

RicanStructing the discourse and promoting school success: EXTENDING A THEORY OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY FOR DIASPORICANS

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ABSTRACT

This article draws from research conducted with academically successful Puerto Rican students and individuals identified as exemplary teachers of this group to inform efforts to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for Puerto Ricans in United States schools. We seek to “RicanStruct” the literature regarding Puerto Rican students to include models that reflect success and hope. Finally, the article extends the theory of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) to DiaspoRicans in order to combat the colonial pedagogies in which many Puerto Rican students are embedded and to promote school success for all Puerto Ricans in the Diaspora. [Key words: Puerto Rican youth, academic achievement, Diaspora, culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), cultural capital]

This school is my sanctuary. I know this because once I step outside these doors my problems come back. They're just waiting outside the doors to smack me in my face and start all over again. I stay at this school because I don't have to worry about my problems. I got my mind set on other things. It's hard to describe but it's like a load is taken off me when I'm here.

— DAMIEN, A PUERTO RICAN STUDENT ENROLLED AT PACHS —



Unlike Damien, as shown by this statement about his experience at the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos Alternative High School (PACHS) in Chicago, most Puerto Rican students in public schools in the United States do not regard them as sanctuaries. Consequently, as well documented in the educational literature and popular media, too few experience school success, which has contributed to their designation as one of the most undereducated ethnic groups in the U.S. Quantitative data on the academic success of Puerto Rican students in the Diaspora¹ paints a bleak picture. For example, according to the U.S. Census Bureau of 2004, approximately 35 percent of all Puerto Ricans over the age of twenty-five have not earned a high school diploma. Theories abound as to why many groups of students of color, including Puerto Ricans, have not performed well in schools, and researchers have forwarded a number of explanations to describe this variability in academic performance. Such theories have attributed minority students' lack of academic success to a cultural mismatch between the student and teacher (Delpit 1995), students' lack of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997), the development of oppositional, "outsider," identities among some Latina/o students (Flores-González 2002; Nieto 1995), distinctions regarding minority and (im)migration status (Ogbu 1992), stereotype threat (Steele 1997), and even genetic inferiority (Herrnstein and Murray 1994). While these theories have provided valuable insight into the plight of Puerto Rican students in the educational system, not enough attention has been paid to the students who excel, despite the barriers that impede the progress of their peers.

Furthermore, there has been a disproportionate focus on students. When teachers are studied, the research typically portrays the struggle of white teachers to engage and effectively teach students of color (see, for example, Bigler 2002; Delpit 1995; Howard 1999). Little work has been done on the effective teachers of Puerto Rican students. The purpose of this article is to extend the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 1995) by critically examining the interface between the experiences of academically successful Puerto Rican students and exemplary teachers of this group. Our goal, then, is to introduce new voices to the field—thereby RicanStructuring the discourse—in the hope that they will serve not only as a powerful counternarrative to a skewed portrayal of Puerto Rican students, but also to encourage other teachers to modify their practice in their work with these students.

As DiaspoRican² researchers deeply committed to improving the educational opportunities and outcomes for Puerto Rican students, we approach this work with a certain level of trepidation. Highlighting the achievement of individuals within an oppressive system can be interpreted as an indication that the system is not flawed, but rather works well, as evidenced by the success stories. To the contrary, the impact of institutional oppression on educational opportunities for Puerto Ricans, as indicated by the massive number of Latina/o students who do not experience academic success, is very real. That the students in this study experienced a modicum of success in the classroom is more a testament to their character, hard work, and in many cases, good fortune, than a sign of optimism pointing to the dismantling of an oppressive educational and social system. All of the student participants recognized that they are the few “lucky” ones who “made it,” and all of the teacher participants locate their work within a larger struggle for social justice and equity. Therefore, we argue that policy and pedagogy aimed at creating opportunities for hard-working students cannot be based on luck; systemic change should not be left to chance.

A brief history of Puerto Rican education

It is impossible to engage in a discussion of the education of Puerto Rican students without addressing the sociopolitical context in which these efforts take place. As members of a colonial possession of the U.S., Puerto Ricans are positioned simultaneously as U.S. citizens and colonial subjects; efforts aimed at understanding the experiences of Puerto Rican students in mainland schools must take into account the complex identities that emerge as a result. Hence, the political status of the Island and the systemic oppression of Puerto Ricans in the Diaspora present significant implications for schools. In fact, schools have been and continue to be a primary vehicle for U.S. colonization of the Island and its people.

From the beginning of the colonial relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico, schooling was used as a way to “Americanize” Puerto Ricans. Based on her examination of correspondence issued by commissioners of education on the Island between 1900 and 1930, Aida Negrón de Montilla (1975) argues that the Puerto Rico Department of Education deliberately created a system of education designed to acculturate students and make them “Americans,” without regard for Puerto Rican culture, thus putting colonial objectives ahead of providing quality education for the Island’s inhabitants. This priority is blatantly evident in a report created by the first North American commission to investigate the Island’s civil affairs:

...the public school system which now prevails in the United States should now be provided for Porto Rico; and the same education and same character of books now regarded most favorably in this country should be given to them.... Porto Rico is now and henceforth to be a part of the American possessions and its people are to be American (Negrón de Montilla 1975: 238).

