (Dreilinger 2016).
2. Filed in 2006 by public school employees who were fired after Katrina. The plaintiffs lost the case before the Louisiana Supreme Court on 31 October 2014, when two previous rulings were overturned (Adamson et al. 2015).

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