

**“This School is my Sanctuary”**  
*The Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos  
Alternative High School*

*by René Antrop-González  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*

**Working Paper No. 57**  
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# “This School is My Sanctuary”

## *The Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos Alternative High School*

*That's why I'm always at this school. 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, Puerto Rican student*

### **Introduction**

Recent studies and personal narratives suggest a connection between the low academic achievement of Latina/o students in the United States to the lack of care they experience in schools (Caraballo, 2000; Nieto, 1998, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999).

This lack of care has been defined in multiple ways. For example, one study defined an uncaring teacher as one that did not take the time to assist students with their assignments or answer questions in class (Caraballo, 2000). Other examples of uncaring teachers have included those individuals who failed to respect their students or demonstrate outward signs of support or affection (Nieto, 1998, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999). In fact, as Nieto (1998) observes, “the care or rejection experienced by Puerto Rican students in U.S. schools can have a significant impact on their academic success or failure” (p. 157).

Moreover, Nieto (1998) argues that caring school communities can be constructed by those individuals who strive to show support and affection for their students, take the initiative to learn about and from their students, respect and affirm their language and culture, and hold their students to high academic expectations. Likewise, in her study of Mexican-origin students at an inner city Houston high school, Valenzuela (1999) borrows from the theoretical work of Noddings (1984, 1992) who describes two types of caring relationships that can take place between teachers and their students.

The first type is “authentic” caring, which describes the reciprocal personal student-teacher relationships that she believes are crucial for the education of Latina/o youth. On the other hand, “aesthetic” caring describes the emphasis that teachers place on things or ideas, such as academics.

Additionally, Valenzuela (1999) reveals the overall lack of reciprocal authentic caring relations that took place between students and teachers at the public high school she examined. These authentic caring relationships, she argues, ideally consist of teachers who respect their students’ language and culture. Students, in turn, reciprocate this teacher caring by doing their best academically. In contrast to these authentic caring relations, Valenzuela (1999) witnessed a propensity for teachers to only aesthetically care about their students. This aesthetic caring is marked by teachers’ expectations that students be solely committed to academic ideas or practices that lead to achievement.

Researchers also suggest that the low academic achievement of Latina/o students is connected to the intense feelings of marginalization and lack of belonging that these students face in classrooms on a continual basis (Nieto, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999). These students’ sense of marginalization and lack of belonging is often caused by their schools’ failure to view their culture and language as resources. Rather, these are viewed as impediments to their academic success. As a result, these students perceive that schools do not value them for who they are (Nieto, 1998). Likewise, the high school that Valenzuela (1999) examined unconsciously adopted a subtractive schooling approach to education in that it ignored and devalued the cultural and linguistic knowledge that its Mexican-origin students brought to school. On the contrary, she argues that schools must strive to adopt an additive approach to education, which structures curricula around the acknowledgment, use, and building upon students’ cultural and linguistic knowledge.

Additionally, Flores-González (2002) reveals how schools structure inequality among Puerto Rican students by influencing whether they adopt a “school kid” versus “street kid” identity. For example, the Puerto Rican students whom she interviewed and 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 extracurricular activities and enroll in honors classes. These high achieving students were also more likely to view post-secondary education as a way through which they could become a member of the middle class. On the contrary, the low achieving Puerto Rican students adopted a “street kid” identity when they found it difficult to situate themselves within school-oriented peer social networks and the school staff did not encourage, nor facilitate, these students’ participation in school related activities.

While this research examines the education of Latinas/os from within traditional school settings, recent research examines alternative school and community-based education resistance campaigns that were undertaken by parents and communities to improve the life chances and structures of opportunities for their children (Ramos-Zayas, 1998; Rivera & Pedraza, 2000; Rolón, 2000; Torres-Guzmán & Martínez Thorne; 2000; Walsh, 1991). For example, Torres-Guzmán and Martínez Thorne (2000) illustrate how Esperanza High School was founded as a “school within a school” in order to build its Latina/o students’ leadership skills and address their cultural and linguistic needs. Interestingly, the students who attended this school expressed the important role that caring teachers played in their lives. These students defined caring teachers as those who openly communicated with them, showed them respect by valuing their language and culture, and offered them personal and scholastic support.

Likewise, Rivera & Pedraza (2000) examine New York’s El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, which offers their students an alternative student-centered curriculum and vision based on the principles of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and

stresses the importance of love and caring, collective self-help, peace and justice, and mastery. Moreover, El Puente Academy encourages its students to connect their education to their respective social realities and become engaged in community projects with the aim of actively transforming their lives and communities.

Another study by Ramos-Zayas (1998) focuses on the Chicago-based Pedro Albizu Campos Alternative High School (PACHS) and is interesting for several reasons. First, unlike most of the work that has examined the education of Puerto Ricans in the United States from an east coast perspective, this researcher addresses the role of a community-based pedagogical project born of Puerto Rican resistance within a major midwestern United States urban center. Second, her study frames this high school in relation to the work of other Puerto Rican-based community organizations and their connection to Puerto Rican Chicago’s strong political and ideological tradition of nationalism. In her examination of the PACHS, she focuses on the voices of students and their discussions concerning the role this school played in raising a Puerto Rican political consciousness and how it influenced their desire to become engaged in community activities.

