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## *The New Teachers' Roundtable A Case Study of Collective Resistance*

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### **Abstract**

*The New Teachers' Roundtable (NTRT) is a democratically run collective of new teachers who have become critical of neoliberal reform with which they have participated. These teachers relocated to New Orleans, with organizations including Teach For America, as a part of the post-Katrina overhaul of public schools. Through interviews and observations, this study examines the ways in which members of this collective support each other in attempts to navigate experiences they perceive as dehumanizing to themselves, their students, and their students' communities. By developing relationships amongst themselves and with other stakeholders affected by and resisting privatization, they are able to challenge their own privilege and begin shifting their perspective and pedagogy. This study aims to contribute to our understanding of how teachers who have been affiliated with market-based movements can be galvanized to work in service of movements that are democratic, anti-racist, and accountable to communities.*



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*There is a power that can be created out of pent-up indignation, courage, and the inspiration of a common cause, and that if enough people put their minds and bodies into that cause, they can win. It is a phenomenon recorded again and again in the history of popular movements against injustice all over the world.*

– Howard Zinn, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, 2010

*The work with the collective sustains me to do the work at school. Part of it is selfish, but if I wasn't doing activism work I would just feel like I was a part of a hopeless system. And I would literally be hopeless. I don't know if we'll see the effects of our work, even in my lifetime, but I can't sit still on a moving train. It's going somewhere. I just can't sit back.*

– Lily

In the above quotation, Lily (all names are pseudonyms) calls on Zinn's concept of refusing to remain 'neutral on a moving train' to describe how her involvement with the New Teachers' Roundtable (NTRT) has effectively sustained her development as a critical educator and organizer. In cities like New Orleans, where Lily lives, market-based reforms limit the purpose of education to the development of human capital (Apple, 2006; Hursh, 2001), create cleavages between educators and the communities within which they work (Lipman, 2011), and diminish teacher agency (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006). To that end, there is a need, and as I will describe here, the potential for teachers like Lily to work alongside community members in efforts to create power out of their collective 'pent-up indignation and courage'.

NTRT is a teacher founded and driven organization that provides new teachers the option of participating in a "supportive community where educators engage in personal reflection and critical dialogue about racial, cultural, and economic justice in New Orleans public schools and are inspired to take action with their students' communities to build a more liberatory education system" (New Teachers' Roundtable, 2015). In this paper I draw on interviews and supplemental observations to describe how novice teachers participating in NTRT build meaningful relationships with each other and with members of local communities affected by and resistant to recent neoliberal reforms. Through these relationships, in addition to analysis of critical texts, participants were able to 1) develop historical, social, and political analysis of education reform and their individual role, 2) create a complicated and collective identity that helped them to challenge their internalized White supremacist beliefs; and 3) begin to shift towards "advocacy professionalism," defined by Anderson and Cohen (2015, p. 17) as the process of engaging with communities to advocate for shared governance; community participation; and diverse, equitable, and culturally responsive schools.

The vast majority of teachers in NTRT, like Lily, were: White, new to teaching, and recently relocated from out of state as part of the post-Katrina overhaul of public schools and services. The original founders of NTRT, as well as many attendees at NTRT events, were current or former participants in Teach For America (TFA), a fast-track teacher preparation program, widely critiqued for displacing veteran teachers (Brewer, Kretchmar, Sondel, Ishmael, & Manfra, 2016) and for its connection to the privatization of public schools (Kretchmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2014; Scott, Trujillo, & Rivera, 2016). In describing the experiences of NTRT collective members, I hope to shed light on the ways in which young, primarily White teachers,

even those who have been affiliated with neoliberal reform, can be galvanized to work in service of movements that are democratic, anti-racist, and accountable to communities.

### **The Socio-Political Context: Neoliberal and White Governed Reform in New Orleans**

There is a long history of powerful, White elites seeking to garner control over the education of Black students in the American south. Even as these efforts were often attempts to serve capitalism and reproduce racial hierarchies, they were masked by the rhetoric of equity and progress (Anderson & Moss, 1999; Anderson, 1988; Scott, 2009). In New Orleans specifically, for example, in the 1930s, the philanthropic Rosenwald Fund attempted to create a segregated high school to train Black youth for industrial jobs. African Americans were told this was an opportunity for racial uplift, while Whites were told this was an effort to “increase the productivity of the city’s black work force” while still neglecting them the training and skills necessary to compete with White peers for higher-paying occupations (Anderson, 1988 p. 215).<sup>1</sup> Post-Katrina New Orleans is as much an extension of these efforts of White domination over Black education (Cook, 2016; Dixson, Buras, Jeffries, 2015) as it is an exemplar of neoliberal, education reform (Buras, 2014; Lipman, 2011; Saltman, 2015).