Negrón de Montilla (1975) also notes that the U.S.-imposed educational system placed little value on the cultural capital Puerto Rican students brought to school. Their cultural identities were largely ignored, and English was imposed as the primary language of instruction, despite the fact that the majority of Puerto Rican teachers and students did not speak it. Ronald Fernández aptly described the situation thus: “So like the biblical Tower of Babel, education in Puerto Rican school houses confused everyone in the room” (Fernandez 1996: 55). Furthermore, the school calendar was changed to include U.S. holidays such as President’s Day, to the exclusion of traditional Island holidays such as Three Kings Day.

Although we are more than seventy years removed from the period of history described by Negrón de Montilla, more recent studies suggest that colonial models still dominate Island education. José Solís-Jordán (1994) maintains that one of the main curricular and linguistic objectives of Island schooling is that of silencing Puerto Rican culture, Americanizing Puerto Ricans, and exalting the value system of a white, middle-class United States. Vestiges of colonialism extend beyond the Island itself, impacting Puerto Ricans in the Diaspora, the deleterious effects of which are evident in the experiences of Puerto Rican students in mainland schools.

Sonia Nieto’s (2000) edited volume, which includes research studies, narratives, prose, and personal testimony from Puerto Rican scholars, underscores how U.S. schools have often marginalized Puerto Ricans. Instead of seeking to connect Puerto Ricans’ relative lack of educational success to one factor, Nieto explores a variety of sociopolitical factors that impact their access to quality education, including colonialism, migration, race, and class, among others. Educational neglect has resulted for many Puerto Rican students, due to their overall disconnection with formal schooling. Indeed, looking at educational success solely in terms of individual accomplishment, or lack thereof, lets teachers, administrators, and policymakers off the hook. The educational outcomes for any group of students have far-reaching effects that extend well beyond the members of that particular group. As Nieto (2000: 32) asserts, “Puerto Rican youngsters have paid through unfulfilled dreams of educational success, but our nation in general has also been affected.” Thus, she frames Puerto Rican educational success as not only a benefit to Puerto Ricans but to society at large.

Media coverage of Puerto Rican students and their families suggests there is still significant work to do to change public attitudes toward them. The continuous backlash against Puerto Ricans impacts their access to quality educational opportunities. For example, across the nation, bilingual programs are under attack and have been eliminated in several states with sizeable Latina/o populations. The elimination of these programs has been accompanied by standardized, high-stakes testing and student accountability. Thus, Puerto Rican students are being held accountable for their academic performance, while having little or no control as to the quality and/or appropriateness of the education they receive. Among the numerous stories documenting this backlash is a recent article in the *Boston Globe*

featuring the experience of a Latina principal of an elementary school in Waltham, Massachusetts, where a group of parents objected to her decision to provide Spanish-translated informational materials to parents of Latina/o English language learners (Siek 2005). Another story in the *Hartford Courant* featured a middle school teacher who allegedly attempted to “motivate” his Puerto Rican students by speaking disparagingly about their homes and neighborhoods (Gottlieb 2006).

Latinophobia, racism, and prejudice, vestiges of colonialism and imperialism, are alive and well today in U.S. schools. The majority of Puerto Rican students sit in classrooms in hyper-segregated, under-funded schools, and are taught using curricula that rarely, if ever, reflects their experiences. Moreover, there is a cyclical dynamic at work in which many DiaspoRican students, as well as those on the Island, are imbedded in a U.S. colonial pedagogy, whose primary aim is to assimilate and subjugate, rather than to educate.

Recent literature on Puerto Rican students: Visions of school success

We will focus here on studies that depict models of success in order to present a more robust and accurate picture of this community. Scholars have recently produced research that deconstructs, reconstructs, and transcends the literature on academic minority underachievement by examining factors that foster high academic achievement of Puerto Rican/Latina/o students. These factors include: the supportive role played by students’ families, especially that of the mother and/or grandmother (Díaz 1998; Gándara 1995; Hidalgo 2000; Hine 1992; Rolón 2000); the acquisition of social capital through social networks, including those provided by churches and other community-based institutions (Flores-González 1999, 2002; Hine 1992; Reis and Díaz 1999; Sikkink and Hernández 2003; Stanton-Salazar 2004); and last but not least, caring teachers and culturally relevant curricula (Ladson-Billings 1995; Nieto 1998; Valenzuela 1999).

Nilda Flores-González (1999, 2002) used role identity theory to explain the multiple ways that urban high schools structure inequitable opportunities for Puerto Rican students by influencing whether they adopt either a “school kid” or “street kid” identity. The high-achieving Puerto Rican students she classified as having a “school kid” identity were more likely to be sheltered in safe social niches with other school kids and encouraged by school staff to actively participate in such extracurricular activities as athletic teams, church-related functions, and academically oriented school clubs. These extracurricular activities enabled these students to set themselves apart from the “street kids.” Moreover, the school kids were more likely to view post-secondary education as the vehicle through which they could move into the middle class. By contrast, the low-achieving “street kid” Puerto Ricans found it difficult to operate in school-oriented peer social networks, and the school staff failed to facilitate these students’ participation in school-related activities. The price the “street kids” pay is dear, as the self-concept that young people develop in these years extends into the future and guides their actions in other social institutions. Additionally, unlike the schooling experiences of high-achieving African-American students in previous studies (Fordham and Ogbu 1986), the high-achieving Puerto Rican students interviewed by Flores-González (1999, 2002) voiced a strong Puerto Rican ethnic identity, revealing that they neither perceived themselves nor were perceived by other school peers as “acting White.”

