A Real Alternative: Tragedy and hope in an urban immigrant community

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On a cold November morning, 18-year-old Uvaldo hunches over a wooden desk at Irene Dugan Alternative High School and scribbles his name on a sign-in sheet. 'Morning, Ms. B.,' he says to Norine Baltazar, the school's parent liaison.

'Right on time,' I say, thinking Uvaldo has slipped in just before the school's 10:00 a.m. start.

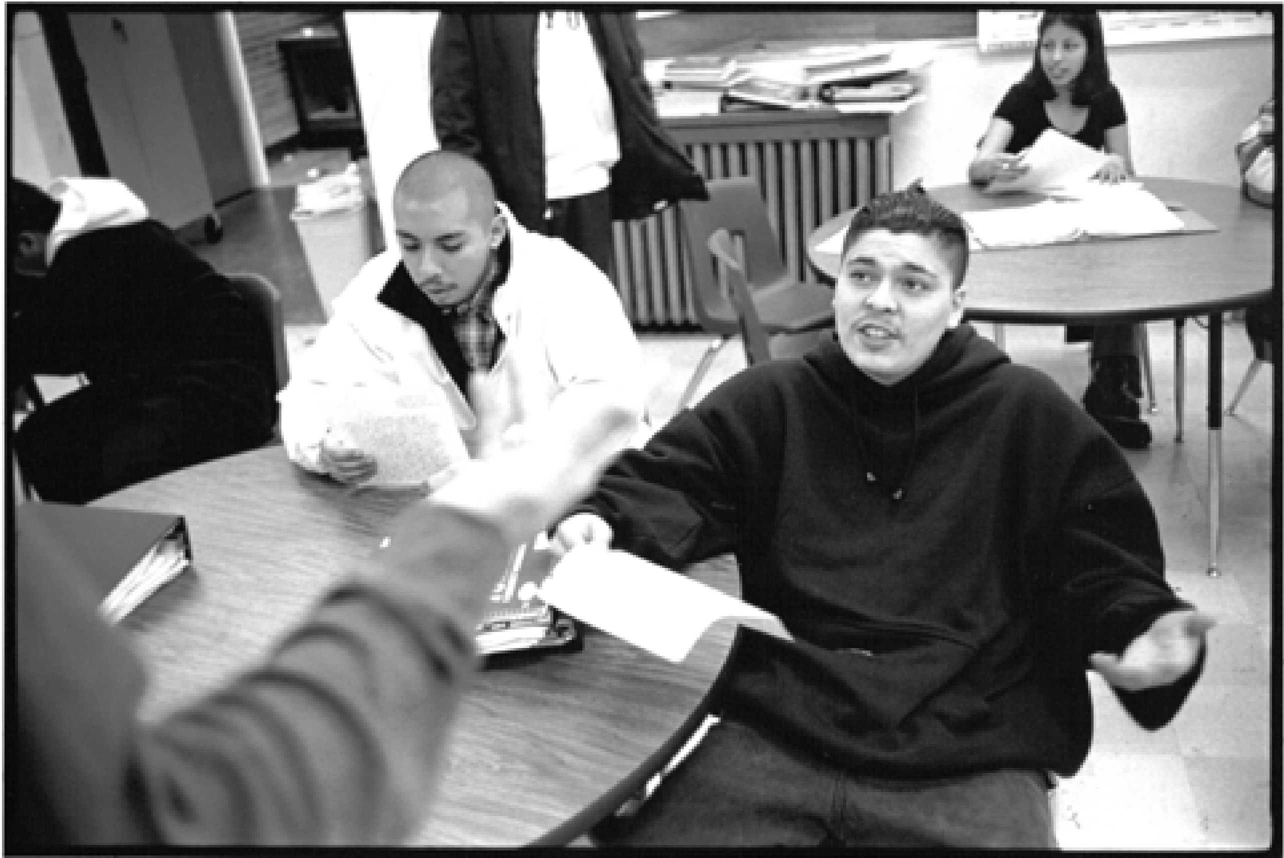
'No, he's a minute late,' says Baltazar, glancing at a wall clock. 'And by the time he gets up to class it'll be two minutes. Late is late.' Uvaldo cocks his head, his expression somewhere between a grin and a grimace.