More recently, I conducted a study at the PACHS focusing on the experiences of its students and teachers. What I found is that for a school to be effective for Latina/o students and other students of color, it must become a “sanctuary.” By sanctuary, I mean that the school fosters student-teacher caring relationships, provides a familial type environment to insure that its students are not marginalized, provides a gang-free safe space, and affirms students’ racial and ethnic identities. The purpose of this article, then, is threefold.

First, I briefly describe the high school. Second, I highlight students’ voices and their descriptions of the “school as sanctuary” concept. Third, I describe the teachers’ experiences pertaining to their difficult task of maintaining the high school as a sanctuary for its students.



## Methods

The PACHS students and staff are sensitive to being studied by outside researchers. This sensitivity to outside researchers had been the result of several negative experiences that the high school had encountered with a “community outsider” who, as a teacher, was actually an undercover FBI agent. Consequently, during the decade of the 1990’s, many students and teachers became the targets of several grand jury indictments that attempted to link the high school to Puerto Rican nationalist organizations, such as the Fuerza Armada de Liberación Nacional (FALN) [refer to Ramos-Zayas, 1997 & 1998 for a further discussion of this FBI targeted surveillance of the PACHS]. Therefore, although I was involved as a volunteer worker with the PACHS intermittently from 1999-2000, it was not until August to October of 2000 that I was permitted by staff and students to collect two types of data for this study.

First, I collected and analyzed school related historical and curricular documents. These documents included brochures, archived newspaper reports and a copy of the formal curriculum. These documents enabled me to learn more about the high 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 curriculum was structured.

Second, I conducted semi-structured one-on-one interviews with eight participants who were involved with the school as students, alumnus or teachers. I decided to interview participants from these particular positions because I wanted to have conversations with individuals who were involved, or had been involved, within the high school on an everyday basis. Additionally, these participants had to meet several criteria that I had established at the beginning of this study. Although I was only able to interview a limited number of participants over a short period of time, these criteria enabled me to select participants who could elicit rich descriptions pertaining to their experiences at the high school. Furthermore, although the small number of participants limits the degree to which I can make generalizations, the findings nevertheless reveal how the PACHS acted as a sanctuary.

The criteria were:

(1) *The student participants had to be enrolled at the time of the study.*

These students must also have been enrolled at the school for at least two years because I felt this amount of time would ensure the richness of the students’ experiences at the school. I interviewed a total of three students from this category. Of the three students who agreed to be interviewed, the first was a 19-year-old Puerto Rican male student (Damien), the second was a 17-year-old Puerto Rican female student (Melissa), and the third was an 18-year-old African-American female student (Unique). These students were interviewed after school hours because I did not want to pull them out of their classes. Consequently, many of the students that I approached who initially fit these criteria could not be interviewed because of conflicting schedules with jobs, lack of transportation, or because of their parent/caretaker’s desire that their child not be interviewed.

(2) *The PACHS alumni participants had to have graduated from the school at least five years prior to the undertaking of this study so that the participant could possibly relate her/his schooling experiences at the PACHS to her/his world of work and/or other life experiences.*

The principal gave me the names of two graduates who fit this criterion and who could easily be contacted because they were residing in the school’s surrounding community. The participants in this category who were interviewed were both 1986 graduates named Kathy and Pura. Kathy was of dual Latina/o ethnicity (half Mexican and half Puerto Rican) and was a mid-level manager for a multinational corporation. Pura was Puerto Rican and was a city employed social worker.

(3) *I also wanted to interview “veteran teachers” who were working at the school when the study took place.*

Consequently, three teachers were interviewed. One was a White English teacher who had been teaching at the PACHS for seven years (Jake). The second was a Puerto Rican female teacher and co-principal who had been at the school for three years (Majandra), and the third had been a teacher and principal of the high school for 19 years (Iván).

The interview protocols were designed and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to discover and generate recurring themes pertaining to the experiences of the high school's students and teachers and how they were related to 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 this particular high school rather than any other of the many traditional (non-chartered and/or alternative) Chicago 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/or staff members and the school's non-Puerto Rican students and/or staff members different and/or similar (e.g. African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, those of multiple Latino ethnicity, and/or White)?*

Finally, my observations and access at the school were also facilitated by my position as an active participant in several ways. I participated in school and community-related events, such as marches and rallies, clean-up detail after community events and tutoring at the school. I also assisted in cleaning the school because the school could not afford the salary of a janitor at the time of the study. Additionally, I also assisted staff members serve students their daily

lunches, helped in the production of the school's 2000 yearbook and participated in the 2000 senior class retreat. I felt compelled to assume these roles because I felt that they would help me "blend in" and become a more familiar sight at the school. I also sincerely believed that my work at the high school would help contribute to its pedagogical mission and enable me to give back to the school in return for the experiences that I was provided.

## **Description of the PACHS**

### *History and Description*

The Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos Alternative High School, which currently enrolls 80 students and has an average class size of 12 students, was founded in 1972 as a response to the Eurocentric-based curricula and high dropout rates that Puerto Rican students had been experiencing in Chicago's public high schools. Historically, the dropout rates among Puerto Rican urban high school students in the United States has ranged anywhere between 45-65% (Flores-González, 2002). An article published on April 8, 1973 in the *Chicago Tribune* titled, "Puerto Ricans Here Set Up Free School to Aid Dropouts," described the negative pedagogical conditions that many Puerto Rican high school students faced when the PACHS was founded. The high school was originally named, "La Escuela Puertorriqueña (the Puerto Rican School)" and originated in the basement of a Chicago church. The article stated the reasons why the high school was founded.