Finally, recent quantitative research has provided explanations for the connection between religiosity as a source of social capital and the high academic achievement of

Latina/o and other youth of color (Jeynes 2003; Muller and Ellison 2001; Park 2001; Sikkink and Hernández 2003). Religiosity and active participation in church-related activities have been found to be important sources of social capital for two reasons. First, church membership provides mentoring between adults and youth that instills positive attitudes, values, and behaviors that promote school success and that serves as a protective measure against oppositional youth behaviors such as gang membership, drug use, and truancy. Second, participating in church activities such as retreats and conventions facilitates intergenerational closure (Carbonaro 1998; Sikkink and Hernández 2003). Intergenerational closure helps these students, through relationships with friends and friends' parents, gain access to advice and mentorship; above all, it encourages positive help-seeking behaviors that allow them to pursue and maintain high academic achievement.

While the studies cited above provide valuable insights into the factors that contribute to Latina/o student academic success, we cannot limit our focus to students. Teachers can play a central role in improving the educational opportunities and outcomes for Puerto Ricans students and in dismantling the hegemonic tide manifested and sustained through a colonial pedagogy. A review of research on teachers of Puerto Ricans students is presented in the next section.

Literature on teachers of Puerto Rican students

Although institutional barriers are formidable obstacles to quality education, individual teachers can influence the educational trajectories of their students. Based on the demographics of the teaching force, comprised overwhelmingly of white, middle-class females, and the often different backgrounds and experiences between teachers and students, there is often a cultural mismatch that emerges between students of color and their teachers. Geneva Gay (1981) argues that three types of conflict—interpersonal, procedural, and substantive—potentially emerge between teachers and students in pluralistic classrooms and others have concluded that such discontinuities, if not addressed, can depress academic performance among students of color (Ogbu 1981; Au 1993). That is not to say that teachers have to culturally “match” their students in order to be able to teach them. Teachers can overcome these discontinuities, cross cultural borders (Rosaldo 1993; Giroux 1992, 1993), and become effective teachers and allies of students of color.

In fact, there is a significant body of literature documenting how teachers promote the educational success of students of color. The bulk of work in this area addresses the implementation of culturally responsive approaches with African-American students and other urban youth of color (Hastie, Martin, and Buchanan 2006; Howard 2001; Ladson-Billings 1994; Ware 2006). These culturally responsive teacher practices are contingent on teachers knowing their students well, viewing themselves as agents of social change, and connecting curriculum to students' funds of knowledge (Moll et. al. 1992; Villegas and Lucas 2002). The literature on culturally responsive teachers of Puerto Rican students and examples of their effective practice is still in its early stages; as it evolves, it is important to forward the voices of teachers who are successful in promoting the academic success and psychological wellbeing of Puerto Rican students, and who Ladson-Billings (1994) refers to as the “dreamkeepers.”

Recent research can be used to inform teachers' practice with Latina/o students in general, and Puerto Rican students in particular. Drawing from her work with Puerto Rican girls in middle school, Rosalie Rolón-Dow (2005) forwards the notion of a “praxis of critical care,” which centers issues of race/ethnicity in the relationships

between students and schools. Rolón-Dow calls for teachers of students of color to abandon efforts to be “color blind” or to look past students’ racial/ethnic identification to avoid racialization, racism, and issues of privilege; rather, teachers should try to understand students’ experiences within the sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts in which they take place. Based on her analysis of teacher narratives, she notes that teachers often avoid naming issues of race and use more ambiguous language, or code terms, to describe their students, the students’ families, and the communities in which they reside. In contrast to the colorblind discourse, she uses critical race theory and LatCrit theory to highlight the need for counter stories by people of color that center issues of race/ethnicity as a way to care for Puerto Rican students, and, hence, promote their academic success.

Similarly, the work of René Antrop-González and Anthony De Jesús (2006) extends the notion of critical care and the importance of student-teacher relationships in their work at two Latina/o community-based schools. Like Rolón-Dow, they also critique racially unconscious, colorblind notions of caring, and frame “authentic caring” as part of the curriculum at these two schools. Moreover, they assert that an explicit curriculum rooted in care can counteract those relationships and practices that serve to alienate, subordinate, and depress the performance of Latina/o students. Their work calls for a reconceptualization of schools rooted in values familiar to many within the Latino community, including *personalismo* and *confianza* (personal trust), and it underscores the importance of relationship-building within schools to improve academic performance.

Angela Valenzuela (1999) also examines factors that influence educational outcomes. Drawing upon ethnographic research conducted with students predominantly of Mexican ancestry at a high school in Houston, Texas, she suggests the schooling experience for many of these students is subtractive. That is, the school environment pressures them to conform to Anglo norms and attempts to strip them of their home culture and language. She posits that a fundamental component of academic success is the development of meaningful relationships with teachers, but warns that many teachers cling to assimilationist notions of teaching and are unwilling to learn about their students’ lives. According to Valenzuela, students can tell which teachers lack genuine respect and affirmation for their culture and hence do not develop relationships with these teachers, which hinder their chances to excel academically. Valenzuela’s work highlights the importance of teachers who value students’ cultures and use them as a bridge to academic success. As the literature on Puerto Rican students in U.S. schools continues to develop, scholars must showcase the voices of participants from the Diaspora to allow them to construct and RicanStruct their visions for school success.

