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Charter School “Miracle”?

Youth Participatory Action Research and Education Reform in Post-Katrina New Orleans

Jacob Cohen and OiYan A. Poon

Summary

This policy brief examines and identifies education disparities within the context of a much-touted New Orleans “charter school miracle.” After describing the Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) method employed at a local Vietnamese American youth organization in New Orleans, we summarize findings on inequalities in academic rigor and access to quality teaching, which suggest that charter school reforms are not bringing about an education “miracle” in post-Katrina New Orleans and that students of color, in particular, are inadequately served. The brief also discusses the potential implications of YPAR methods for asserting Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) perspectives and voices in ongoing education reform debates.

Introduction

Since Hurricane Katrina, the public school system in New Orleans has been in an intense state of transition. As politicians on the left and the right have joined in a national bipartisan agenda of education reform through charter schools and choice policies, urban school settings have been impacted in significant ways. Proponents have argued that deregulation of public schools can lead to healthy competition and innovation. However, the case for charter schools as a proven strategy to improve U.S. education is circumstantial at best (Ravitch, 2010). Although they were originally conceived as teacher- and community-led laboratory schools to seek evidence-based solutions to the most challenging problems in public education, charter schools have opened the door to de-

regulation and corporate interests in the governing of schools—largely leaving democratic participation and local, public accountability in school governance behind (Lipman and Haines, 2007). The new education paradigm in New Orleans combines privatization through charter contracts, testing, operational autonomy for schools, and market-style choice for families. Considered a test tube for the national charter and privatization movement, New Orleans is now the first major urban “public” education system in which a majority of public school students attend schools that are operated by private organizations and governed by independent volunteer boards.

Recognized as one of the most underperforming urban school systems in the nation, some have touted the transition to charter schools after Katrina as the “New Orleans’ School Miracle” (Carr, 2010). Although changes in the student population since Hurricane Katrina have made system performance comparisons difficult, proponents of reforms point to increases in test scores and a decline in the number of schools designated by the state as “failing,” which others argue are circumstantial evidence of the success of charter schools (Levin, Daschbach, and Perry, 2010). Nonetheless, popular representations of the city’s educational restructuring have portrayed the transformation as nothing short of dazzling. The *Huffington Post* has even proclaimed Orleans Parish school reform, “a model for struggling school districts around the nation” (Bassett, 2010).

Given that the appraisal of the New Orleans’ reform project will have serious implications for the future of public education in this country, it is critical to listen to the experiences and voices of public school students: those who are most affected by drastic reforms in the city schools, yet who arguably have the least amount of power over education policy. Rather than looking exclusively at conventional indicators such as results from tests, which are arguably highly unreliable, or deferring to the authority of people who govern and operate the school system, we draw on the experiential knowledge of students who spend forty hours a week in New Orleans schools. Our project operates from the principle that reliable and accurate assessments of educational institutions should be informed by the knowledge of those who experience education reform policies everyday in schools. As insiders, students in New Orleans public schools are equipped to articulate the standards of

quality and equity that constitute “progress” or “success” and to measure the extent to which schools are achieving these standards.

Since June 2010, we have utilized a YPAR methodology to evaluate six New Orleans high schools and empower youth with research skills to participate as democratic citizens in education reform debates. Oftentimes, education policy research is reduced to a focus on quantitative outcomes, and education policy debates exclude the involvement of young people even though they are impacted the most by policy decisions. YPAR is a methodological approach that fills an “intellectual void that occurs when people’s voices are left out of the research and thus policy decisions that affect their lives and opportunities” (Cannella, 2008, 205). It empowers students who are being acted upon and spoken about by the state, allowing communities to appropriate the tools of research and become producers of knowledge. YPAR is characterized by the following three principles:

1. The collective investigation of a problem.
2. The reliance on indigenous knowledge to understand that problem better.
3. The desire to take individual and/or collective action to deal with the stated problem (Morrell, 2008, 157).

Our YPAR project includes youth researchers ranging in age from fourteen to nineteen. They include a core group of twelve youth leaders and fifteen additional youth volunteers, who are all residents of New Orleans East and members of the Vietnamese American Young Leaders Association of New Orleans, which is a community-based nonprofit organization in a neighborhood called Versailles. Calling their project the Raise Your Hand Campaign (RYHC), the youth researchers’ mission is to promote education equity in New Orleans, including equal access to quality education for geographically, economically, or linguistically marginalized students.

