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International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education

ISSN: 0951-8398 (Print) 1366-5898 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tqse20

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To cite this article: René Antrop-González & Anthony De Jesús (2006) Toward a theory of critical care in urban small school reform: examining structures and pedagogies of caring in two Latino community-based schools , International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 19:4, 409-433, DOI: 10.1080/09518390600773148

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09518390600773148

Published online: 16 Aug 2006.

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International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education
Vol. 19, No. 4, July-August 2006, pp. 409–433

Routledge
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Toward a theory of *critical care* in urban small school reform: examining structures and pedagogies of caring in two Latino community-based schools

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Using in-depth interviewing, participant observations, and the collection of historical and curricular documents, this article describes two Latino community-based small high schools—the Dr Pedro Albizu Campos High School (PACHS) and El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice (El Puente). The authors focus on ways in which these two schools create a culture of high academic expectations for their students, value high-quality interpersonal relationships between students and teachers, and privilege the funds of knowledge that students and their respective communities bring to school. The authors advance a theory of *critical care* that embodies this important combination, which is crucial if small high schools created for and by communities of color are to succeed. Finally, the implications for a theory of *critical care* and its impact are discussed within the framework of small urban high school reform.

Introduction

This article presents our research as Puerto Rican/DiaspoRican[2] scholars concerning the history, curricula and student experiences of two community-driven educational projects that have served as alternatives to traditional schooling in their respective United States-based Puerto Rican/Latino communities—the Dr Pedro Albizu Campos High School (PACHS) in Chicago, Illinois and El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice (El Puente) in Brooklyn, New York. Building on the work of a number of scholars in the area of educational caring, particularly the work advanced by scholars articulating the perspectives of communities of color (Ward, 1995; Nieto, 1998; Thompson, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999; Dance, 2002), we articulate a framework that clarifies ambiguous and confusing references to caring in education (McKamey,

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ISSN 0951-8398 (print)/ISSN 1366-5898 (online)/06/040409–25
© 2006 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/09518390600773148

2004) and present the voices of students to illustrate how these theoretical constructs manifest in principle and practice at the two schools.

As small community-based schools, lessons from PACHS and El Puente promise to inform the debate on the nature of small school reform and its relationship to communities of color. At a time when the small schools movement has taken hold in major cities throughout the United States, we believe there are important lessons to learn from the experiences of these two Latino community-driven learning centers. Our research demonstrates some of the power and possibility of these community-driven learning initiatives.

While hopeful about the possibilities of small schools, we add our voices to a number of critical scholars who, while supporting the general goal of creating small learning communities, caution that school size alone is not enough to address the educational needs of students from communities of color (Ayers *et al.*, 2000; Noguera, 2002). We are concerned that many of these new small schools, particularly those initiated by urban districts and philanthropy, may become—as Michelle Fine (cited in Hemphill, 2003)—observes 'big schools in drag,' where 'big school' thinking and pedagogy predominate on a smaller scale. Alternatively, PACHS and El Puente represent small schools that were established by Puerto Rican/Latino community activists, revolutionaries and educators to address educational crises in their communities created precisely by urban school districts. While the size and scale of these schools is an important condition for success, the relevance and quality of instruction and the interpersonal relations that form inside these schools is far more significant than their size.

Our analysis emphasizes that educational projects like PACHS and El Puente are not created in sociopolitical/historical vacuums but emerge organically from community struggles for improved educational opportunities as well as political movements for self-determination, community control and decolonization. In turn, the formal and informal curricula of these schools reflect the cultural values and political realities of the communities that established them and, we argue, provide students with educational and social experiences closely aligned with their community and cultural resources or *funds of knowledge* (Moll *et al.*, 1992) and more fully embody the educational interests of Latina/o communities. To the extent possible, these schools reflect the notion popularized by the Black-owned clothing company FUBU (For Us, By Us) of being schools created *for the community, by the community*. Decades before big philanthropy and school districts signed on to the small schools movement, these communities established small schools with very few material, economic and human resources as cultural and community centers to address the fact that their children were being left behind by large, culturally hostile public schools. In our research, we found that the innovative practices of these two schools were described by students through a language of caring, underscored by Latina/o cultural values and community protective interests.

Interviews and participant observations we conducted with students during fieldwork at PACHS and El Puente illumine how staff at these schools value high-quality interpersonal relationships and high academic expectations, while providing support

and engaging students in the learning process in ways that led to reported academic success. In this article, we interpret this combination of instrumental relationships (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) and high academic expectations (Katz, 1999) through the scholarship on caring in education and its intersections with the social and cultural capital literature.

Theoretical conversations regarding caring in education

In recent years, a number of theorists (Noddings, 1984, 1992; Thompson, 1998; Katz, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999; Dance, 2002) have argued that experiences of caring within the student/teacher relationship are essential to student engagement and suggest that the educational success of youth of color in particular often hinges on 'being engaged in a caring relationship with an adult at school' (Valenzuela, 1999). Caring, however, is an ambiguous term that means different things to different theorists and is often interpreted through culturally, racially and gender biased lenses. Making this observation McKamey (2004) argues, for example, that 'in the education literature, it seems that caring is *not* a common reference point—it does *not* hold the same meaning across texts, and often does not even hold the same meaning within one article or essay. Caring is a *symbolic concept* charged with multiple political, social, and cultural meanings' (p. 5).

In order to disentangle the latent meanings within different uses of the term *caring* in the educational literature, McKamey (2004) suggests three theories of caring exist, which are characterized by key assumptions. *Teacher caring theory* assumes a causal relationship between student achievement and caring behavior on the part of the teacher. *Caring community theory* acknowledges the capacity and obligation of schools and communities to provide caring contexts for students who may be lacking caring experiences in their lives and *difference theory* recognizes varied definitions of caring among social, ethnic, class and gender groups and argues that schools which incorporate these differences are more inclusive of students (p. 7). Illuminated by this framework, our research in Puerto Rican/Latina/o communities led us to explore the nexus between McKamey's (2004) articulation of these three theories of caring. Within this intersection, we find the foundation for a more relevant and nuanced understanding of caring relevant to communities of color, particularly Latinas/os. We find the *difference* scholars, however, especially important because they challenge assumptions of color and power blindness widely associated with White feminist conceptions of caring.

Audrey Thompson (1998), perhaps the most critical of the difference scholars, advances a strong critique of the colorblind assumption in White feminist notions of caring as an emotion-laden practice characterized by low expectations motivated by taking pity on students' social circumstances (Katz, 1999). Within the Puerto Rican experience we call this the '*Ay Bendito* syndrome' referring to the Spanish language exclamation of pity. We refer to this form as *soft* caring because it is characterized by a teacher's feeling sorry for a student's circumstances and lowering his/her academic expectations of the student out of pity. While rooted in a legitimate expression of

concern for the well-being of another, we consider the actions and analysis emanating from an emotional response as more important than well-intentioned attempts to care for youth of color.