Methods

The present study draws from data collected in schools located in three urban centers: Chicago, Illinois, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Springfield, Massachusetts. In Chicago, there has been a significant Puerto Rican presence since the late 1930s and early 1940s. Chicago is home to more than 113,000 Puerto Ricans; of these, 17,000 or 4 percent, are school-aged children (Chicago Public Schools 2005; U.S. Census Bureau 2006). Likewise, the Puerto Rican population in Milwaukee is a product of working-class migration to this city beginning in the 1940s. Currently, the Puerto Rican population of Milwaukee is 24,000. The establishment of Springfield’s Puerto Rican community dates back to the 1950s, with Puerto Ricans now accounting for

approximately one-quarter of the city's population of approximately 152,000.

The Springfield Puerto Rican population, consistent with national trends, is relatively young; more than half of students enrolled in the city's public schools are of Puerto Rican descent. The three sites also represent two types of Puerto Rican communities: Chicago and Milwaukee are large urban centers typical of early settlement patterns, while Springfield, a significantly smaller city, is representative of mainland communities where the Puerto Rican population is currently expanding most rapidly.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and classroom observations at the three sites. The interviews used a standard protocol of open-ended questions and were audio-taped and transcribed. Combined with field notes taken during the interviews and observations, these texts serve as the primary data for the study. The data were crafted into ethnographic case studies (Nieto 2004). Consistent with this model, the sociopolitical factors that influence the experiences of the participants, such as community, school or state policies, were also explored. Data were analyzed using the cross-case comparison (Miles and Huberman 1994), a method that allows the researcher to examine multiple cases in search of similarities or differences. After each case was coded separately, comparisons were made across cases. Cases were compared within and across groups. That is, the responses of teachers were compared with those of other teachers, as well as with students, and vice versa.

The Milwaukee students identified as academically successful and who we felt could best speak about their schooling and home experiences had to meet three criteria. First, they had to be enrolled in grades eleven or twelve, as the majority of Puerto Rican students drop out of school by the tenth grade (Nieto 1998). Second, the students had to have a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or higher. Third, the students could not have dropped out of school at any time. Using these three criteria, a Puerto Rican guidance counselor at the school facilitated the recruitment and selection process of the participants. A total of ten students met these three criteria, and all agreed to participate after we explained the purpose of the study. The Chicago-based PACHS students, on the other hand, were asked to participate in the study if they had been enrolled at the school for at least two years, so that they could provide rich descriptions of their schooling experiences.

Teachers who participated in the study, all of whom taught in Springfield, Massachusetts, were chosen using the community nomination method (Foster 1991). Students, parents, and members of the community were asked to name teachers they believed were exemplary in working with Puerto Rican students. Ten teachers were nominated by more than one person, and these were invited to participate in the study. Five of the teachers were white, three were Puerto Rican, and two were African American. They ranged in age from 22 to 56 and had anywhere between one and thirty-six years of teaching experience. The student participants whose voices are represented here come from working-class neighborhoods in all three cities. Additionally, a majority of the students identified themselves as Puerto Rican only while some identified as multiethnic Latinas/os (i.e., Puerto Rican and Mexican). The students ranged in age from 17 to 19 and had always been schooled in urban public schools.

Because qualitative research highlights "what it means for the participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, [and] what the world looks like in that particular setting" (Patton 1990: 1), we selected these particular qualitative methods not to generalize to all members of a particular group but rather to paint a portrait that might allow others to gain insight into the

complexities of promoting school success among Puerto Ricans in the Diaspora. Our research was guided by three, broad questions: 1) How do teachers construct their narratives so that they positively inform their practice with Puerto Rican students? 2) What factors do Puerto Ricans students identify as instrumental to their academic success? 3) How can the intersections of student experiences and teacher development forge new visions for school success among Puerto Rican students in U.S. schools?

Findings

Extending the notion of cultural capital

I see a lot of teachers refer to growing up poor as something awful and terrible and a travesty and a tragedy, and in some ways it can be. I am not going to lie. There is a lot of stuff that I did without. But when I look back there are a lot of things that I did grow up with that were great...were wonderful. There is richness, a creative and artistic richness in the ghetto, in the poor neighborhoods that I don't know if that exists in the suburbs. If you are not a teacher from this situation, you can still get it, but those teachers have spent a lot of time there to get it. *William Soto, teacher.*

With this comment, William Soto, a Puerto Rican teacher, critiques oversimplified, narrow depictions of socioeconomically deprived communities and the people who live in them. He notes that, while difficult at times, his childhood growing up in the neighborhood where many of his students currently live was a pleasant one filled with positive experiences. His description also extends the traditional notion of wealth as being solely monetary. Soto's observations resonate with those of other students and faculty in the study. Almost without exception, they rejected the notion that Puerto Rican students' lack of success is a result of a cultural deficit or a lack of cultural capital. Such a perspective generally centers white, middle-class norms as the accepted standard, and suggests that students' performance is connected in part to how close their "culture" matches that of the dominant group (Yosso 2005). Hence, those practices that are congruent with "sanctioned" norms are valued in schools and can be considered capital (Bourdieu 1997).

Traditional notions of cultural capital also tend to define Puerto Rican students and others of diverse cultural backgrounds by who they are not and what they may lack, as opposed to who they are and what assets they bring to school. An example is the use of the term "Limited English Proficient (LEP) to describe a student who speaks a language other than English, as opposed to "English Language Learner" (ELL). While the study participants acknowledge the need to adopt new, additional repertoires of practice for students to be able to successfully navigate schools, they also hold steadfast to the notion that the communities from which students come are rich with knowledge, goods, and services. Furthermore, they note that there are forms of capital that exist in these communities as well.