*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.*



Although the high school was originally established to address the educational needs of its mostly Puerto Rican student body (60/80 students), the school also currently enrolls students of Mexican, African-American and multiple Latino ethnicities from grades 9-12. Currently, the PACHS serves as a “city wide” alternative high school and attracts students from different areas of the city. Because the high school does no formal advertising, most students come to the school by “word of mouth,” as a majority of the students who apply for admission are friends or relatives of current students or alumni. Because the high school wants to maintain a relatively small student body, a waiting list is maintained. At the time of this study, this waiting list contained more than 100 names.

Since 1974, the school has been located two miles Northeast of the heart of the Puerto Rican community known as the “Paseo Boricua.” The high school itself is on the second floor of a 2-story building that formerly housed a Walgreen’s photo-developing factory that was purchased by the Puerto Rican Cultural Center. The Puerto Rican Cultural Center is the umbrella organization under which are operated various community-based Puerto Rican agencies including the high school (refer to Ramos-Zayas, 1998). For example, VIDA/SIDA is an organization that provides awareness for HIV/AIDS prevention to the residents of the Puerto Rican community of Chicago. Another example of a PRCC-led community initiative is the Division Street Business Development Association (DSBDA). The DSBDA’s main role is that of encouraging Puerto Ricans to relocate and operate their businesses on Division Street, which is the heart of Puerto Rican Chicago. Hence, the teachers at the PACHS are also part of a larger community organization that works for the cultural, economic and educational interests of the Puerto Rican community of Chicago.

As recently as five years ago, this building was nestled in a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood comprised of modest homes and small factories. However, these residents have been forced to find cheaper housing in other areas as the forces of gentrification facilitated by the capital of White, upper class developers have purchased the surrounding factories and converted them into expensive loft apartments attracting young White upper class professionals (refer to Alicea, 2001; Flores-González, 2001; and Ramos-Zayas, 2001 for a more complete analysis of gentrification in Puerto Rican Chicago). According to school supporters, the school is now considered by many of these new residents to be an “eyesore” because the exterior of the school building is covered with a series of painted murals depicting the faces of former and current Puerto Rican political prisoners. Also painted on the high school’s walls are Puerto Rican nationalist slogans, such as “Down with capitalism!”, “Long live a free Puerto Rico!” and “No to colonialism!” Certainly, for me, these murals left no doubt that the school explicitly supported a political ideology: the independence of Puerto Rico from the United States.

The basement portion of the building houses the high school’s cafeteria where breakfast and lunch are prepared and served by the school’s teachers and other staff members. The first floor of the building houses the Puerto Rican Cultural Center where many books, articles and historical artifacts centering on Puerto Rican history are found. The high school students and community members at large have access to these resources. The reception area, where visitors are greeted and telephone calls are answered and routed, is also on this floor. The second-floor of the building houses the high school, which consists of six classrooms, two computer labs, an art studio, one large room for the teachers’ office space and the main office where student records are archived. The walls of the classrooms and surrounding spaces are covered with posters and pictures of Puerto Rican, Mexican and African-American historical figures that have been artistically recreated by students and there is a row of student lockers that is painted in the likeness of the Puerto Rican flag.

This artwork contributes to the school's sense of Puerto Ricancentricity while also encouraging the non-Puerto Rican students to celebrate their historical heroes.

## **Funding and Accreditation**

Although the high school is considered to be an independent private alternative high school, it is funded and accredited by several federal, state and local agencies. For example, the students' lunches are federally subsidized through the free and reduced lunch program because the majority of the student body comes from families that fall beneath the federal poverty level. State funding, made available through the Title XX and the Illinois State Department of Child and Family Services, is used for the educational services of those students who may come from foster families. Local funding is provided by the City of Chicago, which helps offset the cost of mentoring low income and "at-risk" students. The Mayor's Office of Workforce Development also disburses funding for student job placement and training.

The school also charges students yearly tuition. The students who are ninth or tenth graders are charged \$1,750. However, once students reach their junior and senior grades, they become eligible for a variety of scholarships that are made available through private donors. Consequently, a majority of the eleventh and twelfth grade students do not pay the annual tuition. Although the school has funding from these various sources, school officials have to be creative in order to limit their overhead costs. An example of this economic creativity is the fact that the school does not hire a full time janitor or lunchroom staff. Therefore, all of the staff members participate in the school's maintenance, cleaning and serving of breakfast and lunch to students on a daily rotating schedule.

Finally, the school is registered by the Illinois State Board of Education and accredited by the National Association for the Legal Support of Alternative Schools (NALSAS). This accreditation enables the students to receive a regular high school diploma upon graduation. Additionally, the school

has a 5-year program with the City of Chicago's Dual Enrollment Program so that select students, based on grade point average, have the opportunity to take college-level courses and earn credit at a city college while still enrolled at the high school.

