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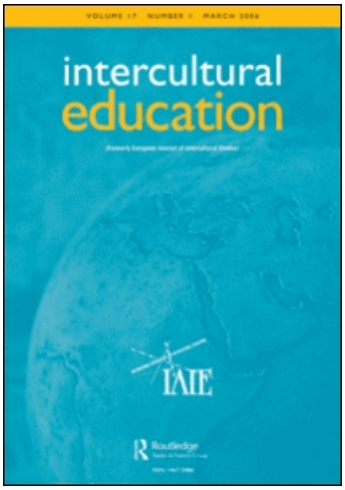

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Instrumental relationships and high expectations: exploring critical care in two Latino community-based schools

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Instrumental relationships and high expectations: exploring critical care in two Latino community-based schools

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Using in-depth interviewing, participant observations, and the review of historical and curricular documents, this paper describes and analyzes 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 findings suggest that these schools are successful because they foment 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. Based on these findings, a theory of critical care emerges that embodies these necessary conditions if small high schools created for and by communities of color are to succeed. Finally, the implications of this theory of critical care and its impact are discussed within the framework of small urban high school reform in the US.

Introduction

This paper presents our respective research as Puerto Rican/DiaspoRican[1] 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 US-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.

Lessons from PACHS and El Puente, which are small community-based schools, promise to inform the debate on the nature of small school reform and its relationship to marginalized communities. At a time when the small schools movement has taken hold in major cities throughout the US, we believe there are important lessons to learn from the experiences of these two Latino community schools that challenge

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the assumptions of the current small school reform movement. Hence, we argue that rather than focusing on the establishment of a small schools industrial complex, which is characterized by large school districts taking the lead in creating small schools, opportunities that support the development of authentic community-driven initiatives will go farther to yield the outcomes espoused by the small school reform movement.

Our analysis emphasizes that educational projects such as PACHS and El Puente are not created in sociopolitical/historical vacuums but emerge organically from communities of color and their respective 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 of schools being created *for the community, by the community*. Decades before philanthropy and school districts signed on to the small schools movement, these communities established small schools with 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.

Interviews and participant observation conducted with students during fieldwork at PACHS and El Puente revealed that 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 paper, 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, and link these notions to rich descriptive data from our fieldwork at PACHS and El Puente.

Theoretical perspectives on caring in education

A number of theorists (Dance, 2002; Katz, 1999; Noddings, 1984; Thompson, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999) have argued that experiences of caring within the student/teacher relationship are essential to student engagement and suggest that the educational success of marginalized students in particular often hinges on 'being engaged in a caring relationship with an adult at school' (Valenzuela, 1999). Contrary to racially uncritical notions of caring emerging from White feminists, Thompson (1998) advances a strong critique of the color-blind 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).[2] Within the Puerto Rican experience, we call this the '*Ay Bendito* syndrome', referring to the Spanish language exclamation of pity. We refer to this as *soft* caring, because it is

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characterized by a teacher's feeling sorry for a student's circumstances and lowering their academic expectations of them out of pity. While rooted in a legitimate expression of concern for the well-being of another, we consider the outcomes and analysis emanating from an emotional response as more important than well-intentioned efforts to care for youth of color.

Alternatively, we 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 (1998) 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 such as 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. (p. 9)

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The 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 students and the politics of caring*, describes the ways in which traditional urban comprehensive high schools (such as 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' (1984) 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 US-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 US, 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' are an important element of academic learning and 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, we agree with Thompson (1998) that notions of educational caring are not color-blind or power-blind 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 (2002) suggests that a new theoretical conversation 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). The notion of *critical care* as described herein represents our contribution to deepening this theoretical conversation.

As Latino scholars seeking to account for this complexity of identity and context, we seek in this paper to advance a theory of critical care based on our research and to 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 in the cases we examine, 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 outcomes for marginalized students. The student voices presented in this paper describe the ways in which 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—that is a combination of instrumental relationships and high academic expectations. This particular form of caring is characterized by high academic expectations. While the small size of El Puente and PACHS provide an important context for authentically caring relationships to occur, our analysis reveals that it is the cultural and interpersonal substance of the formal and informal curricula at the two schools that lead to these outcomes.

Building on the educational caring scholarship (Valenzuela, 1999; McKamey, 2002; Thompson, 1998), we believe that educational projects such as 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

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the best possible response to traditional forms of non-caring, subtractive schooling and the systematic failure these produce. The voices of the students that 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

We employed ethnographic, case study methods in order to make sense of and describe the schooling experiences of students, teachers and other staff members at each school. These methods consisted of structured individual interviews, focus groups and participant observations. In addition, we collected school-related historical and curricular documents. These documents included brochures, archived newspaper reports and a copy of the formal curriculum. These documents enabled us to learn more about each school's history and operations, such as why it was founded, how it was funded and accredited, how the school was operated administratively, and how its curricula were structured. We analyzed these data in order to isolate recurring themes, and our analyses were guided by the following areas of inquiry:

1. What types of interactions took place between students and teachers?
2. How did students, teachers, and administrators describe their respective experiences at the high school?
3. Why did students choose to attend these particular high schools rather than any other of the traditional public high schools?
4. How similar and/or different were the experiences of the female and male participants?
5. Were the experiences of the school's Puerto Rican students and staff members and the school's non-Puerto Rican students and staff members different and/or similar (e.g. African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, those of multiple Latino ethnicity and/or White)?