This assessment of the participants accords with the work of Tara Yosso (2005), who challenges normative assumptions regarding what constitutes cultural capital. In response to prevalent cultural deficit hypotheses used to explain the plight of students of color in schools, she forwards the notion of "community cultural wealth"

to describe various forms of cultural capital present in communities of color that are rarely acknowledged by schools. These include aspirational, familial, social, resistant, navigational, and linguistic capital. Based on her analysis, she concludes that the process of schooling can be transformed if teachers place more value on the cultural assets students bring to school. Yosso's (2005) theory is put into practice by many of the teachers in this study, because they place value on and help cultivate the various forms of capital their students already bring to school. For example, Jennifer Helmsley, a white teacher in her second year of teaching in Springfield, rejected the notion that students should have to suppress or discard aspects of their cultural identities in favor of other models:

Culture is a big thing that needs to be affirmed. My students feel very strong about being Puerto Rican. Kids need to keep who they are without being assimilated to American culture to be able to understand there are more people. It is hard to define American culture, but basically they shouldn't have to give up one culture for a new one. If you are going to work with people in any setting, you need to know culture:

In addition to affirming the cultural identities of their students, these teachers are also open to responding to culture in the various ways it is manifested among their students. That is, they allow for variances across and within cultural groups and think flexibly about how individual students' cultural identities may be influenced by variables, such as gender and class. They also allow for the emergence of hybrid cultural identities that emerge as a result of interactions with members of diverse cultural groups. Highlighting the importance of maintaining flexible notions of culture, Helmsley asserted:

There is more than racial and ethnic culture. There is urban culture too. You can definitely see urban/popular culture in the class and the community. There are different levels of culture. A lot of these kids speak Ebonics or a Puerto Rican form of Ebonics. The kids sometimes call it "ghetto-Spanish." Like an Ebonics in Spanish.

Participants in the study also stressed the importance for teachers to reflect on how their own cultural identities impact teaching and learning.

I think [teachers] need to know who [their students] are and how that plays out in the classroom and the values that they have and how that plays out in the classroom. [Teachers should know] everything about their [own] identity and how that plays out and is that congruent with the kids in front of them or is it different? As a group, as identities of different groups is that congruent or different? Male or female, along racial lines, so they can bridge the gap or change pedagogically what they're doing to make it more culturally competent and congruent with what they do to make kids more successful in the classroom. *Mario Cummings, teacher.*

Such efforts de-center the teacher and allow for the culture of the classroom to be co-constructed by all of the members of the classroom community. This in turn allows space for teachers to become culturally responsive to the academic and personal needs of their students. Similar sentiments were echoed by PACHS students in Chicago. For instance, Kathy described her authentically caring teachers at PACHS as humble and willing to learn with their students.

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 public school.

The work of Paulo Freire offers a valuable framework for understanding the experiences of the student and teacher participants in this study. Freire (1970, 1998) challenged the notion that education should be a pre-packaged set of ideas and values that is transferred from teacher to student. He proposed instead that teachers build upon their students' experiences and use them as a means for the co-construction of knowledge and as an opportunity for the disenfranchised to improve their reality and that of the world. In order for teachers to critically engage their students, they must know and respect the cultures of their students and acknowledge which aspects of their students' identities they value and which they may subordinate. In a collection of letters to teachers, Freire stressed that the "identities of the [teacher and students] have to do with the fundamental issues of the curriculum, as much as with what is hidden as what is explicit and, obviously, with questions of teaching and learning" (Freire 1998: 69). Teachers, as the more powerful constituents in the relationship, need to build upon the experiences of the students, foster the co-construction of knowledge within the classroom, and respect what students bring to school.

Mutually enriching partnerships

The teachers in this study emphasize the importance of acknowledging sociopolitical factors that impact the lives of urban students in their classrooms. They view addressing such issues in the classroom as mutually enriching—they benefit as much as their students do. Moreover, they see themselves as working *with* students as opposed to working *for* students. They see the promotion of equity and social justice as part of the role of urban teachers. Again, this approach is viewed not only as potentially liberating for their students but also beneficial to themselves.

In part as a result of a nationwide push for "accountability" in schools, many teachers have internalized the discourse of high-stakes testing and have adopted rhetoric that positions families and students as being solely responsible for educational outcomes. While these teachers acknowledge that students and families have some agency, they also are quick to point out the sociopolitical factors that impact the academic success, or lack thereof, of Puerto Rican students in urban schools. They know that schools do not exist in a vacuum; students' lives are affected by social and political factors that permeate society, and those effects do not vanish when they enter the school building. Teachers who address the sociopolitical context of education view education itself as a highly political process that often marginalizes individuals and communities who lack political and economic power (Nieto 2004).

***Holding students to high academic expectations
and honoring community resources***

In addition to the creation of mutually enriching partnerships, two interconnected features of the interface between student and teacher responses are: holding students to consistently high academic expectations and the honoring of community resources.

Often, teaching is framed as a one-way process: teachers teach and students learn. The participants in our study demonstrate how teachers can and should become learners and how students and their families can become teachers. For Melissa, excellent teachers held her to high academic expectations and, at the same time, were humble co-learners:

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.

These Puerto Rican students respected their teachers because they were willing to deconstruct traditional teacher-student power relationships and assume positions of humility in order to learn together.