In the ten years since the levees broke, what once was a local school district has been reconstituted as a deregulated and decentralized system of charter schools. As it has now been well documented (i.e. Bigard, 2015; Buras, 2008; 2015; Cook & Dixson, 2013; Dingerson, 2006; Saltman, 2008), this transition began immediately after the floodwaters began to recede and included a shift in leadership and chartering laws that ultimately propelled the mass termination of nearly 7,500 predominantly African American teachers and school personnel. In the months that followed, a network of corporate sponsored, non-profit organizations swept into the devastated region to run and staff the charter management and education service provider organizations (Buras, 2013; 2014; Saltman, 2015). Among these was TFA, whose local branch tripled in size and continued to grow in the subsequent nine years. In the fall of 2015, there were 300 corps members and 1,000 TFA alumni living in the region who “comprise[d] a full 20 percent of the New Orleans teaching force, and over 50 alumni [who] serve as leaders at the school or school systems level,” including members of the local school board and the state superintendent (TFA—Greater New Orleans—Louisiana Delta, n.d.). As the chart below shows, the teaching force in New Orleans has been effectively gentrified:

Table 1. *Teacher Demographics in New Orleans*

<b>Education Research Alliance for New Orleans</b>		
	<b>2005</b>	<b>2015</b>
Black teachers	71%	49%
Teachers trained in New Orleans colleges	60%	40%
Teachers with five or fewer years of experience	33%	54%
Certified teachers	79%	56%

*Source, Barrett & Harris (2015)*

<sup>1</sup> The all White Orleans Parish School Board eventually thwarted this plan, arguing they could produce labor without investing more money.

<sup>2</sup> TeachNOLA is a locally based alternative credentialing program founded by TFA alumni and modeled after TFA.

<sup>3</sup> The following year, Micah left New Orleans and Dinah and Elliot stayed to continue developing NTRT.

In addition to displacing veteran teachers, these reforms undermine democratic life by attempting to shut community members out from the political process (Huff, 2013; Royal, 2014). Charter school boards, for example, are primarily constituted of White business leaders rather than Black parents (Buras, 2011; Nelson, 2015) and, it has been argued, White entrepreneurs are privileged over local, African Americans in the charter authorization process (Henry & Dixson, 2016). Furthermore, corporate philanthropists have channeled significant monies to support non-indigenous proponents of market-based policies within state and local school boards (Cunningham-Cook, 2012; Dreilinger, 2015). This has created both a wedge between the “reformers” (Zeichner & Pena-Sandoval, 2015) and local communities as well as significant resistance and contestation among New Orleanians (Buras, 2014; Dixson, et al, 2015).

Advocates of the reforms continue to refute community claims, asserting that the shift has been successful, pointing to assessment data as evidence (Cowen Institute, 2014). Yet community members, educators, and scholars challenge the ways in which data collection and dissemination of student achievement has been manipulated and misrepresented (i.e., Buras, 2013; Heilig, 2015; Sanders, 2015; Schneider, 2015). The schools themselves are consistently critiqued and brought to court for their push-out practices, harsh discipline policies, and test-centric curriculum (Davis, 2014; Griffin, 2016; Sondel, 2016; Wolff, 2011).

### **Educator Resistance**

Neoliberal reforms in New Orleans and elsewhere have been cloaked in the rhetoric of autonomy, innovation, and freedom from bureaucracy. Meanwhile, the accountability policies attached to these reforms standardize teacher practice, increase surveillance of teachers’ work, and overburden teachers with extensive documentation (i.e. McNeil, 2002; Valli & Beuse, 2007). Further, while charters schools were originally an attempt to create locally controlled educational spaces (Sizer & Wood, 2009), teachers in the charters of New Orleans have little agency in their classrooms; especially those who are critical of the pedagogy expected of them (Sondel, 2015).

While much of teachers’ work is controlled by these top-down reforms, they still have the capacity to enact bottom up policy as “four decades of research have shown that practitioners become policy-makers at the point of implementation” (Anderson & Cohen, 2015 p.15). Teacher resistance has long been treated pejoratively as an act of defiance, yet recent scholarly attention has begun to address the ways in which teachers engage in “principled resistance” (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006) and acts of subversion to benefit the common good in the context of neoliberal reform (Anderson & Cohen, 2015; Hill, 2011; Uetricht, 2014).

One of the ways teachers engage in resistance—relevant to this study—is through critical study groups (Picower, 2011; Riley, 2015). These groups bring educators together to share curriculum and ideas for classroom practice and/or work alongside students, parents, and community leaders to generate research and advocate for anti-racist, anti-capitalist reform in public schools. Among the many examples of these are; The North Dakota Study Group, Teachers For Social Justice, The New York Collective of Radical Educators, The Rouge Forum in Detroit (see Gibson, Queen, Ross, & Vinson, 2011), Network for Public Education, and Education for Liberation Network.

Scholar activist Bree Picower (2011) developed and then conducted a study of a critical support group she developed specifically for novice teachers. She found that having a “safe haven” to reflect on their practice and further their analysis enabled novice teachers to cultivate



strategies to avoid compliance and implement justice-oriented practices even within a neoliberal context. Similarly, in this study I am interested in the ways in which NTRT influences novice teachers' capacity to develop and enact a critical perspective with support from each other *and* from local communities.

## The Study

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Two years prior to this study, I began my relationship with NTRT as a researcher in New Orleans, during which time I participated in multiple NTRT events. I further came to know participants in NTRT on a personal and professional level as we organized an “Organizing resistance against Teach For America and its role in privatization” as a part of the national Free Minds Free People conference (see Sondel & Kretchmar, 2014). This allowed me to become a “trusted person” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 6) even as I was not living in New Orleans. During five weeklong visits over an eighteen-month period between 2014-2015, I collected data with members of NTRT on their experiences participating with the collective.