Alternatively, *difference* scholars argue that communities of color understand caring within their sociocultural, gendered and economic contexts and believe that caring has traditionally existed within differential economic contours for disenfranchised communities—particularly within the experience of Black communities, as Thompson points out:

> Whereas caring in the White tradition is largely voluntary emotional labor performed in an intimate setting or else underpaid work in a pink-collar profession like teaching or nursing, caring in the Black community is as much a public undertaking as it is a private or semi-private concern. It is not surprising, therefore, that caring in the Black community is not understood as compensatory work meant to remedy the shortcomings of justice, as in the 'haven in a heartless world' model. (1998, p. 9)

The *difference* scholar who has made the greatest contribution to date in exploring the ways in which identity and context shape experiences of caring for Latina/o students is Angela Valenzuela (1999) who, in her book *Subtractive schooling: US-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*, describes the ways in which traditional urban comprehensive high schools (like Seguín High School in her study) are organized formally and informally in ways that divest Latina/o students of 'important social and cultural resources, leaving them progressively vulnerable to academic failure' (p. 3). She goes on to observe that 'rather than building on students' cultural and linguistic knowledge and heritage to create biculturally and bilingually competent youth, schools subtract these identifications from them to their social and academic detriment' (p. 25). Building on Noddings's (1984, 1998) caring framework, Valenzuela (1999) analyzes competing notions of caring (aesthetic vs. authentic) among teachers and students that are rooted in fundamentally different cultural and class-based expectations about the nature of schooling. These expectations inevitably clash, and when they do, fuel conflict and power struggles between teachers and students who see each other as not caring. As Valenzuela (1999) observes:

> The predominately non-Latino teaching staff sees students as not sufficiently *caring about* school, while students see teachers as not sufficiently *caring for* them. Teachers expect students to demonstrate caring about schooling with an abstract, or *aesthetic* commitment to ideas or practices that purportedly lead to achievement. Immigrant and U.S.-born youth, on the other hand, are committed to an *authentic* form of caring that emphasizes relations of reciprocity between teachers and students. (p. 61)

To succeed academically at Seguín and many other public comprehensive high schools in the United States, students must conform to the faculty's value of aesthetic caring, 'whose essence lies in an attention to things and ideas' (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 22). While 'attention to things and ideas' forms an important element of academic learning and personal development, Latina/o students often resist this notion because they experience the cultural and social distance between them and their teachers as depersonalizing and inauthentic. As a result, Valenzuela (1999) suggests that '(c)onceptualizations of educational "caring" must more explicitly challenge the

notion that assimilation is a neutral process so that cultural and language affirming curricula may be set into motion' (p. 25). Additionally, this analysis suggests that mediating the tensions between aesthetic and authentic caring is related to school structures that emphasize or delimit particular forms of teacher caring.

As scholars of color, ourselves positioned within the difference conversation, we agree with Thompson (1998) that notions of educational caring are not colorblind or powerblind and that communities of color necessarily understand caring within their sociocultural context. This context must be acknowledged in order to forge a new caring framework that privileges the cultural values and political economy of communities of color as a foundation for education. This premise is at the heart of our conceptualization of *critical care*, a term that captures the ways in which communities of color may care about and educate their own, and their intentions in doing so. In light of critiques of White feminist conceptions of caring, McKamey (2004) suggests that a new theoretical discussion must begin with what she calls a *process theory* of caring that deepens the conversation and 'provides insight to the potential complexities and contradictions inherent within caring interactions, interpretations, expressions, and contexts' (p. 39). A theory of *critical care* takes these complexities to heart and deepens an understanding of the role of caring in education.

As Latino scholars seeking to account for this complexity of identity and context, the purposes of this article are to forward a theory of critical care based on our research and integrate Thompson's critique of colorblind forms of caring with understandings of social and cultural capital. The interests of communities of color, specifically Latina/o communities, are translated into school cultures and practices aimed at engaging students in learning linked to broader goals of community survival and development. We are particularly interested in the ways in which Latina/o *funds of knowledge* (Moll *et al.*, 1992) may constitute formal and informal curricular and pedagogical practices leading to the transformation of educational experiences and outcomes for students of color. The student voices presented in this article describe the ways we believe PACHS and El Puente have created culturally additive learning communities underscored by high-quality relationships and high academic expectations that reflect an ethic of *critical care* and illustrate the practice of *hard* caring – a form of caring characterized by supportive instrumental relationships and high academic expectations. While the small size of El Puente and PACHS provide an important context for authentically caring relationships to occur, we argue that it is the cultural and interpersonal substance of the formal and informal curricula at the two schools that lead to the student transformations described herein.

Building on the educational caring scholarship (Valenzuela, 1999; Thompson, 1998; McKamey, 2004) we believe that educational projects like PACHS and El Puente explicitly acknowledge community and student contexts and seek to affirm the identities, social and cultural resources of Latina/o students and constitute the best possible response to traditional forms of non-caring, subtractive schooling and the systematic failure these produce. The voices of students we interviewed support these theoretical claims. In the following section, we provide brief sociohistorical and political descriptions of the two schools that inform our analyses.

Methods

Ethnographic research methods including semi-structured one-on-one interviews, focus-group interviews and participant observation were employed for this project. Such methods uncover complex phenomena inherent within the lived experiences of students, teachers and other community members in rich detail and capture the essence of both schools' respective communities and their possibilities. Moreover, as Puerto Rican/DiapoRican scholars working in Puerto Rican/Latino community-based settings, our interest was in using decolonizing methods that seek to transcend the profound limitations of Western research traditions (Smith, 1999) by encouraging students and teachers from both schools to participate in this project's research design and analysis.[3] This collaborative approach involved presenting our research proposals to students and staff and seeking their permission to conduct our research, participants assisting in the development of research questions and interview protocols, and using member-check procedures to ensure that we were not misrepresenting the voices of our participants (Merriam, 1998).

Participant observations were also an integral part of the data-collection process (Spradley, 1979). Consequently, we participated in school and community activities and events including tutoring and advising students, janitorial duties, serving breakfast and lunch to students, chaperoning field trips, and working in other events, such as parades, music festivals and campaigns in support of human/civil rights. Finally, we collected and analyzed historical and archival materials (i.e. brochures, newspaper reports and curricular documents, etc.) from both schools so we could learn more about each school's respective philosophical visions, funding and accreditation, and how they generally operated within institutional and community-based contexts.

Two Latino community-based schools

The Dr Pedro Albizu Campos High School (PACHS): History and Context

The Dr Pedro Albizu Campos Alternative High School (PACHS) was founded in 1972 as a response to the Eurocentric-based curricula and high dropout rates that Puerto Rican students had been experiencing in Chicago's public high schools. Historically, the dropout rates among Puerto Rican urban high school students in the United States have ranged anywhere between 45% and 65% (Flores-González, 2002). An 8 April 1973 article in the *Chicago Tribune* titled, 'Puerto Ricans Here Set Up Free School to Aid Dropouts,' described the depressing social and pedagogical conditions that led to the founding of this high school:

> The school, which opened in February [1972], is geared to aid Puerto Ricans who have dropped out of Tuley, Wells, and Lake View High Schools. It also serves as an alternative for Puerto Rican students who are considering leaving school because of academic or personal problems…. Puerto Rican students, parents, and community leaders have long complained that the Chicago public school system is counterproductive and generally apathetic to the real needs of Puerto Rican students.