## **Administrative/Staff Structure**

The school's administrative structure consists of a board of directors and principal that believes Puerto Ricans should lead their own school and community-based agencies. As the high school principal once indicated to me, Whites are not encouraged to assume administrative positions because this type of leadership would only serve to implicitly perpetuate a colonizer/colonized relationship. The board of directors also reviews, revises and legislates school policies. The high school's board of directors consists of 12 members and is composed of the various directors of Puerto Rican community agencies, business owners, a high school parent and a currently enrolled student. The high school principal is in charge of curricular issues, the implementation of board policies and the general well-being of the school. At the time of this study, the school's staff consisted of eight teachers, two office workers, two counselors and a grant writer/accountant. A majority of the teaching staff is Puerto Rican, except two White teachers.

## **Educational Philosophy**

The philosophy of the school reflects its educational mission, which is inherently focused on Puerto Rican pride and affirmation. This philosophy is described in the PACHS teacher manual:

*This school is bilingual and bicultural because our community speaks both Spanish and English while fighting to maintain Puerto Rican culture. Living within the United States, the Puerto Rican people are pressured into assimilation. Neither our language or [sic] our culture is taught in schools. Our history is even more ignored. The emphasis of bilingual education in public schools has been to 'mainstream' — to make Spanish-speaking students learn*

*English. Puerto Rican students are told that their language and culture are impediments to their success. Teachers tell them that they may not speak Spanish in their classes. At this school, we strive to regain our pride in our Puerto Ricaness. By studying their own history and culture, students are able to regain their self-esteem as Puerto Ricans and thus participate fully in their education (p.2)*

The school's educational philosophy is also based on the work of Freire (1970) because of its emphasis on the concept of "education as liberation." This concept encourages students to become agents of social change within the Puerto Rican community. This Freirian-based educational model involves a process by which students are encouraged by their teachers to question those social structures, beliefs or "common-sense" assumptions that serve to perpetuate a status quo and maintain control over its students and/or community members. School documents explicitly address this educational philosophy.

*To us, education is liberation. By this we mean that education is the development of a thinking human being with the capacity to change his or her environment. Students should take an active role in naming their world and transforming it for the betterment of all. Therefore, we believe education goes far beyond the categories of career, job, and acceptance of the status quo without investigation. To do this, our method is student-centered and based on dialogue. The emphasis is critical thinking — to ask questions and to seek answers. The teacher acts a resource person/facilitator who kindles discussion and assists students in seeking the causes as well as solutions to problems. Much of this work is done with students seated in a circle where students face each other. Students are encouraged to participate that what they say is not right or wrong, but rather the beginning of an*

*analytical process in which they name their world. It is not the role of the teacher to extract answers that he or she wants to hear, but rather to encourage students to investigate and study what they say, so that they can shape their ideas and reach conclusions themselves. The teacher is not the provider of pre-packaged truth or pre-ordained answers (p. 3).*

This active social analysis was especially evident in the school when I witnessed much dialogue between students and their facilitators in classes and community-based projects that encouraged students to research and analyze their immediate life circumstances, such as poverty, gang life and police brutality. For instance, I noted how some students helped organize and carry out a protest march regarding police brutality against young Latinas/os. This particular march took place in the immediate Puerto Rican community. However, perhaps the most potent example of this dialogical style of learning/teaching that I witnessed took place during the school's weekly batey sessions, which was part of the "Unity for Social Analysis" class that all students were required to take for credit.

The word *batey* is the Taíno (the indigenous of Puerto Rico) expression for "meeting area." The *batey* is an open space located in the middle of the second floor portion of the building in which the school is housed. Sofas and chairs line the outside perimeters of this space. It is here, within the *batey*, that the students and teachers would meet on Tuesday and Friday afternoons for one hour. This special space was designed to give students and teachers an opportunity to voice their sentiments on any topic imaginable. This special space was also reserved for student poetry readings and artistic performances. I observed discussions revolving around a wide range of topics, such as the planning of field trips, problems that may have occurred between students and their teachers or fellow classmates during the school week, and discussions around topics such as patriarchy and feminism, gang life and other topics of student interest.

## The Formal Curriculum

The PACHS curriculum is formally divided into three components. They are named the “Identity,” “Cognitive Skills” and “Action” components. 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. This student-based social analysis is done through the offering of Puerto Rican, Mexican and African-American history and literature courses. Most of the teachers utilized multiple texts for their classes. Many of these texts presented topics through an alternative lens. For example, one U.S. history teacher used the work of Howard Zinn in his classes as a supplement to the main textbook that students used in class. Other teachers used texts that specifically addressed African-American and Mexican historical issues.

The “Cognitive Skills” component of the high school’s curriculum reflects a more traditional public high school curriculum, which 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 the offering of 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. Consequently, I observed this particular curricular component through my participation with students and teachers in these action-based events. Although students were 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.

Much creativity was required by PACHS administration and staff in order to maintain the high school’s acquisition of funding sources, accreditation methods and actively engage its students from a Freirian-based curricular format to prepare students for a life of work and/or university studies. For the next phase of this article, I will discuss the school’s role as a sanctuary.

## School as Sanctuary

The students I interviewed theorized the role of the PACHS as a sanctuary because of its caring student-teacher relationships, its familial type environment, its role as a gang-free safe space and the importance that was placed on the affirmation of its students’ racial/ethnic identities. These students tended to view the PACHS as a refuge because it worked to satisfy their affective needs by providing them with several qualities that were indicative of a much more humanistic school environment. Because this type of school environment had been lacking from their previous urban high schools, they felt they had no other choice than to seek a pedagogical alternative.

