

Storms Swell, Paradigms Shift

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April 3, 1974, is a date I will always remember. It was the day an F5 tornado demolished my new home of only six months. I was 10 years old with five younger brothers and sisters. Dinner was in the oven, and we were playing in the driveway collecting hail. At that time, we had no idea that hail was sometimes a precursor to violent tornados. As my mother was finishing her phone conversation with my grandmother, she called us to the dinner table. Then suddenly the phone went dead. She heard a loud noise, which she later described as a train, and looked out the back door and saw the tornado coming. She yelled into the kitchen for us to run to the basement; we did. As soon as my dad reached the last step, the house was blown away. Walking up the steps and seeing daylight where a house once was will change your perspective on natural disasters forever.

Many of my students will also have a date, August 29, 2005, engraved in their mind. Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast and destroyed a region. Unlike a tornado that hits suddenly, the fear and panic of an approaching hurricane starts days earlier. Two of my students, twins named Tyron and Byron, retell the story of their exhausting 15 hour car ride to safety in Houston, while one of my girls, Nenisha, tells of the harrowing five days in the Superdome without food, water and, as she



likes to point out, deodorant. The physical pain and mental anguish endured by the students before the hurricane was exacerbated after the hurricane. I do not need to recount the terrible atrocities that were endured and the many mistakes that were made. The fact that so many of the students have survived and are forging a new life for themselves is a testament to their resilience.

For well over six months after the tornado,

my three brothers, two sisters, parents and I lived with my grandparents. We slept three to a bed, but we were with family. My grandparents' home was close enough that I could still go to my same school. After the storm, mom found my school uniform waving like a flag from the top of a tree branch. I was excited about not having school, as if it was a snow day, not realizing the stability and security that school provided me. Nevertheless, mom knew, just as I know because of my experience, that providing a safe and secure school environment would be a key for the students of Hurricane Katrina.

Before Nenisha was even out of the Super Dome in New Orleans, Tyron and Byron were already registering for school. The twins were eager to get into a routine at school and after they saw the football program, were ready to play. They had lots of attention thrown on them immediately with newspaper articles and television morning shows. They became an asset to the community and carved a niche for themselves. Others have not been so lucky.

Over the next month, Louisiana students would come and attend our and other schools in the Houston area. As they struggled to find a place to live and survive, school was secondary to their basic needs. I worked with my students in trying to create a nurturing environment and a place where they could feel safe, and maybe for 50 minutes, be a teenager. We talked about New Orleans' schools and how they were different from Eagle High School. I remember Byron telling me about a new student from Dallas at their old school in New Orleans. Everyday he was beaten up by the kids until he went back to Dallas. He laughed and said, "We are tough."

William, who went to the same school as the twins, said, "My high school experience has changed because of Katrina by being in another location. My education has also changed because we get books in Houston. In New Orleans, we didn't bring books home. All we had were class copies. And, the students were fighting everyday."

Many conversations with students from New Orleans about losing their homes, their possessions and their school, revealed how they were frustrated, tired and felt helpless. I did not find it surprising when fights broke out at many of the Houston area schools. So why were others surprised that this was happening on campuses? These were *(continued on page 18)*

teenagers fighting to belong, fighting for their way of life, and fighting for their community. Angela wrote, "The hurricane has affected my life in many ways. Far as school goes, it's hard to focus knowing there is a lot going on around me." Angela continued to lament about missing her school and the activities in which she had participated. She continued, "Don't get me wrong, learning did come first, but there were times when we enjoyed being a high school student."

The teenagers from New Orleans are looking for a place to feel safe and secure. I had my school to help me through the disaster of my childhood, but these kids do not have that place – everything has been taken from them. The curriculum has to take a backseat in the classroom while teachers and administrators work to provide a community for the kids from New Orleans. Maslow's hierarchy of needs proposes that until we can fulfill the physiological, safety, love/belonging, and esteem related needs of our students, the students will never reach self-actualization.

With the tragedy of the tornado, my teachers already knew me and knew ways to help me. We must make a conscious effort to get to know our new students so that we can learn how to serve them better. A friend recently informed me that this is difficult at the high school level because we are more concerned or passionate about our content. I think we need to make a call for action to become passionate about the children in front of us and less about covering our content. How can we leave no child behind when we have no idea who the child is?

Naima, a bright and cheerful teenager, is able to see the silver lining in this terrible event, but also relates her frustration and yearning for family. She writes, "I like Houston and my school because the teachers teach. I could stay in Houston because there are many opportunities here...but everything is far away. My friends are so far away, and my family is all over the world." Teachers, remember you are part of their family now. Show them with love and care. Teaching and learning will naturally follow. ■

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A Theory of Human Motivation. Psychological Review, 50, 370-396.

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see the profound effect on a single system in such a short time."

Perhaps what we need to observe as educators in this new millennium is not how we "teach students," but instead how we may enable students "to learn." If we want our students to have enduring knowledge and skills in which they are mindful of the natural world, then we need to involve our students in the process of science. Individual choices and decisions regarding the environment are not restricted to those students who pursue a career in the sciences. This must become an imperative for those of us who "teach science."

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