Baltazar smiles. 'And take off the hat,' she adds as Uvaldo heads up the stairs to the second floor, where he and eleven other teenagers will soon be engaged in a spirited discussion of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Uvaldo enrolled at Dugan, located in Back of the Yards, a predominantly Mexican immigrant community on Chicago's south side, after leaving a traditional high school because he felt unsafe. Other students have their own stories. Tony was ordered to attend an alternative school after repeated suspensions – once for being caught on school grounds with two ounces of marijuana. Karina was arrested and advised not to return to her high school after taking part in a lunchroom fight with another girl. Manuel can't point to a specific reason why things didn't work out at his former school. 'I just stopped going,' he tells me. 'Over there they don't really care if you go or not.'

Whatever the causes, these young people – along with about four dozen other students at Dugan – all left their assigned high schools before graduating. Citywide, they have lots of company. Though official dropout rates for Chicago Public Schools have dipped slightly in recent years, the numbers remain alarmingly high – especially when examined over time. A study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (2005) which tracked CPS students from age 13 to 19 put the cohort dropout rate at 41.7 percent in 2004.

And the problem is not limited to Chicago. Nationwide in the U.S., students in large urban systems have a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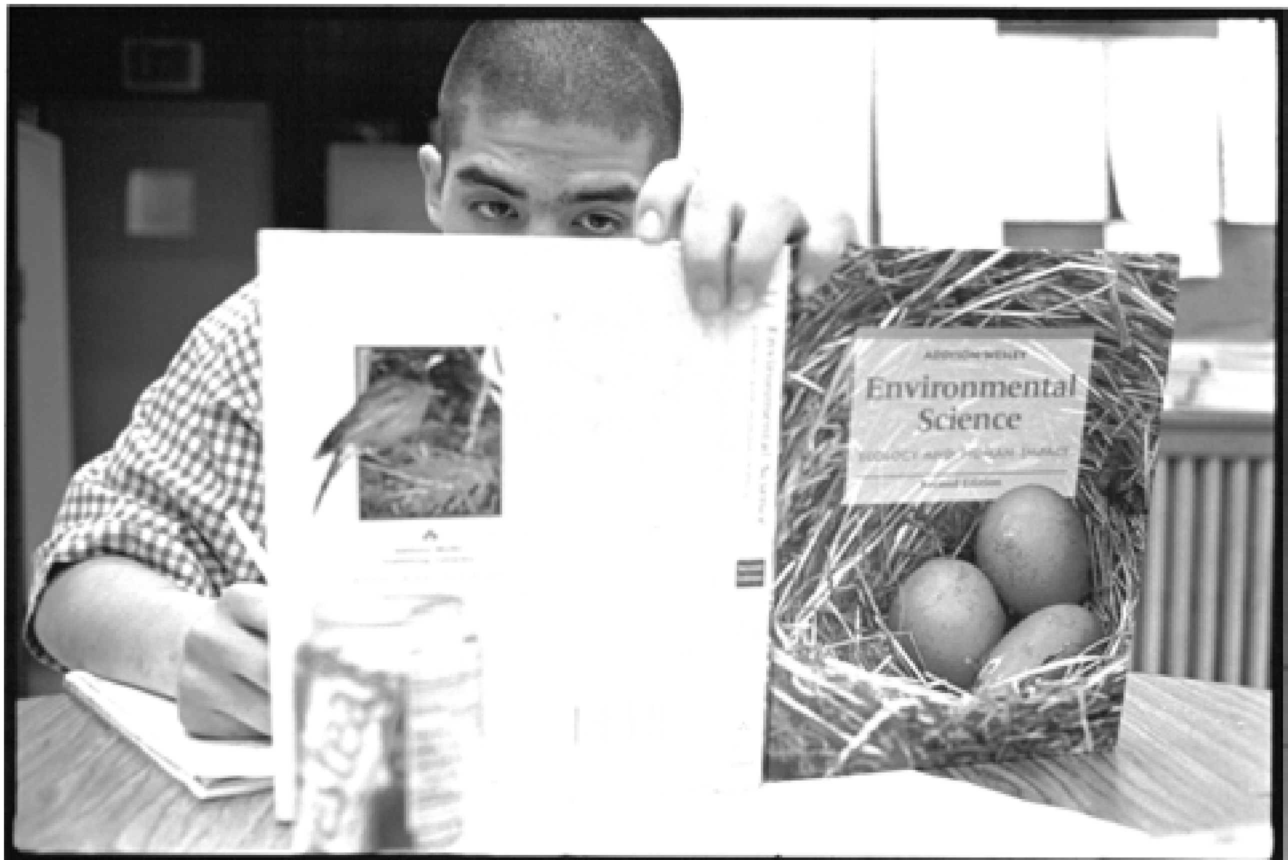
graduation rate of just 57.5% (Orfield, Losen, Wald, and Swanson, 2004). Since the students in many big city school systems are predominantly poor, African American and/or Latino, these groups are affected disproportionately by low graduation/high dropout rates and the social consequences are devastating. What's worse, the dropout/push-out numbers may be on the rise. Numerous reports from across the U.S. suggest that struggling schools, desperate to raise test scores in order meet their Annual Yearly Progress goals mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act, are committing educational triage by pushing out low-achieving students (p. 15).