Participants in this study included nine out of the twelve collective members from 2014:

Table 2. *Participant Information*

Name	Position	Teacher Training Program	Race	Year Arrived in New Orleans
Ben	Out of School Educator	Americorps	White	2011
Caroline	Classroom Teacher	TFA	White	2010
Dinah	Out of School Educator	TFA	White	2008
Elliot	Out of School Educator	TFA	White	2008
Julia	Classroom Teacher	TeachNOLA <sup>2</sup>	White	2011
Leah	Classroom Teacher	Avodah	White	2013
Lily	Classroom Teacher	University-Based	White	2012
Tori	Classroom Teacher	TeachNOLA	White	2012
Victoria	Classroom Teacher	TFA	White	2011

As evidenced by the table above, six participants worked as classroom teachers in charter schools and three as educators outside of the classroom in after-school and alternative education programs. Each participant identified as White, eight were under the age of thirty, only one had attended a university based, teacher education program, and none were from New Orleans. In addition, each participant came to New Orleans with internal and/or external resources to draw from in developing their critical analysis. Leah, for example, had been a participant in *Avodah*—a Jewish Social Corps that provided anti-racist workshops to all trainees, Julia had spent time as a college student learning progressive pedagogy at Banks Street, and Victoria had been trained as a community organizer. As was the case of those who joined the social movements in the 60s and 70s (McAdam, 1986), nearly every participant had a prior history of activism from their youth and/or in college.

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<sup>2</sup> TeachNOLA is a locally based alternative credentialing program founded by TFA alumni and modeled after TFA.

Given my relationships with participants, my own predispositions as a researcher of New Orleans, and my identity as a critical alumnus of TFA, I attempted to gather as much data as possible to counteract the “pull of [my own] biography” (Fine, 2006 p.89). Data collection included two, one-hour formal interviews with each participant. Rooted in feminist theory these were structured as conversations in an effort to break down any power differentials in our respective positions (Kirsch, 1999). In interviews, we discussed participants’ personal histories, experiences in their school contexts, and reflections on participating in NTRT. I followed up informally over the phone, over shared meals, and at NTRT meetings. In addition, I participated as an observer at one of each of the following NTRT events: a collective meeting, biannual retreat, and monthly event for the larger new teacher population. During observations I continued building trust and identified patterns of behavior (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) to discuss in subsequent interviews. I also visited half of the participants in their classrooms to develop contextual understanding. Throughout data collection, I maintained detailed analytic memos (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) to identify themes, which informed the second round of interviews and the first round of open coding. This process allowed me to generate a set of broad themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). With this list, I constructed a conceptual framework from which to write. After creating a first draft of this manuscript, I held a focus group with participants to read and provide feedback, which factored into the final draft.

## Findings

NTRT first emerged out of conversations in 2008 between three first-year TFA corps members—Dinah, Elliot, and Micah—who had grown increasingly wary of TFA, “no excuses” charters, and the educational landscape of New Orleans. After the three finished their two-year TFA commitment, they took the 2010/2011 school year to investigate the reforms and their impact by, in Elliot’s words, “sitting at the feet of the elders”. They met with the owners of the Community Book Center (a local resource center and gathering space) to learn about the history of the city and the schools. They attended an academic conference commemorating five years since Hurricane Katrina where they learned directly from critical scholars including Janelle Scott, Lisa Delpit, Kristen Buras, and Gloria Ladson-Billings. They volunteered and were then given part-time positions at United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO), the historically Black led teachers’ union. They set up coffee dates and office visits with local scholar Lance Hill and anyone else willing to share their indigenous knowledge.

During that year, Dinah and Elliot<sup>3</sup> also took a class with John O’Neal and his daughter Wendi Moore-O’Neal at Junebug Productions/Free Southern Theater—a community theater production group and social movement building organization in New Orleans that dates back to the Civil Rights Movement. There they learned “Story Circle Methodology,” which is a democratic process for “cultural organizing” that builds collective consciousness across groups of people by allowing for each individual to engage in storytelling and discussion (see Michna, 2009).<sup>4</sup> They also attended “racial healing circles” put on by UTNO where they engaged in story circles with community elders and veteran teachers displaced by the post-Katrina reforms. Throughout these experiences they developed historical and political context as well as local

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<sup>3</sup> The following year, Micah left New Orleans and Dinah and Elliot stayed to continue developing NTRT.

<sup>4</sup> The roots and origins of story circles are in African and First Nation People’s aural traditions, yet O’Neal first learned the basic principles as a field secretary for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and has made much of his life’s work the process of passing down this methodology.

organizing strategies. Namely, they began to understand the importance of protecting time during meetings to share a meal, tell personal stories, and develop personal connections.

While NTRT has had multiple iterations, it currently functions as a democratically run collective of educators. Each of these collective members pays annual dues; meets monthly to organize logistics; and gathers biannually for a weekend retreat to reflect on their practices, discuss their long-term vision, read and discuss critical scholarship, and plan for upcoming events. To reach out to other novice teachers, the collective organizes monthly potlucks, during which they build community and explore the historical and socio-political context of New Orleans through exposure to; critical scholarship, guest speakers from the community, and/or film screenings. Collective members also plan several larger events and workshops throughout the year for new teachers in partnership with other community-based organizations. At nearly every event, meeting, potluck, or retreat I observed, NTRT protected time for participants to share a meal and a piece of their personal story.

As I will discuss here, participating in NTRT provided members with an opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with other novice teachers and with New Orleanians. Through these relationships, they cultivated a critical analysis of their context and a collective identity within the wider community that enabled them to begin engaging in resistance by developing as “advocacy professionals” (Anderson & Cohen, 2015).