Originally named 'La Escuela Puertorriqueña (the Puerto Rican School)' the high school was established to address the educational needs of its mostly Puerto Rican student body (60/80 students). Currently, the school also enrolls students of Mexican, African-American and multiple Latino ethnicities from grades 9 to 12 and serves as a 'city wide' alternative high school. Until January of 2003, the high school was located on the second floor of a two-story building purchased by the Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC), an umbrella organization under which various community-based Puerto Rican programs are operated (Ramos-Zayas, 1998, 2001). These programs include the high school, an HIV/AIDS awareness project called VIDA/SIDA, and the Division Street Business Development Association (DSBDA), whose role is to encourage Puerto Ricans to relocate and operate their businesses on Division Street—the symbolic home of Puerto Rican Chicago. Since 1974, the PRCC's building was nestled in a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood comprising modest homes and small factories. However, in recent years many of these residents were forced to find cheaper housing in other areas because of gentrification facilitated by developers who purchased many of the former factories and converted them into expensive loft apartments (refer to Alicea, [2001]; Flores-González, [2001]; and Ramos-Zayas [2001] for a more complete analysis of gentrification in Puerto Rican Chicago). The young White upper class professionals attracted to this area considered the PACHS and PRCC an 'eyesore' because the exterior was covered with a series of painted murals depicting the faces of former and current Puerto Rican political prisoners. Also painted on the high school's walls were Puerto Rican nationalist slogans, such as 'Down with capitalism!', 'Long live a free Puerto Rico!' and 'No to colonialism!' These images left no doubt that the PRCC and the PACHS leadership explicitly supported a political ideology revolving around the independence of Puerto Rico from the United States. This ideology also served to antagonize the 'yuppie' newcomers (Flores-González, 2001; Ramos-Zayas, 2001) who felt that they were not welcome to reside in the Puerto Rican community.

Conversely, many Puerto Rican and other Latina/o residents of 'Paseo Boricua,' the heart of Puerto Rican Chicago's business district, believed that White, affluent young professionals were encroaching on a Puerto Rican/Latino ethnically and politically constructed space in an attempt to push longtime residents out of their neighborhood. Evidence of this fear was present on signs that were posted on various storefront windows on 'Paseo Boricua' that read, 'Yuppies go Home' and 'Yuppies not Welcome.'

During the late 1990s, as part of a broader strategy to create a distinctively Puerto Rican business center in the Humboldt Park neighborhood, the PRCC's leadership decided to sell the high school building to developers in order to move the high school to *Paseo Boricua*. As a result, the PACHS is now located in a newly renovated building, which, unlike the former building, no longer displays the political prisoner murals or nationalist slogans. On the contrary, the new façade is one of beige textured cement blocks and greatly resembles many of the newly renovated buildings within its immediate vicinity. More importantly, although the new school is much smaller than its predecessor, it now has a modern science classroom with new experiment pods and an updated computer lab in addition to six classrooms.

El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice (El Puente): History and Context

El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice is an innovative high school in New York City that emerged from (and is part of) El Puente, a community-based organization in Brooklyn, New York. Founded as an after-school and cultural arts center in 1982 by Puerto Rican and Latina/o activists in Williamsburg/Los Sures, a historically poor and working class Latino/a community, El Puente today is a vibrant institution that incorporates the Academy, three youth development centers (after-school programs) and a number of other urban youth initiatives. The organization was initially founded in response to a protracted period of youth violence during the late 1970s and early 1980s and the inability of existing social service agencies and schools to address these problems. Eastern District High School, the zone school for Williamsburg, symbolized for El Puente's founders what was wrong with the Board of Education.[4] The conditions Valenzuela (1999) describes as *subtractive schooling* resonate strongly with the educational experiences of Latina/o youth in North Brooklyn and throughout New York City at the time El Puente was founded. In a 1988 *New York Times* article documenting dropout rates in New York City, Luis Garden-Acosta, El Puente's principal founder, summarized the messages he believed Latino youth received as part of their education in New York City public schools. His statement sheds light on the way El Puente Academy's founders defined the educational problems for the Latina/o students they later would seek to address through their own school: 'Young people are being given a message: Your culture is not good enough; your language stinks; you have to adjust to our culture, it's an insensitive cultural response by the Board of Education and the educational system in general' (Carmody, 1988).

In response to these conditions, the founders of El Puente sought to create a holistic after-school learning community that affirmed the language, culture and identities of Latino/a students and linked the individual development of students to a broader vision of community development. In their efforts to institute effective youth development and culturally responsive after-school programming based on principles of peace and justice and human rights, El Puente's founders identified the need to address the schooling of young people in their community. In 1993, El Puente opened as a New York City public high school under the auspices of New Visions for Education, a non-profit initiative founded 'to create a critical mass of small, effective schools that equitably serve the full range of children in New York City' (Rivera & Pedraza, 2000, p. 227). Now in its tenth year, El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice serves 150 students in grades 9–12, 87% of whom are Latina/o and 11% African-American. The majority of students are residents of North Brooklyn and come from low-income backgrounds. While now a New York City Public School, the fact that El Puente was founded by Latina/o community activists who explicitly sought to create a school whose purpose is linked to community development (for the community, by the community), creates organizational and instructional conditions that are more reflective of the interests and values of local Latina/o residents than those of professional school district administrators or school planners. In this context,

educational caring at El Puente (and PACHS) emerges from more profound origins and takes on additional meaning.

Critical and caring curricula

El Puente's approach to developing formal curriculum values incorporates students' cultural capital or funds of knowledge—what Moll and Greenberg (1990) consider 'an operations manual of essential information and strategies households need to maintain their well being' (p. 323). The Sankofa curriculum is a ninth- and tenth-grade English, global studies and fine arts curriculum and is organized around the essential questions, 'Who am I?' and 'Who are we?' Students explore poetry, art and cultural histories that address personal identity and the diasporic history of communities of color. They present individual portfolios of art projects, writings and research about themselves and their family histories.