Father Bruce Wellems didn't know the dropout statistics when he came to Back of the Yards in 1990 to serve as a parish priest. Born and raised in New Mexico, Wellems initially had only vague notions of what an inner-city ministry might look like and little commitment to the neighborhood's struggling youth. But after some prodding from a local park district supervisor, he began trying to build relationships with teens in the community who were gang members, many of whom were spending their days on the streets instead of in school. He quickly discovered that most of them desired one of two things: a decent job or the chance to continue their education.

For several years, Wellems tossed around the idea of starting a community-based high school that would serve the kids he'd gotten to know on the streets. But with so many other pressing needs in the parish, the high school stayed on Wellems' back burner until February 1998, when a tragic incident of youth violence moved him to act.

'What can we do?'

The radio reports that day were grim. Two Back of the Yards teens – a 14- and a 15-year-old – had been shot dead. The accused, a seventh grader who had flirted with gang involvement, was only twelve. The story became front-page news around the country. But while the reactionary media accounts encouraged responses of shocked resignation or a rhetorical *what can we do about it?*, Wellems began asking the same question in a more genuine manner: What *can* we do about it? What can we *do*?



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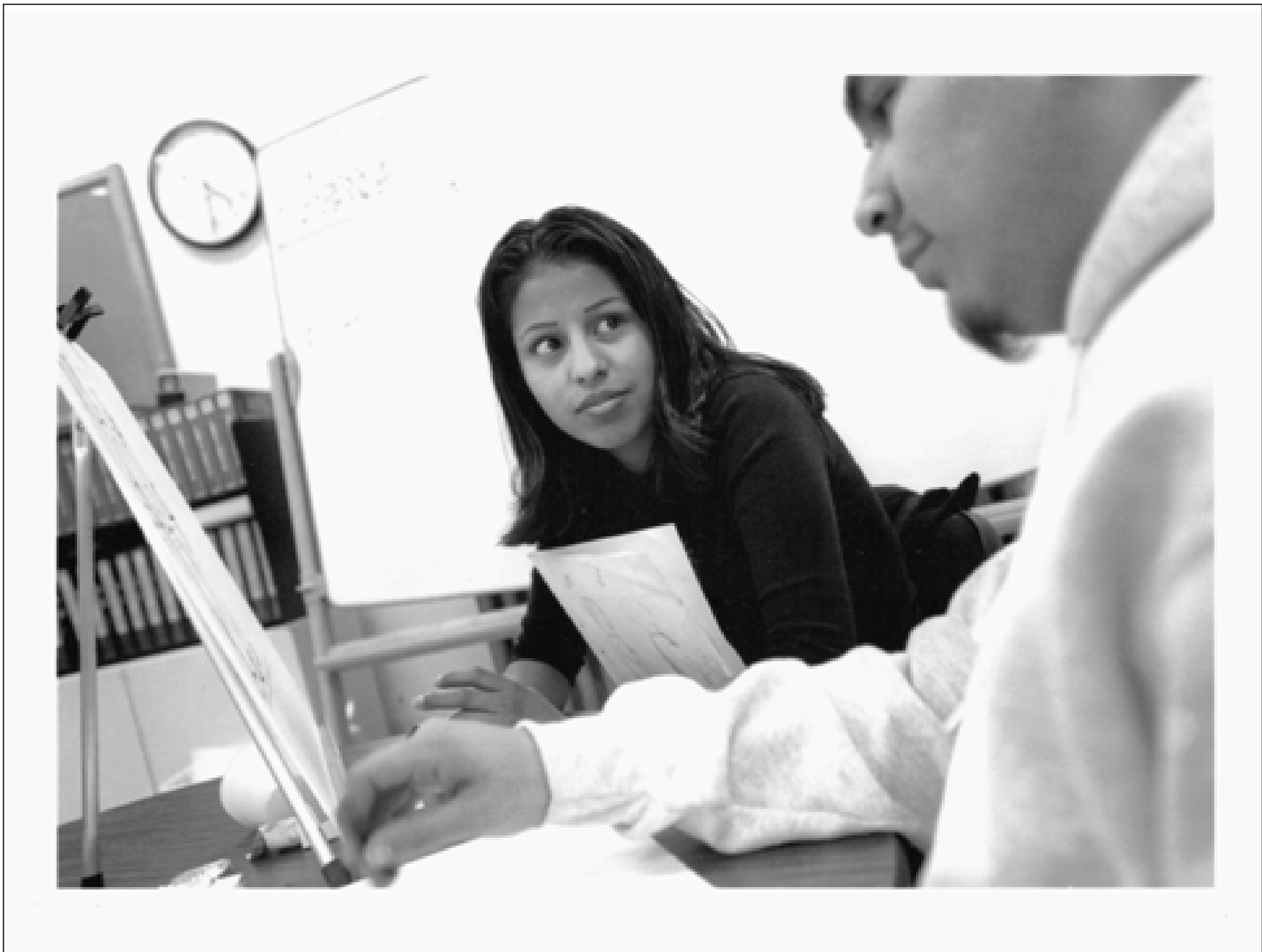
With the city's gaze focused on Back of the Yards in the wake of the two murders, Wellems decided to try to use the attention to make something good from the tragedy. In late February, Chicago public schools' then-CEO Paul Vallas visited the neighborhood and Wellems served as tour guide, championing the idea of an alternative school at every opportunity. By the end of the morning, Vallas had made a verbal commitment to lend district support to the effort.

In the months that followed, launching the high school became Wellems's mission. He formed a coalition of neighborhood educators, business leaders, community activists, and volunteers who worked together to map out a plan and build support. He visited alternative schools in East Los Angeles to gather ideas about scheduling, curriculum and encouraging parental