Although teachers in the study were never asked during the interviews if they spoke a language other than English, several noted that one of the primary ways they made connections with students and families was through language. Of the ten teachers who participated, seven identified themselves as fluent speakers of Spanish, and several others noted varying degrees of proficiency in non-standard, hybrid forms of English and Spanish, commonly referred to as Ebonics and Spanglish. Several teachers expressed understanding a wide range of gestures: a language of its own. A number also expressed an understanding of complex linguistic concepts such as code-switching, the use of more than one language or language form in discourse between two people who share proficiency in more than one language. The participants' heightened awareness of code-switching underscores the importance of multilingualism and knowledge of sociolinguistic concepts relevant to the lives of their students. Moreover, they viewed these qualities and skills as vital to their work as educators.

Significantly, the teacher participants viewed speaking multiple languages as a personal journey and not solely as an academic pursuit. Their language learning went beyond mastering vocabulary, syntax, and grammar. Teachers connected with students and parents through language, created spaces for students to use various modes of communication, and participated in the life of those discourse communities. They reported that their lives were transformed as a result. These teachers used the knowledge gained from their experiences using multiple discourses to inform their practice as educators. While national statistics reveal very few teachers speak a language other than English, several of the teachers in this study not only learned second or third languages, but they also strived to sound like native speakers of the language. They saw their students and Spanish-speaking parents as resources to help them with their language development, and allowed themselves to be taught by their students and their families. The process of immersing themselves in their students' culture informs their work. June Hamilton, a white teacher of Irish descent with more than twenty years of experience, commented:

[My students and their families] helped me with my language. They helped me start to sound how I should sound when I am speaking. They were there when I needed them. Their situation most of the time, quite frankly, was tough. The children that I work with often come from tough situations, but for some reason there is always a little something extra that they can give you, and they do so willingly. That makes me very happy.

Also, these teachers do not wait for students to bring their cultures to school. They immerse themselves in their students' communities and use the knowledge they gain to inform their practice. When asked what advice he would give to a new teacher, Ed Black, an African-American teacher, stated:

Learn your students. Learn their cultures. We're supposed to be educators, which means we are lifelong learners. Lifelong learning isn't simply about staying abreast in your topic area. You need to know who is in front of you. You need to know what the best practices for reaching those children are. Not everyone has an IEP [Individualized Education Plan] in front of you that is going to say make these modifications and this is what should be the result. It doesn't work that way. You need to go out. Go out into the community.

The teachers in this study acknowledge and honor the community resources and wealth that emanate from communities of color, particularly Puerto Rican communities. The student participants revealed they often succeeded academically in spite of school, precisely because their communities, institutions, and families advocated for their success. In particular, the role of the mother is significant. For example, when asked to elaborate on her mother's role in her education, Lisa stated:

Ever since I was in middle school, my mom has been sending me to pre-college programs and doing things like getting me stuff on the ACT and the kinds of questions they ask on that test. I also go to my mom for personal problems that come up. My mom is always coming down hard on me to do well in school. So if she can't help me with my school stuff she finds somebody who can.

Lisa's mother, like the mothers of other students in this study, "went the extra mile" to counsel her daughter and seek informational resources that would aid in the college application and general learning processes. This finding supports the work of several scholars pertaining to the influence of Latina/Puerto Rican mothers in the academic lives of their children (Hidalgo 2000; Hine 1992; Gándara 1995; Reis and Díaz 1999; Rolón 2000). Our participants' mothers also held their children to high academic expectations and actively sought out other people who could help their children (with homework, for example) when they could not.

Other students spoke about the power of their mother's influence and expressed the desire to do well in school to make their mothers proud. Daniel commented:

My mom has been my inspiration to do well in school. I remember that I used to make bad grades in school and my mother would become sad. When I started to bring report cards home with As in them for the first time, I remember the happy look in my mother's eyes. When I saw that look in her eyes, I just felt that it was much more rewarding to get good grades. I also remember going to family picnics and my mother would be talking about my grades. The rest of the family would then start talking about me. They were all proud of me.

Daniel was driven to do well in school in order to make his mother happy. It was also important for him to be the pride of his family. He also mentioned that his school did not do much to help him select a college or to fill out financial aid or admissions forms. Although his mother did not graduate from high school, she assumed the role of helping her son complete the necessary forms to go to college.

Finally, the students we spoke with described the ways in which their community churches positively impacted their academic achievement. For example, Cecilia, a Puerto Rican high achiever, commented:

Ever since I was in the ninth grade, I have been going to church regularly. I also sing in the church choir. The people at church have always been friendly and supportive of me. I feel like I really belong. I have also met a lot of people at church. I have a lot of friends from different backgrounds. I have Hispanic, white, Asian, and black friends. We all treat each other as friends and we keep each other in line. I really think going to church has helped me become a better student.

Like Cecilia, Estrella talked about her involvement in a church and connected it with her high academic achievement. She also participated in church activities with peer networks consisting of other Latina/o youth. She felt that these friendships and her participation in religious activities had a positive impact on her academic achievement. She remarked:

I'm involved in church very much. I have lots of friends of church in church. We do lots of things together. We do retreats and we invite other youths to come. We also evangelize together. We want other youths to know God and Jesus. There are also lots of camps in the summer and conventions in the Midwest. There are lots of Latinos that get together for these conventions and we have lots of fun. I really think that these church things have helped me be a good student.

Cecilia and Estrella talked about receiving mentorship and informational resources through their social networks at church, which impacted their high academic performance. This finding speaks to the importance of community institutions that

are traditionally overlooked as sources of support, precisely because they are located in communities of color. Like Yosso (2005), we also believe teachers and other school staff should acknowledge the cultural wealth emanating from students' communities, which have been generally dismissed as having nothing to contribute to schools. Hence, creating access for traditionally marginalized groups of people requires that institutional agents like teachers and administrators consciously seek the building of community-school connections, so that the academic performance of Puerto Rican students is enhanced. These types of RicanStructions would help create a more just society in which resources and opportunities are more equitably distributed among various actors; namely, schools with communities.