Additionally, using the arts as a key medium, El Puente organizes annual integrated curricular projects across disciplines and seeks to link them to students' cultural and historical journeys as well as the history and geopolitics of the local Williamsburg community. The Sugar Project, for example, was inspired by a local Williamsburg landmark—the Domino Sugar factory—and linked English, global studies, biology, dance and visual arts to an exploration of the historical and commercial connections between the Caribbean and Brooklyn:

> Young people studied the history of sugar and its effects (i.e. slavery dependent cultivation in the Caribbean and Latin America) as well as the patterns of consumption in the United States. Students in biology conducted a school-wide survey of the amount of sugar and sugar-based products consumed daily by young people in Williamsburg. The English and Global Studies classes investigated the histories of people who worked on sugar plantations and studied the cultures of resistance which grew out of their struggles. Video, dance and visual arts classes studied the cultural and spiritual expressions that emerged from struggles and oppression related to sugar in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. (Pedraza *et al.*, 2001, p. 18)

The culmination of the Sugar project was the Sweet Freedom Sugar Feast, a performance and parade with student stilt walkers, Afro-Caribbean dance, spiritual songs, a skit, and a presentation of a short video produced by young people. This community celebration took place outside in El Puente's community garden, *Espíritu Tierra*, with student-created murals as the backdrop. It combined elements of fantasy, political satire and traditional culture that together told the history of the people who suffered oppression and resisted in and beyond the sugar fields. Sweet Freedom was an example of the experiential learning that takes place when academic subjects and the arts are integrated (Rivera & Pedraza, 2000, p. 19). In other years, integrated curriculum projects have been organized around themes of the garment industry, biodiversity, media literacy and power/self-determination.

El Puente's students described the ways in which the Academy's curriculum and pedagogy is relevant to their lives and provides them with important historical knowledge grounded in their identities. Carmen, a Puerto Rican ninth grader,

describes the significance of the 'Who am I book,' an element of the Sankofa curriculum and how she was engaged through lessons on the Taíno indigenous people of the Caribbean:

> We are exploring ourselves. In global studies, we're learning about the Taíno—the indigenous people of Cuba, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. We're learning about our roots. My facilitator brought in some Taíno artifacts and showed us all the weaponry and stuff, and it was cool. El Puente finds a way to teach you, and you have fun at the same time. In all the classes, we are learning about who we are because we write this book, the 'Who am I book.' That's stuff I never really thought about before.

Similarly the PACHS curriculum places emphasis on preparing students to analyze and transform their lives, the lives of others and the communities in which they reside from critical perspectives through the lenses of racial/ethnic, cultural and politically nationalist affirmation. The curricular objective of decolonizing the mentality and actions of students and community members is formally conceptualized into three components named '*Identity*,' '*Cognitive Skills*' and '*Action*.'

The '*Identity Component*' of the curriculum stresses the importance of students analyzing their social realities as Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, African-Americans or students who may identify themselves as being of multiple Latino ethnicities. Student-based social analysis occurs through the offering of Puerto Rican, Mexican and African-American history and literature courses. Teachers utilize multiple texts that present topics through an alternative lens such as the work of Howard Zinn (*A people's history of the United States*) in addition to standard history textbooks. Other teachers use texts that specifically address African-American and Mexican historical issues.

The '*Cognitive Skills*' component of the high school's curriculum reflects a more traditional public high school curriculum and includes Biology, Chemistry, Algebra, Basic Arithmetic, Geometry, Calculus and Trigonometry, among other courses. The third and final component of the curriculum is called '*Action*' and is implemented through classes that encourage hands-on student experiences such as photography, art, journalism and video production. Other activities within this component involve student participation in community events such as community protest marches, community clean-ups and cultural events. Although students are not obligated to participate in these community events, many of the students who did were praised and given extra credit towards a higher grade in their 'Unity for Social Analysis' class. This class stresses the importance of connecting project-based learning to community involvement like beautification projects and civil disobedience regarding the release of United States political prisoners and gentrification. Melissa, a Puerto Rican PACHS senior, commented that her previous high school experiences were culturally irrelevant and that more high schools should include courses that specifically address the subjugated sociohistorical and political realities of their students.

> At my old public high school I had no idea who Pedro Albizu Campos was or who Lolita Lebrón was. I had no idea who these people were. Somebody came up to me and asked if I knew what the *Grito de Lares* was. I was like, 'What is that?' My Puerto Rican-ness was challenged when they asked me, 'You're Puerto Rican, right?' They then told me I should

> know this stuff. None of this was ever taught to me. I think public schools should have different kinds of history classes like African history, South American history, and other stuff that isn't normally taught.

Damien, a tenth grader, also observed that his previous public high schools did not undertake any serious attempts to incorporate culturally relevant curricula in courses. In fact, he felt that these schools were, in essence, 'brainwashing' students like him to accept a set of mainstream realities that ran counter to ones he wanted to learn more about.

> In Hartford and Chicago I was brainwashed. There was always a side of me that wanted to learn more about my culture. I wanted to learn more than what the schools were telling me. It was at the PACHS that I heard of Puerto Rican writers like Lola Rodríguez de Tió, Luis Muñoz Marín, and Dr Pedro Albizu Campos. But when I was in school they never taught me what I wanted to know. They would only teach me to pledge allegiance to the United States flag and sing the Star Spangled Banner. These are all lies. They never told me about the splendid little war and how the United States went into Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. They never told me how they went in and took Hawai'i. In the public schools they never taught me about the slaughtering of people in Vieques. The teachers always tried to make the United States seem all high and mighty.

Although Melissa and Damien expressed their desire that schools radically transform their curricula in ways that would address alternative epistemologies, PACHS and El Puente students also felt it was important for teachers to not only have a passion for the provision of academic content but to also build and sustain high-quality interpersonal relationships with them. This powerful combination of high academic expectations and meaningful student–teacher interpersonal relationships form the basis of authentic caring as an alternative to the traditional schooling that many students of color in urban schools experience on a daily basis.

Authentic caring as not-so-hidden curriculum

Time and time again, student informants articulated the importance of authentically caring relationships with their teachers/facilitators and described their relationships with teachers at PACHS and El Puente in contrast to their experiences of non-caring in prior schools. These experiences constitute what we call a not-so-hidden-curriculum that counteracts the informal and formal practices that marginalize Latino/a students. Bowles and Gintis (1976) describe the hidden curriculum as the nature of social relations in classrooms and schools that transmit messages legitimizing class-based positionalities in regard to work, rules, authority and values that maintain capitalist sensibilities. The hidden curriculum, then, becomes the mechanism by which students learn their place in the economy, accept their position and develop the necessary skills for their role in the labor force.

Alternatively, these students illustrate that PACHS and El Puente's formal and informal curricula are organized in ways that encourage students' active engagement as members of a learning community. Emphasis on instrumental relationships (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) and the Latina/o cultural value of *personalismo* (Santiago-Rivera

et al., 2002) create conditions that student informants describe as transformative[5] relative to their prior experiences in traditional schools and their knowledge of schools that friends and relatives attend.

For example, Melissa, a Puerto Rican PACHS senior, described the ways in which teachers and students had marginalized her in a school characterized by deep class divisions:

> The year I left the other school, they had taken too many students. Most of my teachers cared about the richer and better students. The ones who were poor or at the bottom were ignored. The teachers didn't care because they put down students and called them names. One time a teacher said that I would become nothing but a future statistic—pregnant or raped somewhere. The White students heard that and started calling me 'stat.' I was also the only Puerto Rican in that advanced science class. Things were really bad. I had to get out.