involvement. Every Tuesday night he met with a group of 15 to 20 young men who were interested in signing up for the school: getting their input, providing updates, keeping the momentum going. They agreed to name the school after Sister Irene Dugan, a Religious of the Cenacle nun who'd worked with some of the neighborhood's youth during the final year of her life. The school would be an alternative public high school – not a partially private-funded charter school – and its graduates would receive regular Chicago Public Schools diplomas, not GEDs (high school equivalency diplomas).

As the weeks passed, Wellems and his planning team cleared bureaucratic hurdles and firmed up logistical details. By August, Dugan Alternative High School was up and running with a staff of three full-time teachers. Housed in a small brick building on the church's back lot, the school opened with 19 students, many of whom had police records or were affiliated with the local gang. Several had been pushed out of other schools, often for minor offenses. Federico Vega, who at 21 became the school's first valedictorian, had been suspended for fighting at the beginning of his senior year and had given up on resuming his education until Dugan opened.

'My life has changed a lot in this past year,' he said in his commencement speech. 'If I could turn back time I would change all of the negative choices I made in my life, and I would trade them with positive ones. But as you all know, that is impossible to do. I can't change the past, but I can change my future. I can learn from



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my mistakes and change my ways. I think all of us can.'

Relationships are the key

Federico's message continues to echo in Dugan's classrooms. Now in its ninth year, the school recently graduated its one hundredth student. Chela, 18, who quit school and turned to drugs after her father succumbed to bone cancer when she was in eighth grade, credits Dugan's staff with helping her get a fresh start. She's been off drugs for two years, and she's on track to become the first in her family to finish high school. 'I used to have real low self-esteem,' Chela says. 'But ever since I came here all the teachers have been supporting me a lot. One of my teachers takes me home from school sometimes. They helped me get a job. They set my family up with a counselor. They notice right away when something's wrong.'