### *Critical Vigilance*

With neoliberalism defining the purpose of schools as the production of human capital, Anderson and Cohen (2015) argue that advocacy professionalism must begin with educators' own “critical vigilance,” or analysis of the everyday functions of neoliberalism (p.9). Only when these power relations come to the fore through consistent critique and reflexivity, they contend, can teachers “think in terms of what they do not want to be, and do not want to *become*, or, in other words, begin to *care for themselves*” through consistent critique and reflexivity (Ball and Olmedo in Anderson & Cohen, 2015 p. 10). NTRT provided the space for participants to break the silence and develop the contextual understanding necessary to engage in this critical vigilance.

***Breaking the silence.*** Each participant reported experiencing a “moral distance” (Hargreaves, 2001) when they began teaching between what they believed to be right and the behavior to which they were being trained and held accountable. Their primary concerns related to their schoolwide discipline policies and systems of control; demanding that students walk on straight lines of tape as if in a prison yard; expecting students to remain silent for long segments of the day; subjecting students to public humiliation for low assessment data and non-compliance; and implementing harsh punishment such as day-long detention, suspensions, and expulsions (see Golann, 2015; Goodman, 2013; and Sondel, 2015). They were equally concerned by the test-centric curriculum they were expected to implement that left little opportunity for critical or creative thought. Some participants described their practice using Paolo Freire's (1971) term “banking education,” wherein teachers treat students as passive and empty receptacles into whom information can be deposited. Participating in this school culture negatively affected these teachers' relationships with students and took a toll on their mental health. Ben, for example, reflected on what he referred to as a “toxic environment”:

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*I think three years of [this] has really made me distrust kids, and not realizing what they can do, and see them as problems to be solved. Because that's the way we treated them. It was always like, you know, diagnosing what was wrong. It was never like, how do we build them up? How do we help them grow into their capabilities?*

Ultimately, participants reported concern about developing a deficit perspective of their students and of themselves as educators.

Many participants initially remained silent about their apprehension, without a place to discuss or develop these concerns. First of all, they were too exhausted or unsure of themselves to trust their intuition. Dinah, for example, reflected on her first year teaching:

*It was really traumatic to every day be doing something we did not feel equipped to do, battling students and having to maintain our authority in ways that made us feel like we were dehumanizing [them]. And to us in turn. And there was so much work, you could barely process those things because there was just a mountain of grading and making phone calls, and lesson planning to do.*

Like Dinah, many participants were overwhelmed by their workload and rendered silent by stress.

In addition, and as is often the case in market-based environments, teacher dissent to administrative policies was viewed as 'infidelity' and punished (Anderson & Cohen, 2015, p. 16). Each participant had been reprimanded for small acts of subversion including taking children to the bathroom, spending too much time on a read aloud, and refusing to keep their students in silent lines. Verbal protest was also extinguished. Tori explained:

*It was so hard to criticize the system...when you're inside. You can very quickly isolate yourself by being super critical of the environment because they're always trying to keep this very positive culture, so they shame you if you're critical of what they're doing.*

After an instructional video was shown at a faculty meeting, for example, Tori voiced concern that the pedagogical strategies presented were disrespectful to students. Her colleagues responded that her comment was offensive to a teacher who "works her ass off...and dedicates her life to student success."

In another example, Caroline was admonished after bringing her concern, first to her administration and then to her TFA coach, that her kindergarteners had too much direct instruction and not enough free play:

*[The school administrator] told me that I was a lazy teacher because I was asking for more recess. So I went to [my TFA program director] with my critiques, and she told me that KIPP and TFA are partners, and that I should trust KIPP.*

Here, and elsewhere, the connection between the charter school and TFA was used to reinforce buy in and acquiescence. Leah's principal similarly silenced her, claiming that research contends that, "this is the best way to educate low-income Black kids," and assured her that the school environment was a great improvement to what schools looked like prior to the storm. "I didn't know. I wasn't here. So I believed him," she explained. Leah's own lack of contextual understanding enabled her principal to suppress her analysis. The fact that participants, and

teachers in New Orleans generally, had been hired on at-will contracts and subsequently had no job security exacerbated this silence.

However, participation in NTRT provided the space for them to begin cultivating the self-confidence, vocabulary, and analytic tools they needed to openly articulate their critique and condemn their experiences. According to Caroline; “Story circles were spaces where we could hold each other’s anger. And where I met other people who were angry too, because [having that] feeling in my workplace was really hard.” In addition to emotional support, story circles helped participants begin to trust their intuition. Leah explained:

*I felt less crazy and isolated and it gave me room to question more, because at school [I was being told] I was like radical or too much of a hippie...I found solace in the group and a place where I didn't feel isolated.*

Story circles were particularly powerful for participants in juxtaposition with how they were expected to interact at school, void of emotions. They were expected to maintain, what was referred to by TFA and charter school administrators as, a “sense of urgency;” the idea that students’ education and lives were in danger leaving no time to slow down and reflect.

Having this space to question encouraged participants to seek out and open themselves up to critical scholarship. They collectively read and discussed Paolo Freire’s (1971) description of liberatory education, Kristen Buras (2008; 2011) and Leigh Dingerson’s (2006) analysis of reform in New Orleans, Gloria Ladson Billings’ (1996) description of culturally relevant pedagogy, and Tema Okun’s (2001) discussion of White supremacist culture. These texts provided the vocabulary and theoretical framework for participants to connect their experiences to the larger project of White domination and neoliberal reform. Subsequently, they began to translate their emotional reactions into critical analysis. This was particularly important, many reflected, prior to 2012 when critiques of market-based reforms and TFA were not as readily available online and in popular discourse.