### Caring Student-Teacher Relationships

Most of the students I spoke with chose to attend the PACHS because of their previous experiences in Chicago’s public high schools with uncaring teachers and the overwhelming presence of gangs. Melissa, a Puerto Rican senior at the PACHS, revealed that many of her public school teachers were uncaring because they had the tendency to stereotype and humiliate her in class.

*The year I left the public 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) and 1986 PACHS graduate, also spoke about her experiences with uncaring teachers before she decided to enroll at the alternative high school. For her, this uncaring attitude was also complicated by a lack of a Latina/o teacher presence, which translated to having teachers who did not personally know their students and/or who treated them badly.



*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 I was like, 'I'm outta here.'*

For Melissa and Kathy, it was easy to detect the negative stereotypes, lack of *cariño* (care) and low teacher expectations that were held for them by their previous teachers. These negative attributes contributed to their feelings of school alienation (Nieto, 1998). It is clear that these students' previous educational experiences lacked authentic caring. That is, teachers failed to develop any significant personal relationships with their students and held them to low academic expectations.

At the PACHS, the students I interviewed discussed both authentic and aesthetic types of caring relationships. Kathy, for example, highlighted her experience with authentic caring, which was manifested through a social outing that she had with a teacher and other students. However, it was much more than the act of going out with a teacher that meant something for Kathy. It was the guidance and protection from a negative urban street peer culture that transpired during these interactions.

*I remember being at the PACHS. On Friday nights, there was one particular person and his partner that I remember — Iván [the school principal] and his partner Anita would take a bunch of us out on Friday nights. We'd go to the movies, go bowling and even go to Iván's house to cook dinner. What teacher does that? Iván really cared about the kids and he wanted to keep us busy and keep us away from the streets. It's like he would adopt us and provide guidance for us.*

As Kathy mentioned, the dinner and bowling represented an authentic caring gesture because her teacher viewed her as more than just a student in an academic setting. Rather, Kathy was a human being worthy of mentorship and guidance outside of school. Like Kathy, Damien mentioned his appreciation of his teachers and the authentic caring that they provided him. For Damien, this authentic caring relationship also took place outside the high school and was especially appreciated during his times of personal crisis and, at times, was the difference between life and death.

*Iván, Jake, and the rest of the school and community might not know it but they've helped me with my struggles. There was a time when I was just hangin' around. I was in fear for my life because of my time with the gangs. The teachers helped to keep me away from drinking on the weekends. Iván would take me out to the park, just for the hell of it, and we would talk.*

Students also discussed the reciprocal nature of authentic caring (Noddings, 1984 & 1992), which was evidenced through their desire to give back to their communities. As Damien 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 through her desire to work in the community after graduating from college.

*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 sense of community was also emphasized greatly in conversations that took place in the high school. I perceived a sense of urgency in these conversations, as many students and teachers felt that the Puerto Rican community should also be preserved through the work of the high school's students. Thus, students were regularly encouraged by their teachers to manifest their support of the community through their school projects and/or to continue their support of their communities by remaining as residents or to come back as residents after finishing college.

Students also highlighted caring student-teacher relationships of an aesthetic (e.g. academic) nature. In contrast to her previous Chicago public schooling experiences, Melissa also explained that teachers at the PACHS cared more about her because they held her to higher academic expectations and gave her additional opportunities to fare better on tests. Therefore, care for Melissa meant being held to high academic expectations and being given a second chance to do better on schoolwork.

*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.*

Finally, Kathy defined her authentically caring teachers at the 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.*

Kathy's caring relationships with her teachers were also reflective of the school's Freirian-based learning/teaching philosophy, which emphasized the teacher's dual role as facilitator and learner (Freire, 1970). These students, then, determined that caring teachers were those that offered them guidance and friendship inside and outside the classroom, held them to high academic expectations and demonstrated a sense of solidarity by being their active co-learners and facilitators rather than domineering teachers. Consequently, these caring teachers and their relationships with their students greatly contributed to the PACHS' sanctuary-like role.

### **“A School Should be Like a Family”**

Another important belief held by most of the students was that a school should be like a family. This family-like environment contributed to these students' "sense of belonging" (Nieto, 1998) within the high school. Also, students who have extensive friendship networks in school are more likely to develop a pro-school identity (Flores-González, 2002). The PACHS was like most other schools in that students formed their own social networks. Nonetheless, because of the ethnic composition of the school's relatively small student body, I consistently observed mixed student social networks between the Puerto Rican, Mexican-American, African-American, and students who identified themselves as having a dual Latino ethnic identity.

For Unique, an African-American female senior, the familial atmosphere at the PACHS was important because, unlike the public high school she had attended, disputes among students were more likely to get resolved before people were physically hurt.

*Here, it's like a big family. At my other Chicago public school everybody was fighting or getting stabbed. I was tired of that. At this school, we work things out before they get out of hand.*



Pura, a 1986 PACHS graduate, also attested to this:

*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.*

The school as family concept was important to the students and was facilitated by the school's small student body. In many traditional urban public high schools, the student populations are much larger. As a result, students may feel lost in their large schools. Hence, it was because of the smaller classes at the PACHS that many of the students felt less marginalized and more comfortable in their everyday interactions with other students and their teachers. In turn, this familial type atmosphere was conducive to healthy student relationships.

### **The PACHS as a Gang-Free Safe Space**

Several students made references to the overwhelming gang presence in their previous public high schools. For example, Melissa addressed the physical dangers that she and the ones closest to her had to confront in school on a continual basis.