Kathy, a multiethnic Latina (Mexican and Puerto Rican) who graduated from the PACHS in 1985 also described how her experiences with non-caring and non-Latino teachers facilitated her exit from a traditional high school and subsequent enrollment at PACHS:

> The teachers in my other high school were mean. They would speak down to you. I had no Latino teachers. My teachers didn't even know my name. If they wanted to get my attention, they would poke at me or yell at me. After a month of this shit, I was like, 'I'm outta here!'

These reported experiences resonate with other researchers' (Katz, 1999; Dance, 2002) observations regarding teachers who had no knowledge or interest in becoming familiar with their students' social and cultural realities and, as Kathy asserted, this alienation was reinforced by a lack of any Latina/o teacher presence.

Teresa, an African-American El Puente senior, linked a critique of her previous school to her positive experience at El Puente and its articulation of a mission 'to inspire and nurture leadership for peace and justice.' She provides an analysis of the tacit mission of her former school:

> This whole thing of basically having a mission is different right there—you can't ask no other school like 'what's your mission' cause I don't really think they (my former school) have none. I think it's just to get those students who aren't doing well out—'cause they also push a lot of students ahead without them making their grades. And I haven't seen that done in this school.

Teresa's critique of the lack of a mission of her former school and the practice of 'pushing students ahead' suggests that educational engagement at El Puente is related to both high expectations and a high level of support placed on her by facilitators. For Melissa, Kathy and Teresa, teacher apathy and low expectations contributed to academic alienation and their eventual exit from traditional high schools. As Teresa argues, this sentiment is reflective of a 'push out' rather than 'drop out' experience and yet these student observations suggest that something about the social organization and pedagogy of these two schools generates a culture of student 'drop-in'[6] and academic engagement. Other students suggested that the substance of this engagement

in school emerges from high-quality instrumental relationships with teachers (Stanton Salazar, 2001).

School as *familia y communidad*: transforming power relations through *personalismo*

Student informants from both schools described experiences of educational caring linked to high academic expectations and mentorship as central features. These reported experiences highlighted an emphasis on high-quality interpersonal relationships at the two schools. This emphasis, we argue, emerges from the Latina/o cultural value of *personalismo*, which Santiago-Rivera *et al*. describe as having important institutional implications:

> High importance is given to the qualities of positive interpersonal and social skills that family members, both nuclear and extended, maintain mutual dependency and closeness over a lifetime. The valuing of warm, friendly and personal relationships has important implications for how Latinos respond to environments (e.g. hospitals, mental health agencies, etc.) that are quite often impersonal and formal. (2002, p. 44)

By institutionalizing an ethic of *personalismo*, PACHS and El Puente staff transcend the boundaries of traditional schooling and create social conditions and relationships that are more aligned with students' cultural orientations and which overlap with extended family life. Additionally, because these schools emerged out of community struggles for denied educational rights, they embody important social and cultural protective features. Reflecting these struggles the terms *respect*, *friendship* and *family* frequently and compellingly arose in the interviews and conversations we had with students. Students often described their relationships with facilitators as *like a friend*, *like family* or *like a parent*. Ricardo, for example, a Dominican-born sophomore, expressed that El Puente was a caring school because of the sense of family and community that his teachers fomented. Suggesting that traditional power relations between teachers and students are also subverted at El Puente, he used a 'parent–son' metaphor to illustrate his experiences:

> El Puente's a very good school because the teachers really treat you like a family. In some other schools you gotta call the teacher Mr Rodríguez or Mr This, Ms That. At El Puente, you call your teacher by their first name, like one of your friends. If you got a problem [in other schools] they tell you, 'You can do anything you want, after my class.' At El Puente they don't do that. If you do something bad, they all sit with you and have a meeting with the principal and they try to help you in whatever you need. They sit with you and talk to you like it was a parent to a son.

Because he felt cared for by his facilitators Ricardo did not see school as a place where adults focused narrowly on academic content and routines or where he must be guarded and distrustful of authority figures that would punish or suspend him. Moreover, by abandoning the use of formal surnames, El Puente's facilitators communicated their interest in redefining the traditional 'power over' model of student/teacher relations for a 'power with' model (Kreisberg, 1992).

Kathy, a 1985 PACHS graduate, also considered her teachers to be caring because they were willing to be learners with their students and because there did not exist a hierarchical power division between student and teacher:

> The teachers don't have that aura of being superior because they belong to the faculty or administration. For me, the teachers acted like co-students. They cared because they were there to work with you and learn with you. It was a different feeling than what I got at the large public school I attended.

Kathy's comment points to the PACHS' commitment to utilize an educational philosophy derived from the work of Paulo Freire known as critical pedagogy, which emphasizes the teacher's dual role as facilitator and learner (Freire, 1970). Similarly, El Puente refers to its teachers as *facilitators* because they facilitate learning rather than utilize banking methods and 'fill empty vessels.' Students also suggested that such views about the role of teachers had important implications for creating a learning community where students also supported each other's learning. Pura, another 1985 PACHS graduate, reinforced how the PACHS facilitated this sense of community among students:

> The students here looked out for each other and we worked for one another. Everything was done together. If a decision or situation had to be made or resolved then there was a discussion in the school and the decision was made together. I still remember having special school events together. We looked at each other as being part of a family.

Similarly, Carmen, a freshman at El Puente, commented:

> El Puente's about loving and caring, support, community, like we're all one and united. It's the way people interact with each other, you know? The facilitators are good. They care about the students. Basically, they treat you like friends. You can call them by their first name, just like they call you by your first name. It mainly has to do with respect. They're caring.

Critics of such a strong emphasis on interpersonal relations may express concern that such highly personalized and informal relationships, like the ones valued at both schools, might have the potential to diminish boundaries and authority relationships between youth and adults. Students, however, reported that facilitators at El Puente negotiate relationships that are indeed bounded, respectful and evocative of student development. Teresa observed:

> I think they come down to our level in a mature way. Like they can hang out with us and talk to us on our same level—but it's like they're not really with us. They know how to have a good time with us—how to talk to us—how to find out what we're thinking but at the same time not really act childish. They still know their place—have a good time and let the student know that they are older and they do have a certain respect—so if you're sitting down with a facilitator you don't cuss or anything.

The notion of school as 'familia y comminidad' is facilitated at both schools by an explicit commitment to engaging Latina/o students in learning through close, high-quality interpersonal relationships between teachers and students. Trina, an African-American El Puente freshman, commented on these three important conditions:

> It's nice, it's different, and very unique. It's a loving school. When you come into this school everybody accepts you. Everybody kind of embraces you and takes you in. It's a lot smaller than the average high school. And I think we are closer and we get along more because everybody gets to know each other. Everybody is familiar with the teachers and the staff. They [facilitators] take their time with you and they ask you if anything is bothering you. They're caring.