Like Chela, most teenagers – even those who outwardly resist school, even those in gangs – want to feel connected to, and supported by, caring adults. But in too many oversized, traditional high schools, a 'crisis of relationships' (Meier, 2000) exists that leads young people to feel disconnected. Angela Valenzuela (1999) found this to be particularly true of the U.S.-Mexican youth she studied at a large Houston high school, where teacher-student relationships characterized by 'authentic caring' were rare. Similarly, Pedro Noguera (2004) interviewed and observed students at ten Boston high schools and found that 56 percent 'did not believe that their teachers really cared' (p. 29).

It's not hard to imagine why. While individual teachers in large urban high schools may work valiantly to foster strong relationships with their students, institutional backing for such efforts is often weak or non-existent. Lacking administrative support, many teachers grow weary of battling school cultures

characterized by anonymity. Others never take up the fight. A former eighth-grade student of mine lamented the fact that, halfway through the year at his 2,800-student Chicago high school, his history teacher still didn't know his name (Michie, 1999).

Dugan's teachers understand this reality and believe that making personal connections with students, many of whom have felt invisible or alienated at their former schools, is central to their work. Classes are small – the maximum is fifteen students – and instructional programs are personalized. 'Our success has been about relationships from the beginning, and it still is,' says Brigitte Swenson, who has taught at the school since it opened and now serves as its administrative and instructional leader. 'Students aren't just numbers here. They're known by every teacher in the school.'

That doesn't mean there aren't challenges with individual students. Some kids rebel against attendance policies they believe are too strict. Others struggle to leave behind poor study habits or to reawaken what Florence Rubinson has called 'a long, slow and often painful withdrawal from learning' (2004, p. 58). Conflicts among students flare up on occasion. But when problems arise, the strong teacher-student bonds allow staff members to better understand and address the underlying causes, rather than react with punitive, one-size-fits-all responses. Recently, when several teachers noticed a student becoming increasingly unmotivated toward academics and antagonistic toward his classmates, the entire staff – all five teachers plus Swenson – sat down with the teen for an extended conversation, both to reaffirm their support for him and to clarify expectations.

Crystal McDonell, who teaches French, appreciates such efforts. 'At the other schools where I taught, it was like, 'Read the code of conduct, write them up, send them to the vice principal,'' she says. 'But here it's more like, 'Let's talk about it. What's the history with this kid? Let's talk to everybody who's dealt with him and come to a decision about what's best.'' Dugan, McDonell says, has the feel of a family, 'and when you screw up with your family, you get another chance.'

Rethinking everything

From the beginning, Dugan's teachers (along with Wellems, who continued to advise the staff) had to think creatively about every detail of the school's operation. Some of the questions they pondered were those likely to be asked at any start-up: How can we help students take ownership of the school? How can we meet the needs of kids who come in at a wide range of readiness levels? What should the curriculum be? There were quandaries related specifically to Dugan's size, its student population, its lack of physical space: How will district requirements for classes like music and physical education be fulfilled? What if kids come to school wearing gang colors? What will students eat for lunch – and where?

Experience, Swenson says, has been the best teacher. While she and her staff continue to retool elements that aren't working, they've learned many lessons. Among them is how not only to go about fashioning and sustaining a school that meets troubled kids where they are but ways in which to challenge them to invest in their own learning.

Some of the other lessons learned:

- While it's essential that teachers build trusting relationships with students, it is, in itself, not enough. Researcher Michelle Fine (2000), long a supporter of grassroots small school initiatives, says she worries in private 'that some small schools substitute caring for serious intellectual growth' (p.177). Dugan's teachers try to guard against that possibility by tackling stimulating subject matter in required courses and offering electives that help students examine their worlds through different lenses, classes such as Criminal Justice, Chicago Fiction, Film Studies, and Law in American Society. 'There's a stigma out there about alternative schools,' Swenson says, 'that they're places where you try to get kids through the day but not a lot is going on intellectually. I think our teachers work really hard to have meaningful classes and to push kids to think critically.'
- Students who haven't found success in high school, for whatever reason, need to see tangible results as quickly as possible. 'There's a need for instant gratification,' Swenson says. 'If they don't see themselves making progress, they get frustrated.' To account for this, Dugan incorporates a block schedule in which students take four 80-minute classes each day. The longer class periods allow students to earn a semester's worth of credit in each course in just nine weeks, credits they can view on a transcript right away. In relatively short order, students begin to see that they can indeed be competent, and even successful, in school: a