Multiethnic, multiracial, and multicultural coalitions for educational equity and social justice

The battles for civil rights, including educational equity, among oppressed groups in the U.S. have often been portrayed as single-group efforts. The civil rights movement, for example, is often framed as an African-American movement. In fact, many others, including Latinos and whites, were active in the struggle. Single-perspective portrayals often serve to sustain the oppressive conditions that individuals are trying to combat, or they may result in gains for one group but not for another. Consider, for example, school desegregation. Although Latinos were pioneers in the school desegregation movement (i.e., the 1946 case of *Méndez v. Westminster*—see McCormick and Ayala's essay in this issue), they were not officially recognized as covered under the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision until 1973 (Cockcroft 1995). As we center the experiences of Puerto Rican students, we recognize the need to involve others in the efforts to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of this group of young people. Particularly given the current demographics of the teaching force, it is imperative to work with all teachers to improve their practice with Puerto Rican students.

Coalition-building among teachers and students was a common theme among our faculty and student participants. These coalitions cross racial/ethnic, gender, and class lines. Teachers join with families to achieve the goal of educating students. In addition, they structure their lives in ways that promote their development as multicultural people and educators. For example, seven of the ten teachers live in the community where they teach, thus sharing a geographical connection with their students. They also contribute to and utilize a variety of goods and services within the community. Being immersed in the community gives teachers other “data points” from which to learn about their students. A high level of investment in the community and its inhabitants facilitates the development of coalitions to address issues relevant to teacher and student constituents. James Talbert, an African-American teacher, stated:

This is home. This is where I wanted to teach. I wanted my kids to grow up in the neighborhood. Not to mention the fact most of my students live in the community. They can say where they live and I can tell them all about their neighborhood. I can tell them some of the people they live on the street with. With a lot of the kids I can name members of their family. That allows me to deal with them on a different level because they know I'm a real person.

Another significant feature of coalition-building is the respect with which teachers approached the community and its members. The comments of Mario Cummings, a white elementary school teacher, are representative:

It's important to try to tap into the students and figure out who they were and talk to their parents and visit them in positive ways, not your son or daughter is in trouble. Then you get kind of invited to social events, quinceñeras and things in the community, weddings that we would go to, and show up. So that was part of loving from the community. I'm always kind of weary of participating as a tourist in cultural celebrations and just being like touring the neighborhood. So we're bringing something back so why don't we try to be a little bit more invested in the community and activities and make it more of our daily life.

Most of these middle-class professionals, although of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, have chosen to become members of the community in which they teach. Moreover, they actively participate in religious or secular organizations, children's sports leagues, and the like, thus interacting with students on their own turf. Consequently, they experience first hand the sites from which students draw to construct their identities. They not only observe those metaphorical sites, but often share membership in the same community groups, drawing from them aspects of their own identities.

Access to the students' neighborhoods allows teachers to witness inequities and injustice, as well as the community's cultural richness. They do not have to wait for someone to deliver information; they are out there on the proverbial frontline. As a result, they see their teaching practice not only as a way to create opportunities for individual students but as a vehicle for community improvement. Similarly, the students in this study expressed a desire to achieve success not just for themselves but to help others. They approach schooling with a sense of reciprocity and articulate responsibility for family and community, contrary to how education is often framed as an individualistic pursuit for upward social mobility. They see themselves as part of a larger struggle, their success as a means of promoting the success of others. Students were regularly encouraged by teachers to support their communities through school projects and/or by remaining as adult residents after college. Moreover, through their teachers' modeling of active community involvement, students feel compelled to give back to their communities beyond graduation. Damien, a PACHS student, commented:

The teachers probably don't know this, but I want to come back to the community and work after I graduate. The teachers at the school have taken care of me and they've shown me a different outlook on my Puerto Rican history. I feel the need to say thanks by coming back and working for my people in the community.

Melissa also stated her desire to reciprocate the care she received at school with plans to work in the community after graduation.

I want to go to college and help out the people who live in the community. I want to share the things that I've learned at the high school with many people. To do this, I need to come back after I finish college.

This finding about the teachers' community involvement—regardless of their race or ethnicity—is especially important as the overwhelming majority of present and future teachers are white (as the demographics of pre-service teaching programs suggest). The study's exploration of how a diverse group of teachers—whites, African-Americans, and Puerto Ricans (two born and raised on the mainland and one on the Island)—work effectively with Puerto Rican students contributes to a vision of school success that promotes unity among groups of color with similar struggles and encompasses the efforts of white teachers as well as those of color.

This study has implications for how teachers can prepare to work with students of color in general and Puerto Rican students in particular. First, it supports Nieto's (2004) assertion that before one can become a multicultural educator, one must become a multicultural person. The teachers in our sample did not view their work solely in terms of a professional choice; they also saw teaching as a lifestyle choice. These teachers linked their professional development to their lifelong, personal development. In their work, they are engaged in transformative experiences that shape their life stories. Just as their students are constantly evolving, these teachers continue to re-write their autobiographies.

Second, the study counteracts negative perceptions teachers may have developed through the media or, more alarmingly, through teacher-education coursework or experiences. Because the majority of pre-service teachers have had limited personal interaction with Puerto Rican students, it is important to highlight the voices of academically successful Puerto Rican students, as well as the voices of diverse teachers who have been particularly effective with this group. Their voices can contribute to the Ricanstruction of the discourse regarding Puerto Rican students and communities, thus positively influencing the practice of teachers.