Trina's experience of acceptance and her observation that 'we get along more because everybody gets to know each other' suggests that interactions among students are shaped not just by the size of the school but also by the nature of relationships between facilitators and students. Both PACHS and El Puente students described powerful experiences of being cared for by teachers at their respective schools.

Students explained that caring teachers offered them guidance and friendship inside and outside the classroom, held them to high academic expectations, and demonstrated a sense of solidarity by being active co-learners and facilitators rather than authoritarian teachers. These observations revealing a strong emphasis on *personalismo* as an informal curricular practice and strongly suggest that the cultural orientations and values at the two schools are closely aligned with the expectations that Latina/o families have of schools: an emphasis on social relations, self-awareness and respect in addition to academic preparation. Valenzuela articulates these expectations by using the Spanish term *educación*:

> Educación is a conceptually broader term than its English language cognate. It refers to the family's role of inculcating in children a sense of moral, social and personal responsibility and serves as the foundation for all other learning. Though inclusive or formal academic training, educación additionally refers to competence in the social world, wherein one respects the dignity and individuality of others. (1999, p. 23)

Based on Valenzuela's definition, the notion of *educación* or *ser bien educado/a*[7] (to be a well-educated person) is deeply rooted in relational and social ties characterized by respect (respeto) and confianza (mutual trust) (Moll & Greenberg, 1990), which student informants revealed are operationalized at PACHS and El Puente and facilitate their academic engagement and achievement.

'Failing is not a category:' instrumental relationships + high academic expectations = hard caring

In our interviews with students at El Puente and PACHS, they consistently used the term caring to describe their experiences and relationship with administrators, teachers and facilitators. A number of students described caring teachers as those who, through their actions, emphasized the importance of close student–teacher relationships and hold students to high academic expectations. In contrast to the notion of 'soft' caring that we articulated earlier in this article, the combination of high expectations for academic performance that teachers place upon students (Katz, 1999) and supportive, instrumental relationships between students and teachers amounts to what we call *hard* caring.[8] Our discussion of soft vs. hard caring suggests that there exists within the social landscape of schools and teacher/student relationships a

continuum of caring that may not be as binary as the soft/hard concept implies but that the most relevant forms of caring, which we believe teachers at PACHS and El Puente employ, recognize that students of color will not benefit from forms of caring that are not tied to the expectation of academic excellence. One way *hard* caring manifested in our interviews was when students reported that teachers were willing to make their time available to provide students with academic support. For example, Ramón, a Brooklyn born Puerto Rican El Puente 11th grader, remarked:

> Facilitators are caring; they take their time out with the students. Make sure they're passing their classes. If you're not passing they stay after school knowing they could be doing other things. 'Cause most of the teachers take out their time and stay here with you and make sure you got the work down.

When asked to elaborate on what they meant by caring, students responded that facilitators and administrators were accessible, listened to them and were willing to invest time with them to support them academically or with other concerns. Students did not describe caring ambiguously; rather, they linked it directly to facilitators' insistence on their academic success and the support they provided toward this end. For example, Reggie, an African-American 11th grader at El Puente, suggested that adult support and a commitment to student success enhanced his overall educational experience and achievement because facilitators 'don't let you fail:'

> It's a good school to go to because they don't like nobody to fail. They try to help you, give you goals for your life. They don't let you drop out of school. They care about you. In other schools, if you fail, teachers just say, 'You failed.' At El Puente, if you are failing, they don't let you. Failing is not a category at El Puente.

Echoing Reggie's comments, Teresa described how facilitators are committed to students' success, make themselves available to provide assistance to students, and go out of their way to ensure that students are learning. She also noted a relationship between the ages of facilitators and their availability:

> They take their time out with the students. Make sure they're passing their classes. If you're not passing, they stay after school, knowing they could be doing other things. 'Cause most of the teachers are young and they're still going to school, but still they take out their time and stay here with you and make sure you got the work down.

Reggie and Teresa underscore the dedication of how El Puente's facilitators dedicate large amounts of their time to individual students to ensure that students have understood and mastered content and skills. Their responses also suggested that the sense of social closure and high expectations they experienced resulted in improved academic performance. Orlando, a US-born Salvadoran El Puente 10th grader, related these expectations to the fact that he must demonstrate in his classes why he knows what he knows. He gave the example of his math facilitator, Cynthia:

> I think that, in math, I'm learning more. How to not just get the answer but to know how I got it. Like, I don't just go straight for the answer. I know how to take the steps and how to get there. You just can't give them the answer. You got to give them the whole entire speech of how you got the answer. I just can't tell her like one plus one, I just can't say the answer is two. She'll be like, 'Why is it two? Show me how you got two.' She makes you

> think more because I know what steps that I have to take. I know that if I don't show my steps or explain myself, I'm not going to get full credit.

Similarly, Carmen believed that the combination of facilitator availability/time and high expectations made a difference in her confidence level and academic performance. She related how this occurred with her math facilitator, William, who patiently endeavored to 'make sure' students 'get it.'

> I feel more confident. In my other schools, I was like 'damn, I don't know this.' Teachers would explain it, but I really didn't get it. So I would just say, 'Okay, yeah, yeah,' and forget it. But this school, like William, my math teacher, he explains it and explains until you get it. He makes sure you get it. If he thinks you didn't get it, he'll explain it more. That's what I love about William.

Carmen's description of her experience with William illustrated an increased comfort level in contrast to her previous school and led to her reported increase in intellectual confidence. She described a process whereby the patience and additional attention given to her by William created an obligation for her to create goals that subsequently became a part of her academic engagement and success. Katz describes this process as one infused with social capital:

> The teacher–student relationship, like other social relationships, has the potential to contain social capital. In the context of school, the relationship is productive—that is, it has social capital—if it yields student learning and achievement.... In the teacher–student relationship, each actor must have faith that investment in the other will provide benefits. In other words, the teacher devotes time and energy to students who s/he believes will at some point, either immediately or in the future, show progress in learning due to that time and energy. Similarly, a student will work hard for a particular teacher knowing that the effort will produce positive results, e.g., in the form of high grades and school recognition. (1999, p. 813)

PACHS students also revealed experiences of caring characterized by high expectations and support. For Melissa, a PACHS senior, this experience of high expectations was marked by both honesty about her academic performance and the opportunity to improve it:

> The teachers at the school won't lecture you. They're into everything you do and they'll tell you when they think you've half-assed on a test. I remember when I got a 'C' on a test. The teacher told me that I could've done better so he let me take the test again. I thought that was cool because it showed me that the teacher cared about me.

Our student informants described caring teachers as those who supported them, held them to high expectations and demanded high-quality academic work. In addition to the attention paid to the understanding of academic subject matter, students also commented on the high level of personal trust or *confianza* that was an essential component of the student–teacher relationships that were commonplace at the school. Unique, an African-American PACHS senior, stated:

> The teachers are cool because they look at you more like a person than a student. They give you help if you need it. They're more like a friend than a teacher. You can also go up to them and tell them anything and they won't go and tell anyone else.