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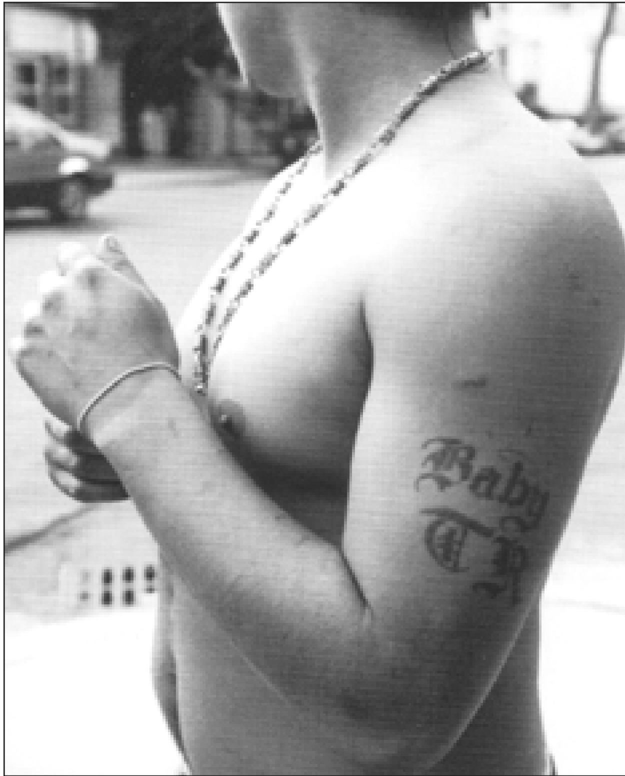
possibility that is foreign to many Dugan youth. As that realization settles in, students are less likely to feel they are drowning in an 'ocean of inadequacy' and more likely to work to develop their 'islands of competence' (Brooks, 1999, p. 66).

- Regular attendance and punctuality are often a struggle for students who are returning to school after a prolonged absence, or who attended erratically at their former schools. During its first year Dugan didn't have a strict, formalized attendance policy and some students took advantage. Now expectations are clear and, except for extreme situations, non-negotiable: if you miss more than four days in a quarter, you're dropped and have to start again the next marking period. 'The kids fight against it,' Swenson says, 'but we try to approach it as, 'If you're not here, you're not learning.'' The results are impressive. Dugan's attendance rate is 93%; the average for CPS high schools is 86%.

- The goal is to keep students in school, not put them out, so the flip side of adhering to strict attendance guidelines is doing as much as possible to help kids meet their commitment. In other words, the responsibility of ensuring high attendance rates shouldn't rest entirely on individual students: the school, too, should play a role (Seeley and MacGillivary, 2006). One way Dugan does this is with a ten o'clock start, which allows its teenage clientele to sleep later and still make it to school on time. In addition, students who don't show up get a call the same morning, and sometimes a home visit as well, from the school's parent liaison, who tries to troubleshoot and get them to class. For those who fail to hold up their end of the bargain, redemption is always just around the corner. If a student is dropped for missing too many days, he or she can always start anew the following quarter. Dugan's year-round schedule allows students to be admitted (or re-admitted) four times each year.

- Small schools shouldn't become islands unto themselves. Connecting with individuals, cultural and arts organizations, businesses and other resources both inside and outside the immediate community is crucial if alternative education sites



Credit: Antonio Perez

are to survive and thrive. In part, this is because improved schooling alone cannot sufficiently address the many social, emotional, medical, economic and other needs that students who have not succeeded in traditional schools bring with them (Martin and Halperin, 2006). At Dugan, Swenson and her staff forge relationships with parents, parishioners, a neighboring elementary school, probation officers, employers, the police department, private donors and several arts organizations in an effort to provide students with a richer educational experience, offering services and extra-curricular options that would otherwise be unavailable in a small school setting.