***Developing historical, social, and political analysis.*** In addition to sharing stories and reading critical literature, NTRT also provided multiple formal opportunities for new teachers to learn from and with members of local communities by organizing guest speakers, panel discussions, trainings, workshops, and story circles. Many of these events were organized in collaboration with UTNO, the local, predominantly African American, teachers’ union with a long history of organizing for educational equity (see Randels, 2010). Having an opportunity to share their stories and experiences with veteran educators and UTNO members, first of all, enabled participants to trust in and further develop their critical vigilance. Victoria, for example, was more confident in her concerns about the special education program at her school after hearing that veteran teachers, many of whom had significantly more experience than her school leader, were similarly concerned by the ways in which her school was circumnavigating special education policies. Further, this dialogue helped participants put their experiences in historical, social, and political context.

Prior to participation with NTRT, participants had not only been uninformed, but misinformed about the history of New Orleans both before and after the storm. Nearly every participant described learning from TFA and their school leaders that veteran teachers’ apathy, corruption, and incompetence was to blame for educational inequity in the region. Leah, for example, described what she learned at her first NTRT event:

*I went to a [NTRT] teach-in where they showed a video about the 5,000 teachers who were fired. My mind was blown. I had no idea. Because the rhetoric I heard from my principal and from other people was like, 'all these black lazy teachers were a drain on the system.'*

Again, story circles were a powerful tool in helping participants learn from and empathize with the personal experiences of elders, community leaders, and veteran teachers. They learned that after the levees broke New Orleanians lost family members and much of the city they loved. They learned that after “reconstruction” began, veteran teachers lost their jobs, their homes (Parekh, 2015), and their power over how youth in their community were educated (see Buras, 2010 to read related counter-stories). They learned the historical context, namely that even through years of segregation, forced integration, White flight, and the resource neglect that followed (Randels, 2010; Siddle Walker, 2001), Black teachers in New Orleans had embraced their identity as trained professionals with rich cultural and historical knowledge about the students and communities they served. The cleavages participants began to recognize between these stories and the messages presented at their schools contributed greatly to their critical vigilance.

Knowing that public schools, teachers, and UTNO had played a central role in the struggle for racial, economic, and educational equity in New Orleans (for further discussion see Randels, 2010) also contextualized the heft of the reformers’ efforts to take control over the schools *and* replace a long history of organizing with a narrative of neglect. “To know that teachers were fired en masse after Katrina and that that’s why I’m here... To know that people have been fighting for the kinds of schools they want and have been denied,” Julia explained, helped her understand why African American teachers and parents were not immediately welcoming to nor trusting of her. This, in turn, helped her come from a place of compassion and humility, which enabled her to develop the relationships necessary to seek and receive guidance from the veteran teachers at her school and the wider community. This historical context also helped participants counteract the deficit perspectives presented about students’ families at their schools, which, as Lily explained, had direct effects on her classroom practice:

*Having had the analysis, I’m able to empathize more...[But] there are teachers out there who I have conversations with who are great teachers, but truly and honestly believe that some kids are just bad, and their families are to blame and the city is to blame... Now I find myself saying stop. Parents generally want the best for their kids, no parent wants bad things for their children.*

Only through historical awareness, participants explained, could they fight back against the historical amnesia endemic to the reformers. Only through cultural understanding could they begin to develop as culturally relevant practitioners. Only through solidarity with those most affected could they challenge the White supremacist narrative they were receiving. This was not without repercussions; both Caroline and Lily had their contracts terminated, with little warning, after vocalizing critiques and attempting to organize union representation.

### *Cultivating Collective Identity*

Social movement theorists continue to provide evidence that people’s willingness to engage in high-risk activism (McAdam, 1986) is contingent on the degree to which they develop meaningful relationships and a collective identity with others engaged in the movement (Arnold,

2011; Taylor, Whittier, & Morris, 1992). While members of the NTRT collective were not risking their physical safety, articulating critiques could cost them their jobs as well as sever their ties to the social network they had developed through participation in TFA and TeachNOLA. Market-based environments tend to reshape the identity of teachers as “new professional management” built on entrepreneurialism, color-blindness, and paternalistic views of communities; this makes it imperative for educators to develop “new alliances” within the communities they teach in order to challenge this identity and replace it with a community-based “advocacy professionalism” (Anderson & Cohen, 2015, p. 17). NTRT provided space for participants to develop a collective identity with each other and within wider communities in New Orleans.

***Creating a caucus for novice teachers.*** Participants spent a lot of time together. They met multiple times each month to manage logistics, facilitate potlucks, and coordinate community wide events and workshops. Outside of these formal meetings, they commiserated over coffee about their challenges with administration and spent hours on the phone discussing lesson plans. They were friends. They showed up for each other’s artistic performances, socialized on the weekends, cooked for each other, and supported each other emotionally through personal hardships and sickness. In a city where they otherwise had no family, NTRT provided them with a network.