*Gangbangers run the schools. Every gang in the city is represented in the schools. You have the Kings, Cobras, Oas and Gangsters. They run the schools. And there are little cliques here and there and little crews that go at war with the gangbangers. People have been thrown off stairs and my boyfriend got stabbed and he's not even a gangbanger.*

In contrast to these negative gang experiences, students commented that the PACHS promoted a safe learning environment for its students. This finding reinforces previous research that highlights the importance of creating safe niches of student communities in school (Flores-González, 2002). These safe niches promote students' school retention

and their overall enjoyment of school. Pura discussed how her mother transferred her from the public school that she had been attending to the PACHS precisely because of the high school's reputation regarding its policies against the gang presence in the high school.

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

Unique also mentioned the fact that she could no longer tolerate her previous public high school because of the gang presence and lack of rules concerning students coming and going as they pleased. Her experiences greatly differed at the PACHS.

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

The teachers at the PACHS are conscious of the color schemes of gangs and their signs as well as their influence on students who live in the immediate community. Consequently, the teachers are capable of detecting and reducing the gang influence within the school. This teacher savvy is crucial because it creates a safe space for students at the high school and makes it a much more stress-free school environment for them. Specific rules are institutionalized and enforced at the high school to

help combat this gang influence. These rules include not wearing gang colors, wearing jewelry or hats that have gang signs and not bringing beepers or cellular telephones into the high school. Additionally, to reduce the chances of students from rival gangs fighting after school, teachers supervise students after school to make sure that all students have secured a safe ride home.

### **The Importance of Racial/Ethnic Affirmation**

Students made reference to the importance of racial/ethnic affirmation within the high school. The students had different notions as to what racial/ethnic affirmation meant to them. What I noticed, however, was that this affirmation was expressed through two frameworks. The first framework was of a symbolic nature, which was focused on the use of ethnic/political symbols like national flags and posters of historical figures. The second framework was represented through a heightened alternative political consciousness.

The ethnic/political symbol framework of racial/ethnic affirmation was present in Melissa's voice. For her, ethnic affirmation was manifested through the lens of Puerto Rican nationalism.

*At the school I wear the Puerto Rican flag and a machete necklace around my neck. I have to have something that identifies me. That way, you know that I'm a Puerto Rican 'independentista.' I also love when people who I don't know ask me what the symbols represent. This gives me the chance to teach them about my beliefs. My goal is that I can bring more people into the cause.*

In additional conversations that I had with Melissa, it was indicated that her heightened nationalist political consciousness had been a result of the history classes she had taken at the PACHS. Damien also expressed the importance of Puerto Rican affirmation at the high school. He described his previous high school education as a "brainwashing" because it did not expose him to discussions centering on Puerto Rican history.

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

I sensed that Damien was frustrated because he had not been presented an alternative historical perspective regarding United States colonial policy in various parts of the world. For Damien, then, this alternative historical perspective was no longer a missing ingredient in his education.

Although this nationalist political consciousness and ideology represented the framework through which teachers taught United States and Puerto Rican history, not all students adopted this particular political ideology. In an informal conversation that I had with several students at a high school retreat, they expressed doubts that Puerto Rico could prosper economically as a sovereign nation. Additionally, Pura mentioned her opposition to Puerto Rican independence.

*At the school, I was able to respect people who supported independence for Puerto Rico but I don't believe that Puerto Rico should be independent. I think it's fine the way it is. It would be hard for Puerto Rico to survive on its own because it's too small.*

Iván also commented that students did not enroll at the school specifically for its pro-Puerto Rican independence ideology. Rather, students go to the school for the overall positive treatment they receive on behalf of the staff.

*Our students don't come here because they are consciously seeking a liberating education or because they support Puerto Rican independence. They come here because they know that this school will work hard not to neglect them and because they'll find out who they are. Hopefully, they will want to come back and continue their work in the community.*

Another indication that not all of the high school's students adopt a pro-independence stance is the fact that many of the graduates of the high school have moved on to join the ranks of the military or multinational corporations that are criticized for their presence on the Island by Puerto Rican nationalists.

Although not all the students were Puerto Rican, the Mexican-American, African-American and other students of multiple Latina/o ethnicities were also encouraged to explore their respective histories. Unique commented:

*At first the school talked a lot about Puerto Rico. But then Iván came up to me and asked me if I wanted to learn more about my culture and history. I was kind of mad about that because I was asked too late. I said that I thought an African-American class should be a part of the school. The next year, there was an African-American class with books and information about Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and stuff on slavery. I thought that was really cool.*

The high school was challenged by Unique to diversify its history curriculum because of its absence of African-American history classes. However, the school addressed this curricular void by finding materials for an independent study course that could accommodate Unique's needs as an African-American student. I also observed that many teachers used multiple supplementary history texts that addressed multiple ethnic perspectives regarding life in the United States. Hence, the high school was conscious of its need to fulfill the curricular needs of all its students and not just the Puerto Rican students that made up a majority of the student body. During my visit to the 2001 graduation ceremony, I noticed that teachers had purchased small national flags representing the ethnicity or multiple ethnicities of each graduating student. These flags were affixed to the seat of the graduating senior. In the case of multiethnic Latinas/os, they were given a small flag representing each country of their ethnic origin (e.g. a Mexican and Puerto Rican flag for a student who self-identified as half Mexican, half Puerto Rican).