Is it making a difference?

Of course, there are many lessons yet to be learned at Dugan and challenges that remain. Perhaps the most important is figuring out how to continue to evolve in an educational universe where top-down mandates and one-size-fits-all 'solutions' are the order of the day. In the midst of such an environment, Swenson worries that the freedom Dugan has enjoyed in the past could suddenly be curtailed. 'There's always a level of concern that someone's going to see what we're doing and not support it because we do things differently,' she says. 'It's like we're always looking over our shoulder thinking, 'Are we going to get caught?''

Lehr and Lange (2003) have argued that in this era of high-stakes accountability, alternative schools need to amass as much quantitative data as possible in order to bolster their chances of garnering continued funding and support. While that is undoubtedly good advice, it's also true that numbers alone often miss the most important parts of the story. A hundred Dugan graduates over eight years, for example, may seem like a drop in the bucket when weighed against the bigger picture of dropout statistics and the failure of public schools to educate all students.

Yet for many of those hundred, Dugan has been life-changing: a refuge, a second chance, a step down a different, more hopeful path. Juan Palacios had been out of school for nearly two years and was heavily involved in gang activity when he enrolled at Dugan. Now 25 and a graduate of the school, he's a few credits shy of an associate's degree and works part-time at a downtown Chicago law firm. His dream of attending law school, once distant and fading, now seems legitimately within reach.

The question is not whether young people who've lost their way in traditional schools – those who have been pushed out or kicked out, who are young mothers, who are lured into gangs – value education. Like Juan and Chela and Federico, most of them clearly do. The real question is whether we value them enough to provide a schooling experience that works for them. After all, reconnecting dropouts, as Nancy Martin and Samuel Halperin (2006) point out, 'is not rocket science. Rather, it is more an exercise in imagining what might be, of having the skills, the will and the stamina to shape reality in more creative and positive directions' (p. 7).

Dugan's founders, teachers, and students have spent nearly a decade imagining 'what might be' on Chicago's South Side and mustering the necessary will to keep their vision alive. Asked if the efforts have been worthwhile, Swenson's reply comes without hesitation: 'There are a hundred kids out there who, before they came here, never thought they were going to finish high school. Is that cost effective? Is it practical? Is it worth it? I say yes, absolutely.'

* The names of current Dugan students have been changed.

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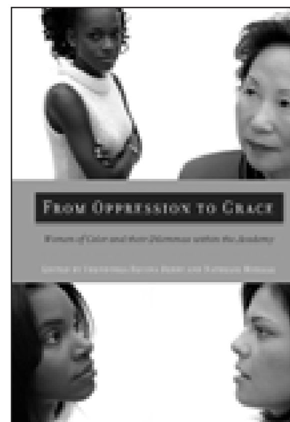
From Oppression to Grace

Women of Color and Their Dilemmas within the Academy

Edited by Theodorea Regina Berry and Nathalie Mizelle



This book gives voice to the experiences of women of color – women of African, Native American, Latina, East Indian, Korean and Japanese descent – as students in pursuing terminal degrees and as faculty members navigating the Academy, grappling with the dilemmas encountered by others and themselves as they exist at the intersections of their work and identities.

Women of color are frequently relegated – on account both of race and womanhood – into monolithic categories that perpetuate oppression, subdue and suppress conflict, and silence voices. This book uses critical race feminism (CRF) to place women of color in the center, rather than the margins, of the discussion, theorizing, research and praxis of their lives as they co-exist in the dominant culture.

The first part of the book addresses the issues faced on the way to achieving a terminal degree: the struggles encountered and the lessons learned along the way. Part Two, 'Pride and Prejudice: Finding Your Place After the Degree' describes the complexity of lives of women with multiple identities as scholars with family, friends, and lives at home and at work. The book concludes with the voices of senior faculty sharing their journeys and their paths to growth as scholars and individuals.

This book is for all women of color growing up in the academy, learning to stand on their own, taking first steps, mastering the language, walking, running, falling and getting up to run again – and illuminates the process of self-definition that is essential to their growth as scholars and individuals.

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