Finally, students perceived that there was particular attention given to breaking down the traditional power relationships that exist in many traditional urban high schools between students and teachers. Rather than assume the position that students are empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge from their teachers and that students have nothing to contribute to the learning/teaching process, a culture of mutual learning and teaching between students and teachers existed at the PACHS. Kathy, a 1985 PACHS graduate, remarked:

> The teachers don't have that aura about themselves being a part of the faculty or administration. For me, they were like co-students. They were there to work with you and learn from you. It was a very different feeling than what I got at the public schools.

Without such instrumental support and reciprocity, students at both schools suggested they would be less comfortable and less engaged in learning. Caring alone is not enough for academic engagement and success to occur. On the contrary, caring must manifest itself as high academic expectations—what we call *hard* caring. Katz describes this essential combination:

> High expectations without caring can result in setting goals that are impossible for the student to reach without adult support and assistance. On the other hand, caring without high expectations can turn dangerously into paternalism in which teachers feel sorry for 'underprivileged' youth but never challenge then academically. High expectations and caring, in tandem, can make a powerful difference in students' lives. (1999, p. 814)

Students at El Puente and PACHS described that 'high expectations' do not necessarily take the form of extreme academic pressure, high-stakes testing or other humiliating practices aimed at raising test scores. Rather, as Carmen's description of her relationship with William illustrated, high expectations were communicated through the patient investment of time and the creation of reciprocal obligations between students and facilitators as an important and active form of social capital.

Creating spaces that are safe to learn: principles and practices of safety and caring

Previous research has highlighted the importance of creating safe niches of student communities in school (Flores-González, 2002). These safe niches promote students' overall engagement in school. In an era where draconian zero-tolerance discipline policies are the preferred strategy to address conflict, violence and gang-related behavior in schools, PACHS and El Puente students described how clear expectations and respectful, holistic approaches to conflict resolution create and maintain compellingly safe school environments. Unlike unilateral discipline policies that are focused on maintaining order and control and victimize all students, our research reveals that PACHS and El Puente staff develop clear policies and practices that do not tolerate specific behaviors yet communicate to students that their personal safety is a priority. For example, Pura, a PACHS graduate, described how she transferred from the public school that she had been attending to the PACHS precisely because of the high school's reputation regarding its policies on gangs in the school:

> When I was going to high school the gangs were just recently evolving. The gangs had changes. Now they were wearing colors and shooting each other. You really had to know what colors not to wear in school. You even had to be careful about wearing certain colors outside school because you could get beat up on the public buses on your way home. All this stuff was going on so my mom took me out of school and I ended up at PACHS. Iván and the faculty didn't tolerate gang stuff in the school.

Unique, a PACHS African-American senior, also mentioned that she could no longer attend her previous public high school because of the gang presence and lack of rules concerning students coming and going as they pleased. Her experiences differed greatly at the PACHS:

> At my old high school I was tired of all the gang fighting and stabbings. People would even pull fire drills to get out of school. I could even walk out whenever I pleased and nobody would challenge me. At this school [PACHS] I can't even walk down the hall without a teacher coming up behind me to ask me what I'm up to. At this school, the teachers care what I'm doing. They also don't put up with fighting or gangs in the school.

Teresa, an African American El Puente senior, also described her transition from a large traditional high school to El Puente where she had been involved in a number of fights with other students. She suggests that the schools' small size and high expectations of facilitators contribute to her having no choice but to learn:

> I get along with people better. And I get along with more people. I'm not always fussing, arguing or fighting. I'm not always getting into trouble. And I learn a lot more and go to more classes 'cause there's nowhere to hang out! There's nowhere to cut classes in this school. In my old school—I had a big school so you could go out in the west wing or hang out in the lunchroom, in the gym—there's a lot of cutting spots. You could just chill in the bathroom on different floors. But now [at El Puente] there's like just one bathroom. Everywhere you look, there's a facilitator sending you to class, making sure you got permission to be out of class, so you have no choice.

Administrators, teachers and facilitators at the two schools are intimately familiar with the social circumstances that students experience within their communities. At the PACHS, teachers are conscious of the color schemes, signs and symbols of local gangs as well as their influence on students who live in the immediate community. Consequently, the teachers are capable of detecting and reducing the gang influence within the school. This teacher knowledge is crucial because it communicates that adults are aware of and understand the conditions that students live under and are not just concerned about violence for their own safety. Policies including restrictions on gang colors, jewelry, beepers and cell phones are enforced and help address gang influence. Additionally, to reduce the chances of students from rival gangs fighting after school, teachers supervise students after school to make sure that all students have secured a safe ride home.

El Puente addresses interpersonal conflict through HIP (the Holistic Individualized [and Group] Process), as it is known, an approach that avoids a reliance on unilateral discipline policies and seeks to understand more broadly and flexibly the needs of individual students and the origins of conflicts among members of the learning community. Through assessment and reflection, young people develop goals with

adult mentors and create individualized action plans. Consistent with the school's principle of holism, through a weekly HIP seminar, students focus their goals and action plans in the areas of body, mind, spirit and community within the following four major components: individual and collective self-help, group development, wellness, and community action and development.

The HIP process is tied to El Puente's 12 principles of Peace and Justice[9] and manifests formally in ways that are quite distinct from mental health and intervention models (or lack thereof) in traditional schools. This process is characterized by resisting the deficit orientations that proliferate within and outside schools. HIP is a manifestation of El Puente's attempt to create its own language for what traditionally is known as student support services or, simply, counseling. Julie, one of El Puente Academy's HIP coordinators, described the process in this way:

> Instead of looking at all young people as what their deficiencies are or that they have these problems and we have to fix them, we look at them as a whole person and see what [experiences] they bring to the table. And a lot of it is positive, and a lot of it has to do with environmental factors and a lot of it has to do with some strengths that they have but they have put in other areas in their life that need to be refocused. If we look at them as an individual instead of looking at their deficit, we can see what's really going on, and we can work from there. It's a much more empowering model. It's much more youth focused, it's positive, and it allows you to go more places than if you look at them through all of the things that they have wrong.

Importantly, HIP is not the exclusive domain of the 'counseling' staff and, while trained counselors and health professionals are key resources and coordinators, all staff (and some trained students—with supervision) participate in mediating conflicts among students.

El Puente students confirmed the value of HIP. For example, Reggie, who struggled academically and behaviorally early in his high school career and now clearly articulates his goal of attending a state university in the South, explained why he believes El Puente is a safer place to learn:

> It's not worth it to fight or to get in conflicts, you know, 'cause this school right here, there's something special about it, you know. They treat you with a lot of respect. They give you a lot of freedom here. They don't hassle you. They don't check you when you come to school. They don't have metal detectors. They trust you. You know? This is a good school. Most schools now, they got metal detectors, they pat you down. I don't be wantin' that! My friends tell me: 'Yo! I don't want to go to school. They're not teaching me nothing.' They [the teachers in their schools] don't care! This school [El Puente], if you cut school, or don't come to school, they call your house and ask why. Other schools, they don't care. They just mark you absent. If you don't come—absent, late, cut—they don't care!