These questions framed our inquiry as participant observers, but it was also essential to ground this analysis in the history and political economy of each of these urban Puerto Rican/Latino communities.

El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice (El Puente): history and context

El Puente 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 community development 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

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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.[2] 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 develop 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 serves 150 students in grades 9–12, 87% of which 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.

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 US have ranged anywhere between 45 and 65% (Flores-González, 2002). An article in the *Chicago Tribune*, 8 April 1973, titled, 'Puerto Ricans here set up free

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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 9–12 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-storey 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, 2003). 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 consisting of 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), Ramos-Zayas (2001) for a more complete analysis of gentrification in Puerto Rican Chicago). These same struggles around the effects of gentrification and its implications for schooling and the broader political economy have also recently begun to affect El Puente.

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 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.

Critical and caring curricula

El Puente's approach to developing formal curriculum values and incorporates students' cultural capital or funds of knowledge—what Moll and Greenberg (1990)

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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 US. 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

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> 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 students being able 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 such as beautification projects and civil disobedience regarding the release of US 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-ess 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 weave 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.

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> 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 US flag and sing the Star Spangled Banner. These are all lies. They never told me about the splendid little war and how the US 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 US 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 experiences on a daily basis.

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Authentic caring as explicit 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 an explicit (or not-so-hidden) curriculum that counteracts the informal and formal practices that historically 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, student voices reveal 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[3] 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!'

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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 generate a culture of student 'drop-in'[4] 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 highlight 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.* (2002) 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 dependence 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. (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 arise 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 feels cared for by his facilitators, Ricardo does not see school as a place where adults focus narrowly on academic content and routines or where he must be guarded and distrustful of authority figures that will 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 statement reflects the PACHS commitment to use an educational philosophy derived from the work of Paulo Freire, known as critical pedagogy, which

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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 use banking methods and 'fill empty vessels'. Students also suggest that such views about the role of teachers has important implications for creating a learning community where students also support each others' 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

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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 reveal 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 (1999) articulates these expectations 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 of formal academic training, *educación* additionally refers to competence in the social world, wherein one respects the dignity and individuality of others (p. 23).

Based on Valenzuela's definition, the notion of *educación* or *ser bien educado/a*[5] (to be a well-educated person) is deeply rooted in relational and social ties characterized by respect (*respeto*) and mutual trust (*confianza*) (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 paper, 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. This form of caring, which teachers at PACHS and El Puente employ, recognizes that students of color will not benefit from forms of caring that are not tied to the expectation of academic excellence. One way this form of 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.

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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 provide toward this end. For example, Reggie an African-American eleventh 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's voices reveal that 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 tenth 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.

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Carmen's description of her experience with William illustrated an increased comfort level in contrast to her prior 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 (1999) 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. (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 both by 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.

Consequently, 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.

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, it must manifest itself as high academic expectations. Katz (1999) 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

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> for 'underprivileged' youth but never challenge then academically. High expectations and caring, in tandem, can make a powerful difference in students' lives. (p. 814)

Student voices suggest that, at El Puente and PACHS, '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 are communicated through the patient investment of time and the creation of reciprocal obligations between students and facilitators as an important and much needed form of social capital.

Conclusion

The voices of PACHS and El Puente students presented in this paper 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 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.

This emphasis on *personalismo* and high expectations is consistent with our articulation of the term 'hard caring' or a form of *critical care*, because motivation finds origins in a critique of traditional forms of schooling in the lives of marginalized Latina/o youth. Moreover, these practices result in explicit, rather than hidden, commitments to creating curriculum that affirms student identities as well as culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Moreover, these particular schools are very different from their small, progressive, White-led high schools because they are actively led by leaders of color who are aware of their students' daily lives/struggles as a result of residing within the very neighborhoods where the schools and their students are situated. Thus, these findings are important because they strongly 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. In this regard, we believe that our analysis of student and critically caring practices at El Puente and PACHS contribute to McKamey's notion of a process theory of caring by advancing the concept of critical care as one that is motivated by community protective interests and considers cultural and community contexts where these are too often ignored. Moreover, through a notion of hard caring vs soft caring, we believe it useful in both critiquing emotionally laden origins of teacher caring as opposed to relevant forms of caring for marginalized students that are characterized by supportive interpersonal relationships and high academic expectations.

It is of the urgent importance that communities of color have a primary role in the creation of small high schools, because they have first-hand knowledge of their students and their sociopedagogical and political interests. Because PACHS and El Puente were organically created and sustained for and by community members, as

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opposed to large, impersonal and bureaucratic school districts, students and teachers were able to authentically privilege and honor their respective funds of knowledge and dismantle the subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) practices that were so commonplace in their previous schooling experiences. Thus, we strongly encourage small school reform leaders to steer their pedagogical and political efforts towards communities of color and away from the very school districts that are responsible for the need of such communities to create alternatives to traditional schooling.

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Notes

1. Popularized by Nuyorican Poet Mariposa, the term DiaspoRican connotes the increasingly disperse and evolving nature of Puerto Rican identity within the US (Valldejuli & Flores, 2000).
2. 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).
3. 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.
4. This term is adapted from Fry (2002) who, from his analysis of Latino drop out 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.
5. 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 decent. Notwithstanding this limitation, I 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.

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