These students' experiences revealed the ways in which the PACHS was important to them. Interestingly, the students' voices emphasized the importance of the high school in terms of its sanctuary-like attributes. These sanctuary-like attributes included multiple definitions of caring relations between students and their teachers, the importance of a familial-like school environment, the importance of having a safe school and allowing students a space in which they are encouraged to affirm their racial/ethnic pride. Although these things had been missing in their previous schools, they were now an integral part of their everyday experiences at the PACHS. While the students I interviewed spoke positively about their experiences at the high school, their teachers spoke about their difficult experiences pertaining to what it takes to have a school sanctuary. For the following portion of this article, I will turn my attention to the voices of the high school's teachers and administrators and their discussion on what it takes to maintain a school sanctuary.

## What It Means to Maintain a School Sanctuary

*Our days are very complicated. As a teacher here, you are expected to be committed to your teaching and to your work in the community. It's not easy having to teach classes, attend school and community meetings, and do your lesson plans. By the time you get home, it starts all over again. This work is hard.*

**Jake, English teacher**

Students would not consider the PACHS to be a sanctuary if it were not for the hard work and intense commitment of its teachers and administrative staff. In the conversations that I had with teachers, and my observations in the high school, it was clear that working at the PACHS was not a 9-3 job. A typical teacher day included arriving at the school at 7 a.m. to cook and serve breakfast to the students. After breakfast, a teacher would then be assigned to clean the lunchroom and prepare it for lunch. After breakfast, teachers had to get ready for their morning teaching duties, which consisted of teaching four classes. After teaching morning classes, it was time for lunch. Although lunch was brought in by a private catering company, all the teachers were expected to serve students their lunches and supervise the lunchroom. After lunch, a teacher was again assigned to wash all the utensils, wipe down tables, fold and store all the chairs, mop the floors and take out the trash. After these duties were completed, it was again time to teach three more classes in the afternoon. As if a full day of teaching, cleaning and counseling students was not enough, the teachers were also expected to do an overnight security session once a week. These overnight security sessions were started in 1985 after the FBI broke into the high school in search of evidence linking the PACHS to FALN activity. Although no evidence was found, the FBI caused extensive damage to the high school's facilities. As a result of this event, teachers expect each other to stay at the high school overnight once a week to ensure break-ins do not occur. Teachers are also expected to attend after school staff meetings and/or participate in community events.

For example, teachers work 8-hour shifts in the community's Fiesta Boricua celebration held on Labor Day weekend. This street festival attracts around 100,000 visitors to the Puerto Rican community of Division Street with sounds of Puerto Rican music, the rich smells of comida criolla and frituras, and Puerto Rican arts and crafts vendors. At this annual festival, teachers were assigned 8-hour shifts with any one of a number of responsibilities including handing out flyers, serving food or being a part of a clean-up crew either during or after the celebration. For example, I remember how we were assigned to teams of PACHS students and teachers to clean the city streets after the Fiesta until 2 a.m. As mentioned previously, the teachers' participation in these community events is important because the PACHS is part of a larger umbrella organization called the Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC) [refer to Ramos-Zayas (1997) for a detailed description of the PRCC's work].

Although the teachers work hard at the high school, it is expected that their participation should also extend beyond the classroom. That is, I observed that it was not enough for teachers to talk to their students about the importance of being involved in the community. On the contrary, teachers became role models for their students through their commitment in the community.

Another example of how difficult it is to build a sanctuary is evident in these teachers' struggles in coping with students and/or parents. Jake, an English teacher at the school for 7 years, commented on his struggle as a White male and his role as an English teacher at the high school. He conceptualized this struggle around the arduous task of gaining his students' trust. Jake perceived that his Whiteness represented privilege and had racial and political implications for his teaching. Although he may have found it initially difficult for his students to place their complete trust in him, however, I easily observed how many of the high school's students respected and liked Jake because of his commitment to teaching and the school.



*As a White teacher, I represent the power structure. There's no amount of being radical or alternative that is going to change the fact that I have things that many of the kids in the school don't have. I will always have access to things that they do not have. And, you know, I'm teaching English, which is the language that has been historically imposed on Puerto Ricans. Many of the students don't trust me at first. Why should they? Their previous teachers who looked like me failed them. I have to earn the students' trust. It's not easy.*

Majandra discussed her position as a Puerto Rican female teacher and co-principal as a “double impact” because of the male chauvinism that she sometimes encountered by students and parents.

*Being a Puerto Rican woman at the school is a double impact and hard. Although the school has pushed me to become a leader, I have to confront people who are taught that women are inferior. Some students have tried to intimidate me physically and some parents won't speak to me because I'm a woman. Although they know that I'm one of the principals, they insist on talking to Iván [the male principal] instead. It's not easy.*

Majandra, unlike her male counterparts, had the complex task of confronting gender-based inequities in her quest to prove herself as a leader because of some Latino males' firm belief that women should not have leadership positions within the high school. In spite of the gender-based inequities she faced, however, I noticed that Majandra was well liked by her students because she initiated caring in her relations with students whom she often counseled academically and personally.