For many, this community served as an antidote to the elitist identity actively being developed at their schools and through TFA. They needed less approval from the peers in these settings because they had each other. Tori’s story provides a salient example. While attending a staff training for a new job at a charter school she, along with other new teachers, was introduced to “school culture” and discipline policies by spending the week role-playing teacher-student relationships with the administration. She was, for example, expected to walk in straight and silent lines through the hallway and raise her hand and wait to be called on to speak. She was publicly humiliated in the cafeteria for talking to a colleague and then subjected to a technique called “sharking,” wherein “teachers” attempted to catch “students” for non-compliance. She described her reaction to me as follows, “I was so disgusted and there was no one else who looked the least bit concerned with what we were doing.” When I asked Tori what facilitated her critique in the midst of her peers’ acquiescence, she contemplated:

*I’ve thought about that a lot. I think it comes down to a difference in character... my own education probably left me pretty confident to make my own analysis of things, which is probably a part of being privileged. But all of them were privileged too. So I guess, they seemed to really want to please their superiors. And they felt like they were becoming a part of something. Maybe I already felt like I was already a part of something outside of that, in terms of NTRT. And I also had built relationships with people at the union.*

In addition to her internal resources, NTRT and the union served as an alterantive community for Tori that emboldened her to critique and verbally criticize when it was not advantageous for her to do so.

These relationships also helped them stay accountable to a justice-oriented mission because they trusted each other enough to critically challenge each other’s actions. When Victoria, for example, took a position at KIPP—a highly resourced charter management organization reputed for excluding community members, creating a culture of compliance and

competition among staff, and for the mistreatment of students—she faced critique and pushback from her NTRT peers. From her perspective, a position at KIPP would allow her the opportunity to change the system from within as well as gain access to training and support to develop as a teacher. She would not have made this choice, she explains, if she did not have the NTRT and UTNO communities to keep her anchored to a critical analysis. Each participant had to make a decision about where they felt comfortable working in a city where traditional public schools were nearly extinct and White, novice teachers were systematically replacing Black, veteran teachers. As each participant drew this line in a different place, tensions were created and then diffused through honest dialogue.

Developing and maintaining the connections necessary for these tense conversations was not easy, primarily because it took time and energy—two resources of limited supply. Further, each participant experienced internal conflict between their desire to provide each other and other new teachers’ with emotional support and their desire to engage directly in meaningful social action. Julia’s comment provides illustration:

*A lot of this scares me! Because I feel like we’re doing absolutely nothing. And a lot of this just makes us feel better about the [stuff] that we do that’s horrible in our horrible world. And then also, I was in such a terrible mood on Thursday and I was having a hard time, and I got to talk to Lily...[and that] gave me what I needed to go back to work, and not just to go back to work to do my job, but go back to work with an eye to figure out how to make it better.*

They grappled with feelings of guilt for centering their own emotional wellbeing as White people working in a system that is oppressive to people of color. They simultaneously recognized that only with these relationships could they continue to fight inside and outside of their classroom. At one collective meeting, Elliot—always one to connect tensions with lessons from historical social movements—reflected to the group as follows:

*This song came into my head [with] the Ella Baker quote, ‘Until the killing of Black men, Black mothers’ and sons becomes as important to the country as the killing of a White mother’s son—we who believe in freedom cannot rest.’ In 1964 she said that, and we’re still in that. People in that time were fighting their asses off, probably in some cases way harder than we’re even capable of, and it’s still happening. People are still getting killed... but we have to have that nuanced understanding, and know what resting means in her song. It isn’t taking a nap or sleeping enough so that you can show up and be with your brothers and sisters. When she says resting, she’s talking about checking out from the work. And that’s a whole different thing. We’re done with that. We’re not going to check out. Because we can’t. We’d be miserable. We’re done with that kind of resting.*

In the half hour discussion that ensued, many agreed with Elliot that helping each other to balance self-care with direct action was essential to the arduous task of fighting for equity.

Participating in NTRT allowed participants to work through these conflicts and come to see the practice of self and collective care as a strategic step. Having this space to unpack their own privilege facilitated their capacity for community collaboration. Tori explained:

*When I was in my first year of teaching NTRT was super essential for me in a way that it’s not now. I hadn’t been around other critical thinking White people who*



*could articulate their understandings of why the charter movement is actually really harmful to the community. So if I hadn't practiced having those conversations, I probably would have sounded like a huge [jerk] to the union.*

NTRT ultimately served as a White identity caucus for collective members, a practice common among organizations that seek to dismantle racism (i.e. Baltimore Racial Justice Action, Dismantling Racism, Showing Up for Racial Justice). While the collective was not intentionally White and there were teachers of color at potlucks and events, at the time of this study nearly all collective members identified as White. Even as this made some of them uncomfortable, many believed this allowed them space to process their privilege and White supremacist culture, in ways that did not tax people of color, so that they could better show up as allies in the fight to end systemic racism. Participants imagined that the racial make-up of the collective, and subsequently their practices and processes, would eventually change. This was likely, they explained, given that the demographics of the reform movement in New Orleans were shifting, in part a result of TFA's efforts to diversify (see White, 2016 for discussion).

Lily's following anecdote provides a powerful example of how functioning as a caucus served her own development. At her first NTRT event, she participated in an *Undoing Racism Workshop* facilitated by The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (for more information see [pisab.org](http://pisab.org)) where she was first introduced to analyses of systemic racism and began to understand her own complicit role. This awareness depressed and isolated her:

*It was basic race theory that I didn't know, that I had been implicit in it for so long...I still get upset when I think about it...All these years, I am thinking I'm this liberal person, but I was just so out of touch. And then you realize how many people around you are out of touch in your life. And I was like, I don't want to talk to anyone.*

Social movement theorists, Sidney Tarrow has argued that; "anger is mobilizing; but shame, despair, and resignation are not" (1998, p.111). NTRT, explained Lily, provided her with peers whom she could unpack her shame and analyze her experiences through the lens of White supremacy culture and neoliberal reform. Having done this foundational work, she and others explained, enabled her to engage with members of the African American, indigenous communities seeking not absolution, but rather new knowledge, skills, and opportunities for collective action.