The RYHC leadership team conducted more than forty, open-ended peer interviews, two youth forums, and two bilingual English-Vietnamese parent forums with participants from New Orleans East in order to identify key factors that contribute to a quality education from community perspectives and arrived at a list of critical dimensions of quality education according to community

interests. The team constructed a survey to evaluate and compare six local high schools along the identified dimensions from student perspectives. After being trained in how to administer surveys, RYHC team leaders and Vietnamese American Youth Leaders Association of New Orleans (VAYLA-NO) volunteers collected 415 surveys from local youth enrolled in six high schools that were selected because they serve 2,660 students, many from New Orleans East. A comparison between the latest data on enrollment in these six schools and our RYHC survey sample is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of School Enrollment in RYHC Survey Sample

School	Enrollment	% Black	% Asian	% Free/Reduced Lunch	RYHC Sample	% of School
1	180	91.0%	6.1%	80.0%	37	20.6%
2	657	29.7%	22.5%	27.6%	71	10.8%
3	430	82.0%	16.0%	87.0%	126	29.3%
4	564	92.0%	6.0%	78.0%	85	15.1%
5	268	99.0%	0.0%	79.0%	38	14.2%
6	561	98.0%	0.0%	75.0%	58	10.3%
Total	2,660	76.9%	9.8%	66.6%	415	15.6%*
RYHC Sample	415	56.7%	32.4%	76.3%		

Data Source: 2009-2010 School Enrollment Data Note:

* Sample as a percent of the total enrollment

With data collected through the survey, we reexamined the New Orleans Miracle through the perspectives of youth directly affected by ongoing education reform decisions.

Findings

Our survey project examined multiple dimensions of schools that we believe are integral to a quality education—physical environment, instructional quality and learning, academic rigor, student support services, English instruction for Limited English Proficiency students, parental involvement, and textbook availability—through the eyes of the students in these schools. Across

all six dimensions, we found numerous deficits in these schools that meet the RYHC's standards of excellence. We also found systemic inequalities in the quality of education accessible to students on the basis of school, race, income, geography, and language. For the purposes of this brief, we will review findings from two dimensions—access to quality teachers and academic rigor.

Disparities in Access to Experienced Teachers

The RYHC team found startling disparities¹ in access to quality instruction across the different racial groups in our sample. More than 80 percent of white students in the survey said they have teachers who are prepared (4 or 5 rating), compared to 57 percent of Asian American students and 61 percent of African American students who said the same. Additionally, more than 80 percent of white students in our sample stated that they have teachers who put considerable effort into helping students (4 or 5 rating); for Asian American and African American students, this figure is less than 60 percent. In both areas of teacher quality (class preparation and effort to help students), the mean response from white students is significantly higher than the mean responses from Asian American and African American students.

Disparities in Academic Rigor

Our group was also concerned by the lack of academic rigor at many of the schools in our sample. In interviews, numerous students reported feeling unchallenged and unprepared for college. Homework load is one way we chose to examine academic rigor. Nearly 60 percent of students across the six target high schools complete one hour or less of homework each night. Schools 1, 5, and 6 had means of 1.15, 1.30, and 1.35 hours respectively, compared to 0.74 hours for students at school 4 and 2.81 hours at school 2. The disparities between school 4 and the other five schools are statistically significant, as are those between school 2 and the other schools.

Implications

The examples of findings from the RYHC research project presented here confound the assertion that charter school reforms in New Orleans have led to an education "miracle." Even a small sample of six public high schools reveals a highly unequal sys-

tem in which “miraculous” opportunities are anything but widespread. Findings from this study indicate significant and persistent disparities in the system by school and by race. In our study, student respondents at schools 2 and 3 reported far better conditions almost across the board, compared to the students who attend school 4. Moreover, five of the six schools (i.e., schools 1 and 3–6) consistently underperform when measured against the standards that RYHC students believe constitute a holistic, high-quality education. There were very few metrics on our survey in which students, on average, rated their schools as adequate. Thus, the overall quality of schooling in New Orleans is inadequate from the perspective of those who matter most: the students.

Proponents of charter school and school choice policies would argue that disparities should lead families to choose to attend better schools to fit their interests (Ravitch, 2010). Confidence in these policies to remedy education inequalities depends on the assumption that all families have equal levels of knowledge about educational options. However, our study also found that home language and family class status are significant in influencing how much knowledge students believe their parents have about the various school options in New Orleans. Students from Vietnamese-speaking families are half as likely as students from English-speaking families to report having parents who are “knowledgeable” or “very knowledgeable” about the various school options in New Orleans (20% vs. 40%). We also found that students who receive free and reduced lunch, a proxy for economic status, are significantly less likely to report having parents who are very knowledgeable about school choices in New Orleans (15%), compared to student do not receive free or reduced lunch (40%). We conclude that factors such as income and language significantly impact families’ knowledge of the educational landscape. Consequently, charter school and choice policies may be maintaining education inequalities in the school system and leaving behind students from immigrant and low-income families to endure low-performing schools.

In conclusion, the charter school and reform “miracle” in New Orleans and nationally must be critically evaluated by AAPI youth and communities. For youth and communities, YPAR holds significant promise in asserting AAPI voices in education reform discourse, which tends to be focused on African American and Latino populations. It can also lead to the development of an AAPI

community-based agenda in education equity advocacy. RYHC has created a space for Vietnamese American youth to assert their voices in a debate over charter school reform that has largely rendered them silent. At the heart of YPAR is an agenda to increase the democratic participation of youth in education policy discussions and decisions from which they are typically excluded (Rubin and Silva, 2003). The RYHC represents an important YPAR project advancing the principle that youth should be empowered to participate as equals in education policy reform debates.

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Notes

1. Significance testing done with 95% confidence intervals.

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