Finally, the study reveals the importance of teachers being "home-grown," that is, they were born and/or raised in the community in which they teach. Their presence—especially that of the teachers of color who successfully navigated school and chose to return to their own communities—supports the notion underlying ethnic capital theory (Borjas 1994). In short, this theory asserts that success often breeds success. Whereas success for many in urban communities is defined by how far a person can get from his or her community (both literally in terms of distance and figuratively in terms of shared destiny), we assert that Puerto Rican youth need to see more models of success who remain connected to their communities.

**A new vision for promoting school success:
Toward a theory of CRP for Diasporicans**

While it is relatively easy to identify what is wrong with the education of public school children in general and of Puerto Rican students in particular, it is more difficult to present a picture of what schools and relationships within them should look like. The participants in this study offer a vision for spaces where Puerto Rican students' cultures are valued, where community knowledge and resources are honored, and where teachers work collaboratively with students and parents to promote educational equity and social justice. This new vision challenges the

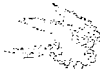
hegemony of the colonial pedagogy in which many Puerto Rican students in the Diaspora are currently imbedded, replacing it with a culturally responsive framework that informs teaching practice. Freire, whose theory of critical pedagogy serves as the foundation for culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), has stated, "No pedagogy that is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors" (1970: 39). These words seem particularly apropos of the work to be done to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for Puerto Ricans in the Diaspora. Instead of models of policy and practice within schools that reinforce the reproduction of race- and class-based stratification, there is a need for more authentic, affirming, and liberatory models of practice.

It is important to exercise caution before adopting existing models that have been effective with other oppressed or marginalized groups. Culture reflects a changing set of values and practices that may vary from person to person; therefore, culturally responsive approaches must be situated in specific contexts and account for variability among members of the group. While Puerto Ricans in the Diaspora may exhibit some cultural commonalities, we are also very diverse. Each of us makes unique meaning of our experiences as Puerto Ricans based on variables such as our length of stay on the mainland, race, geographic location, and class, among other factors. Thus, a fourth-generation mainland-born Puerto Rican student may differ significantly from a recently arrived (im)migrant. Therefore, CRP for the Diaspora has to be flexible. There is no rubric of "best practices" that will work with all Puerto Rican students. Rather, teachers need to immerse themselves in the communities of their students, allow themselves to be taught by members of the community, and use what they have learned to inform their practice.

Thus, this new vision of a culturally responsive pedagogy for Latinas/os is not an attempt to try to fit existing models. As part of the Ricanstruction of the discourse regarding Puerto Rican academic achievement and the effort to promote school success documented in this study, we argue here for a broader conceptualization of culture and more fluid and porous understandings of identity than are currently promoted in much of the CRP literature. We suggest that culture, a central aspect of culturally responsive pedagogies, has often been essentialized and narrowly conceived in studies of the Puerto Rican community. Reconceptualizing culturally responsive pedagogy may help teachers respond more effectively to how culture is manifested among their students and to the multiple sites from which these students draw their cultural identities.

Although five of the teachers in the study are teachers of color who work almost exclusively with students of color (due to school demographics), the majority of whom are Puerto Rican, they noted that sharing racial/ethnic aspects of their biographies with students was not sufficient for being an effective teacher. Being Puerto Rican does not, in and of itself, guarantee a good teacher of Puerto Rican students. It is rather the connections that teachers make that may, in part, address issues of racial and ethnic identity that are central to their work. The findings discussed here are not presented with the intention of offering a rigid rubric for "good urban teacher preparation." Rather, they intend to offer multiple perspectives and examples of personal and professional development activities that have the potential to inform the creation of culturally responsive teacher identities, influence teaching practices, and allow teachers to promote success among Puerto Rican students.

Finally, the voices of the DiaspoRican students in this project clearly identify the highly instrumental roles of family and community over the course of their successful academic journeys. Close relatives (especially mothers) and community organizations such as churches anchor and support students through forms of familial and social capital of color that are often undervalued in the research literature (Yosso 2005). Ironically, many student participants suggested that they succeeded *in spite of school*, precisely because their families and communities served as a sociopolitical buffer to the often oppressive structures of U.S. schooling. Those structures tend to exalt the values of a U.S. colonial milieu, sending the implicit message that these students' linguistic and cultural realities are inferior and have no remedy other than to be fixed. It is imperative that policymakers and school agents look to their Puerto Rican students and their communities as valuable resources and partners in the educational process. Their efforts will be rewarded by the development of more culturally responsive educators, who in turn will promote greater school success among Puerto Ricans in the Diaspora.



NOTES

¹ We have chosen to capitalize Diaspora and Island throughout the article to reference a specific diasporic experience from a particular locale—Puerto Rico. Furthermore, the capitalization of these two words reflect our efforts, however small, to challenge linguistic imperialism and other forms of domination of marginalized peoples often embedded in language.

² As cited in Antrop-González and De Jesús (2006), the term “DiaspoRican” originated with the work of Mariposa, a Nuyorican poet. Mariposa coined this term in order to embody the complexity of Puerto Rican identity but, more specifically, to capture the myriad experiences of Puerto Ricans born and raised in the U.S.

³ As part of their efforts to Americanize the island, the U.S. anglicized the spelling of Puerto Rico. See Fernández 1996.

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