***Building new alliances.*** Perhaps most importantly, participating in NTRT helped novice teachers develop relationships with New Orleanians, again, primarily through collaboration with UTNO. UTNO, as mentioned above, is the local, long-lasting, predominantly African American teachers' union. While post-Katrina reforms nearly dismantled UTNO through the mass termination of all teachers of record, in the subsequent years they have been actively rebuilding their capacity. The post-Katrina reforms and the subsequent gentrification of the teaching population, also neglected novice teachers, like members of NTRT, the opportunity to engage with veteran teachers. Through collaborations between NTRT and UTNO, participants were able to learn from veteran teachers' historical, cultural, and institutional knowledge. The relationships they developed also personalized participants' understandings of the effects of the reforms and situated their experiences and identity within a larger network of local educators, activists, parents, and leaders.

Story circles, again, played an essential role in the development of these relationships. Caroline described the first NTRT event she attended during which she participated in story circles with members of UTNO:

*I think one of the things that most moved me was how, despite the tremendous trauma these folks in the unions have experienced, they weren't angry. I was so angry at myself, I had at that point started to figure out what I was participating in as a KIPP employee. I cried every day for so long. And here I am with the very people whose jobs I took and they're not angry at me. I saw a community that's rooted in love. And continuing to fight for education. And they're trying to hold me up. They're listening to me talk about things that, no doubt, are incredibly painful for them to hear. And that moved me so deeply that I joined UTNO immediately.*

While the experience of these two constituent groups was not comparable, having a chance to share and witness each other's feelings of dehumanization and connect to each other's grievances helped break down barriers and facilitate compassion.

These connections were, first of all, important for tangible reasons. Few NTRT participants had cultural awareness, traditional training, or significant experience in the classroom. While they could support each other emotionally and intellectually, they had little capacity—especially when they first started—to improve each other's practice. Instead, they sought guidance from the veteran teachers who had taught in New Orleans long before the new reforms and who had indigenous knowledge, on how to understand and connect with their students, identify culturally relevant books to incorporate into their curriculum, and develop meaningful lesson plans. In addition, through interactions with veteran teachers and others at UTNO, they found other helpful organizations and mentors that helped them grow as educators. Through one UTNO member, for example, members of NTRT connected to a branch of Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity (SEED) in New Orleans, a national, teacher-led, staff development program founded by anti-racist scholar and activist Peggy McIntosh with an arm in New Orleans. Through their involvement with SEED, they participated in trainings and reading groups that assisted them in developing a framework to recognize, vocabulary to discuss, and skills to address racism in their school climates and curricula.

Another veteran educator and UTNO member invited NTRT participants to observe the work of Students at the Center (SAC); a writing and digital media program that works in collaboration with local arts and community organizations to develop students' critical consciousness, voice, and skills of democratic engagement (for further discussion see Michna, 2009 p. 532; [sacnola.com](http://sacnola.com)). Observing SAC helped four participants draw additional sustenance from veteran teachers, witness a tangible example of transformative education, and learn more about their students' culture and capacity. In Ben's words:

*I've been going to SAC's classes. They don't do any management. My sense is that they challenge themselves to treat the kids as humanely as possible, to treat them like college students. So it's not orderly, but they're so respectful of the students' capabilities. Occasionally [the facilitator] will have to call a kid out, or call home, but of course that happens. The discipline is not the focus. It's interesting curriculum. And they're learning so much more.*

Visiting SAC encouraged participants to reevaluate the messages they received at school, namely

that behavior management (rather than high quality curriculum and trusting relationships) is the key to engaging learners.

These new alliances, however, were situated within the context of racial tension caused by a long and continual history of racist policies (Dixson, et al, 2016) and were not void of conflict. To develop these relationships, participants needed to exhibit humility and recognition that the indigenous community had knowledge and skills to offer. This often contrasted the hubris promoted by TFA. These relationships also necessitated veteran teachers' compassion and commitment to the well being of children. Not only had members of NTRT participated in the reforms that had displaced veteran teachers, but helping them develop as educators had the potential to secure their long-term commitment to New Orleans and subsequently solidify the shift in teacher demographics. This selflessness is not ahistorical. Throughout the fight against segregation, for example, thousands of Black educators across the south knew that integrating teachers would be more difficult than integrating students. They renounced their own positions in an effort to gain access to a better education for Black youth (Fultz, 2004; Goldstein, 2014; Tillman, 2004).

An additional complication was that NTRT needed to decide where to direct their energy among the multiple community groups. Ultimately, they invested primarily in their relationship with UTNO who had been their strongest supporter since their inception and further, as a union, were best positioned to organize teachers. This relationship has taken constant negotiation. In its early stages, Dinah and Elliot worked part-time at UTNO, but decided to develop NTRT as a separate entity. This helped them recruit TFA teachers who were wary of unions. Further, while UTNO wanted new teachers to join and build capacity, according to NTRT participants, they did not want the new, White teachers who had displaced them in their jobs to now replace them in union leadership. Also, while NTRT participants wanted to honor the processes used at UTNO, they believed that a non-hierarchical model would best serve to provide space for novice teachers to process their experiences and feel supported, which they thought necessary to galvanize them for future action. They continue to reflect on this relationship. Ben explained his current analysis:

*UTNO wants teachers to have agency, and so it's this balance of respecting who's there and what's there and also recognizing we can't just be deferential, because that's not helpful either. We want to share in this vision, we don't want to control it, we want to share in it. That's a balance that we're committed to finding.*

At the time of this study NTRT still existed separate from UTNO, but required all collective members to pay dues and engage as active members of UTNO. They also bring forms for people to register membership with UTNO to every NTRT community event.