Iván, in spite of being a well loved principal at the PACHS for 20 years, still voiced his personal commitment and sense of frustration at the fact that not all the school's students graduated and/or went on to lead productive lives. As mentioned in Ramos-Zayas (1998), the school encouraged its students to break away from gang life and drugs and use the high school as a vehicle from which to obtain a post-secondary or obtain stable employment.

*Being a teacher at this school is not easy. We have our problems. Not all our kids will finish — some may go back to drugs or gangs. Some of our students will even go to jail. However, we also have students who will get a college education and come back to the community to work. We really have to define, then, what success is. Is it all about just producing students with good grades or is it about giving them the tools that are necessary to make sense of their world and contribute to their communities? We have to ask ourselves this question over and over again. We have to keep on struggling to make this a better school for all our students.*

Finally, many of the PACHS teachers have paid a high personal price in their quest to maintain the high school as a sanctuary for its students. In informal conversations I had with teachers, it was mentioned that working intense 12 hour days six days a week did not allow them to reflect on or foment their personal relationships with their significant others and family members. Consequently, many of these teachers' problems maintaining these personal relationships have resulted in broken personal relationships. Precisely because being a teacher involves such hard work, an intense commitment to their students and community, struggles involving students and parents and a high toll on personal relationships, many teachers resign. Hence, the teacher turnover rate at the PACHS is high. The relatively low salaries these teachers are paid, in comparison to their Chicago public school counterparts, also influences this high teacher turnover rate. Therefore, to help alleviate teacher shortages, community volunteers with expertise in such diverse areas as computer science and music are also brought in to the school to teach. Hence, the high school staff must find creative ways to supplement their teaching staff and course offerings.

As if working to insure that the high school served its students as a sanctuary was not enough, the high school is in the process of moving to a new location after 20 years. This move was the result of the Puerto Rican community's struggle with gentrification (Alicea, 2001; Flores-González, 2001;

Ramos-Zayas, 2001). Luckily, the school was able to take advantage of this predicament by accepting a substantial purchase amount from building developers for the school building. This money is being allocated for the major renovation of a building that will house the new high school, which will be located in the heart of "Paseo Boricua." Teachers are also playing an instrumental role in the building of the new high school in that they are helping tear down walls and prepare the site for contractors who will do the renovations. The new school building will open its doors in Spring 2003.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The students I spoke with strongly suggest that the PACHS serves as a sanctuary. Moreover, although the high school was initially founded as a site of Puerto Rican pedagogical resistance, it has now also come to fulfill the affective and cultural needs of the many Puerto Rican, Mexican and African-American students that call it their school. All the students, regardless of their gender, race or ethnicity, expressed the school as sanctuary concept through four important characteristics that they felt were important concerning their PACHS experiences.

First, these students' teachers established caring relations with their students by offering them mentorship, counseling and holding them to high academic expectations. In turn, students reciprocated this care by stating their desire to give back to their communities. Previous research findings have also highlighted the importance of these kinds of caring student-teacher relationships in schools that serve minority students (Nieto, 1998, 2000; Noddings, 1984, 1992; Rivera & Pedraza, 2000; Torres-Guzmán & Martínez Thorne, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999). Second, the high school's familial-type environment was important to the students I interviewed because it enabled students more opportunities to form academic and personal support networks with other students, which contributed to their "sense of belonging" in school (Nieto, 1998).

Third, the students I interviewed were appreciative of the high school's gang-free safe space. The importance of safe school niches to students' increased identification with school has been reported by Flores-González (2002). The PACHS teachers enforced rules concerning the use of gang colors and/or signs. The enforcement of these rules offered students a sense of safety and protection from negative gang-based peer influences and helped make the high school a relatively stress-free educational environment. Fourth, the high school's curriculum was structured to encourage its students to explore, discover, celebrate and affirm their respective racial and ethnic realities within and outside school. The importance of this school-based racial and ethnic affirmation has been documented in previous research findings (Nieto, 1998; Rivera & Pedraza, 2000; Torres-Guzmán & Martínez Thorne, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999).

Although the students spoke about the high school in terms of its sanctuary-like attributes, the teachers I interviewed stated that it took long days, hard work in the school and community, their difficulty with maintaining personal relationships and coping with racial and gender tensions to maintain the PACHS as a sanctuary. These struggles are areas of concern because these personal sacrifices contribute to the high teacher turnover rates that the PACHS has experienced in the last several years. It will be crucial for teachers PRCC leaders to have serious conversations on what can be done to alleviate these strenuous teacher lives while simultaneously striving to maintain the school as a sanctuary. As long as these teachers are willing to constantly be critical of these areas, however, they will hopefully continue to find ways to improve their daily conditions within the high school and serve as "keepers of the sanctuary."

Finally, while the PACHS may be similar to other urban public high schools in that it has less than perfect student retention rates, relatively high teacher turnover rates, and students who may go back to a life of gangs and/or drugs, it nonetheless still serves as a beacon of hope and resistance to



many students of color who may have had altogether lost all hope for improving their life chances. The voices of the students that I heard represent generations of students who have looked for schools to be much more than endless rows of desks, standardized test scores, individualistic academic goals, uncaring teachers and an environment that harbors a general lack of respect for their students' racial and/or ethnic realities. On the contrary, these students sincerely felt that a school could have the potential to serve as a refuge from the pedagogical, personal and racial and ethnic neglect they had often experienced in their previous schools. Hence, the PACHS was much more than their school — it was their sanctuary.

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