Reggie's statement suggests that his sense of feeling respected and trusted by facilitators solidifies *confianza* and informs a school cultural norm of safety rather than the preoccupation with control and punishment that is so prevalent in urban schools. Reggie's experience at El Puente has been so positive that he credits these factors with the fact that he is currently in school: 'If I was at another school, I think I would be out playing basketball right now or sitting at home asleep while

my mom's at work. Only once I cut school, and they called my house. I don't cut school no more.'

Other students also described how El Puente facilitators or counselors called or visited their homes if they were absent. Despite having received consequences, they described these interventions not as punitive but as supportive. The day before he was interviewed, Ricardo had cut school, he reported, to play baseball with friends. He described why, in his opinion, his counselor Rossy called his mother and how he ultimately appreciated that this was done in his best interest:

> They do that because they care about you. They want you to succeed and accomplish all your work. That's why they do that. They get on you. Yesterday, I was mad: 'Oh why she had to call here? Whatever!' But then, after a few hours I was thinking, oh she did the right thing. And my mother did the right thing, too. 'Cause I was the one who screwed up. I'm not supposed to do that, so I really appreciate what she [Rossy] did.

Reggie's and Ricardo's statements affirm the Academy's commitment to the principle of safety and the great lengths to which facilitators go to address root causes of conflicts and avoid unilateral and punitive practices that marginalize and alienate students.

While no single strategy can inoculate schools from the barrage of violence and conflict so present in the lives of young people and our broader society, the HIP process at El Puente and 'zero tolerance' for gangs at PACHS attempt to protect students from punitive discipline policies that reinforce violence in the form of coercive and rigidly applied codes of conduct rather than prevent it. Noguera (1995) observes that the 'exercise of discipline in schools takes on great importance because it serves as the primary means through which symbols of power and authority are perpetuated' (p. 198). Based on these observations and student responses, these approaches are infused with authentic caring and represent more effective, democratic approaches to addressing student conflict in schools.

Conclusions

The voices of PACHS and El Puente students presented in this article reveal that authentic forms of caring based on Latina/o values and struggles for educational rights are embedded in the formal and informal structures and curricula of both schools. Students consistently and compellingly reported that they were significantly engaged in the learning process in these two schools through quality interpersonal relationships with adult teachers and facilitators and that these relationships were characterized by high academic expectations of the students by staff. Additionally, students provided evidence that the risk of conflict and gang violence was minimized as the result of the reciprocal relationships and sense of safety at these two schools.

This emphasis on *personalismo* and high expectations resonates with our articulation of a *continuum* of care and the terms *soft* and *hard* caring. These concepts advance the theoretical discussion discussed earlier in this article and outline the contours of a theory of *critical care*. Our conceptualization of *critical care* finds its origins in a

critique of traditional forms of schooling in the lives of Latina/o youth, as is the case at PACHS and El Puente. This conceptualization weaves the caring community and difference theories that McKamey (2004) describes and deepens the conversation regarding a *process* theory of caring.

PACHS and El Puente make explicit commitments to creating a curriculum that affirms student identities as well as employing culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) rather than a politically 'neutral' curriculum that tacitly supports the status quo. Valenzuela (1999) argues that these are essential weapons in combating the detriments of subtractive schooling: 'Students' cultural world and their structural position must be fully apprehended, with school based adults deliberately bringing issues of race, difference and power into central focus. This approach necessitates the abandonment of a color-blind curriculum and a neutral assimilation process' (p. 109). Affirming this position, the structures and practices we observed and the lucidity of student voices at the two schools strongly suggest that a critical analysis of the social position of Latino communities informs authentically caring student/teacher relationships.

These findings are important because they support our argument that while schooling on a smaller scale is an important condition for engaging Latina/o youth in learning, what goes on within those small structures is infinitely more important. Our research points to the importance of opportunities for communities of color to play a primary role in the creation of small high schools that reflect their sociopedagogical, cultural and political interests. Because PACHS and El Puente were organically created and sustained by and for community members, as opposed to large, impersonal and bureaucratic school districts, teachers were able authentically to privilege and honor their respective funds of knowledge and dismantle the subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) practices that were so commonplace in students' previous schooling experiences. Finally, this research suggests that policy-makers and school reformers must consider the ways in which they structure opportunities at every level for communities to be involved in the schooling of their own. That is, of course, if they care to see the transformations that we did.

Notes

1. The authors contributed equally to the production of this article.
2. Popularized by Nuyorican Poet Mariposa, the term DiaspoRican connotes the increasingly diverse and evolving nature of Puerto Rican identity within the United States (Valldejuli & Flores, 2000).
3. Our own experiences in US schools (both as students and educators) motivated our interest in research at these two schools, which represent a compelling counter-narrative to traditional, large public high schools. Each project originated from dissertation research. As Puerto Ricans, our identity as cultural insiders and relationships with key leaders facilitated entry into these communities; however, as institutional outsiders (doctoral students in mainstream institutions of higher education) we also possessed perspectives uncommon to most participants within these learning communities. Lofland and Lofland (1995) describe this duality well: 'most fieldworkers adopt a stance that is somewhere in the middle of the continuum: trust combined with a heady dose of skepticism; suspicion mixed in with large portions of faith' (p. 55).

4. For example, a *New York Daily News* reporter observed, 'through years of riots, shootings, stabbings, parent protests and facility crises, Eastern District became synonymous with the wilder aspects of the decline of urban education' (Williams, 1998).
5. By *transformative*, we mean the extent to which students perceive that their educational experiences (not necessarily outcomes) are better than their experiences would be elsewhere.
6. This term is adapted from Fry (2002) who, from his analysis of Latino dropout data, argues that a substantial number of Latino immigrant students never dropped out of school because they never had the intention of attending school (dropping in) when they arrived in the US, rather they sought workforce participation.
7. In Latin America (as within US-based Latino/a communities), use of the term *educación* and '*ser educado/a*' can relate to social class and race-based differences and strongly implies racial inferiority toward persons of African and indigenous descent. Notwithstanding this limitation, we argue that, within the US schooling context, Valenzuela's usage of the term provides a useful distinction in understanding Latino/a communities' orientations toward education and expectations from public schools.
8. We want to emphasize that our articulation of *hard* caring is not to be confused with 'tough love,' a notion characterized by harsh disciplinary approaches and often invoked in the 'treatment' of substance-abusing adolescents and to break other dependencies. In our view, 'tough love' may be thought of as a technique employed by professionals to solve a human problem whereas *hard* caring is a way of thinking about human practices rooted in a consideration of the best interests of the individual.
9. El Puente's 12 principles are Creating Community, Holism, Development, Love and Caring, Mentoring, Collective Self-Help, Peace and Justice, Unity through Diversity, Respect, Mastery, Creativity, and Safety.

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