These new alliances took time to build. In the year of this study, ten years since the storm and five years since NTRT began functioning, collective members had earned significant trust in a community that, they recognized, had every reason to mistrust them. Increasingly, Leah reflected, UTNO and other organizations were asking NTRT to show up at protests and events. Ben looked forward:

*We're going to mess it up, [but] we're committed to making mistakes and working through them...If we're coming with humility and developing trust, and we're trying to hold ourselves accountable, at least we're [not] being paralyzed by fear.*

Multiple participants expressed their hope that someday in the future, NTRT would eventually exist as a part of UTNO.

### **Discussion: Shifting From New Managerialism Towards Advocacy Professionalism**

NTRT provides a tangible example of the ways in which a critical study group can support teachers in their development as advocacy professionalism in order to work alongside communities to demand shared governance; community participation; and diverse, equitable, and culturally responsive schools (Anderson and Cohen, 2015). More specifically, this case study illustrates the ways in which cultivating meaningful relationship both with other novice teachers committed to justice as well as within local communities facilitates critical vigilance and a collectivity that allows individuals to redefine their identity and reimagine their responsibilities as educators. This case also provides hope that even those teachers who were formerly active in organizations directly connected to neoliberal reform and new managerialism can play an active role in counter-hegemonic work.

To cultivate critical vigilance, and much like participants in other studies of critical groups (Picower, 2011; Riley, 2015), NTRT created a “safe haven” for participants to unpack their experiences and emotional reactions beyond the watchful eye of the administration and their co-workers. This built their confidence and willingness to explore their intuitive and emotional reactions, which was particularly important given the silencing they experienced in their school contexts. Connecting these emotions to critical texts and situating these stories in the knowledge offered by those members from local communities most directly affected by the reforms further situated these experiences in the context of White Supremacy and neoliberalism.

To facilitate a sense of collective identity within the wider community, NTRT and UTNO collectively created opportunities for cross constituent engagement. Without these new alliances, participants would not have gained contextual knowledge, and without the caucus they developed for themselves, they may not have been able or willing to process and move forward with this new knowledge. Essential to the development of this collective identity was the use of story circle methodology. As others have pointed out (Davis, 2002; Polletta, 2009) storytelling can be a powerful tool in mobilizing people and creating a sense of continuity and connection to historical social movements (Taylor, 1989). This may be particularly salient in New Orleans where reformers have created division between constituent groups and where the young, White teachers work in “no excuses” charters where data reign supreme and personal experiences, emotional responses, and historical analyses are often discouraged or dismissed.

Connecting to a larger network of people plays an imperative role in influencing an individual’s chances of participating in contentious politics (i.e. Anyon, 2014; McAdam, 1990). TFA knows this well, and has coopted this strategy, effectively convincing thousands of college graduates that joining a corporate sponsored, alternative-credentialing program is comparable to joining the Civil Rights Movement of their time (Brewer & deMarrais, 2015). NTRT provided an alternative for these teachers to situate themselves instead within a grassroots, locally based, diverse group of people with historical roots and cultural knowledge. These relationships made it easier for participants to risk their TFA connections and avoid acquiescence at their school.

Alliances across constituent groups, such as these, are essential in contributing to social movements and resisting the large-scale effects of market-based reforms (i.e. Anyon, 2014; Fabricant, 2010; Oakes & Rogers, 2006). Anderson and Cohen (2015) explain:

*By building relationships with the communities they teach in, education professionals are less likely to be isolated in their struggles and more able to attack the complex network of policies and practices that make up [new public management]. This new advocacy or activist professional values the ethos of the profession, but embeds it in real communities of difference and an ability to deconstruct dominant discourses by connecting the ideological dots across various policies and practices (p.17)*

Ultimately, NTRT's willingness to self reflect and collaborate, and community leaders' willingness to develop relationships with these new teachers, allowed them to collectively contribute to the burgeoning network of community activists and organizations enacting resistance to the network of educational entrepreneurs that has emerged in New Orleans (Buras, 2014; Kretchmar et al, 2014) in the years since the storm.

## **Conclusions**

NTRT elucidates the ways in which market-based reform dehumanizes everyone involved. It also provides hope that even the young, idealistic, transient, White teachers who have been recruited to implement neoliberal reform have the potential to engage in resistance. The primary lesson this case has to offer are the ways in which these novice teachers practiced humility and a commitment to serve as allies to the indigenous community who had been advocating for democratic, anti-racist education reform since long before their arrival in New Orleans. Just as democratic, education reform must be rooted in community, so must the resistance to neoliberal policies. Those who are interested in resisting TFA and other examples of corporate reform at the national and local level, must first listen to and learn from the efforts made by those most affected. Future empirical research with veteran teachers and community members to understand their experience working with and investing in these novice teachers would provide significant insight as to how to cultivate and support efforts such as these.

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