

“

# NOT A WHITE PAPER

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- APREE

*Mission Statement*

To advocate for social transformation through programs focused on education and the advancement of the Puerto Rican community.



ALLIANCE FOR PUERTO RICAN EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT | NEW YORK, NEW YORK

# MOVING TO A NATIONAL ASSET BASED ECOLOGY FOR PUERTO RICAN YOUTH

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## WHY NOT A WHITE PAPER!

Traditionally, white papers have been written to present a problem and offer a solution. This **'NOT a White Paper' (NWP)** was written by members of the Alliance for Puerto Rican Education and Empowerment (APREE), because after reviewing the literature and data we were appalled at the consistent and unacceptable statistical patterns, indicating that Puerto Ricans in New York City have abysmal high school graduation rates, are not college ready when they do graduate and are under-represented in senior colleges. These statistics span from before the 1970s to the present 2016. Critical to our initial investigations were comprehensive reports introduced, most notably by Angelo Falcon (August, 2012, September, 2016), Luis Reyes, (Fall 2012) and the Community Service Society (2010).

As long-time activists we recognize the importance of how the narrative is framed and who gets to do the framing. This NWP was written with the belief that upon exploring our strengths, experiences and knowledge base, we must begin to remobilize for social change in our community with renewed hope and positivity. We reject the deficit narrative that blames our community for the grim educational statistics we discovered in our research. Instead we focus on our community's assets,

in our struggle for justice and equality. We do this to both reframe the conversation and to re-spark mobilization within our community so that we do not fall victim to the retrenchment and disinvestment we experienced in the '80's and so that much needed services and programs are not extinguished or denied.

The asset based approach we have adopted includes reflecting on our personal experiences particularly regarding higher education. Through telling our stories, we focus on what our communities have achieved or are in the process of achieving. We address those issues where, through our determination and "atrevimiento" (risk-taking), we have garnered the activist participation of our friends, families, and community organizations to triumph even during the most challenging of times. We share these stories not for acclaim but as a window to the past in order that those in the present and in the future may come to know, from those "on the ground" the complexities of the battles lost, won and yet to be decided.

The context is "los logros" (victories) as a community, the voices are mostly of the "60s" and 70's generation but not exclusively, the focus is aspirational and the tone reflects our passion and our commitment to advocate and to provide support to the movement for a better, more equitable quality

of life and livelihood for all of our people. Most importantly, we expect to share this **'Not a White Paper'** with those, young or not so young, aspiring to attend college, with those who have been marginalized through incarceration or disconnected from work and school, as well as with the academics and organizers who may find these stories useful as they engage in their studies and in their work in

local communities. We urge our community members and constituencies to read our stories and to realize how their own stories are powerful tools. If we are to move forward and reclaim the 'PROMESA' of our future generations, we must stand on the foundation that we are not the "problema", we are the "promesa."

## THE PROBLEM WITH DEFICITS

**Esther Farmer**

For many years young people in our community have been related to as problems and/or victims. The entire mindset of our educational system relies on an understanding of our youth as having deficits that must be fixed. Our language is inundated by deficits and diagnostic labels. Our youth have been called damaged, depressed, compulsive and antisocial. Our children have been diagnosed with ADHD, they are said to be emotionally disturbed, slow, or defiance disorder. David Cooperrider, the founder of the asset based model called Appreciative Inquiry describes the cultural consequences of our deficit discourse as the “erosion of people power” (Cooperrider, 2001). He shows that the deficit discourse has led to a vocabulary that has spiraled out of control. This vocabulary is not benign. Leaving aside how these words and labels have led to an epidemic of over-diagnosis and over medicalization of our youth, particularly youth of color, the deficit model has creating a culture of victimhood. We all seem to have some diagnosis that “explains” our “problem.”

John McKnight, the founder of Asset Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University, decries the passive acceptance of these deficits and their labels and shows how we have become somewhat helpless in the face of them. He demonstrates that the deficit model creates the environment where we must rely on a professional class of helpers who are deemed the only people “qualified” to help. This has led to what he calls the “professionalization of caring.” Communities who always had a natural capacity to care have been stripped of this role by the professionals who now get paid to do it (McKnight, 1995).

The history of the deficit model has taken a heavy toll on the education of Puerto Rican children in particular. In addition to all the diagnosis associated with poverty, Puerto Rican children have been made to feel that their bilingualism is a deficit. In the early years of the struggle for bilingual education, which was led by Puerto Rican activists, Spanish speaking children were immediately dumped into remedial classes. Many of our personal stories below, reflect the impact this bias had on our development. Antonio Nadal, a professor at Brooklyn College, who was one of those activists points out that bilingual children were put “in the dingiest places in the building. And they picked up that they were inferior to English-speaking kids” (Meraji, 2014). That feeling of inferiority was a slap in the face to Puerto Ricans, who, after all, are American citizens, says Nadal. So to fit in, Puerto Ricans focused on English - often at the expense of Spanish (Meraji, 2014).

Today when being multilingual is so coveted in the job market particularly in a country that has 14 million Latinos, the culture of deficits has created the environment where some Spanish speakers are made to feel that their language is just for the home and not an asset anywhere else. It is



somewhat ironic that the push for dual language programs is now coming from more affluent parents who, for the most part, may be associated with the gentrification of New York City neighborhoods. They recognize and advocate for the importance of multilingual education in a globalized society.

By embracing an asset based approach we are by no means denying the impact of poverty, racism, inequality and lack of opportunity. In fact the deficit model has exacerbated the very serious consequences of poverty and racism. It has made our young people feel helpless and powerless in the face of all their so-called deficits. Too often our youth and families feel they have nothing to offer.

## **THE ASSET BASED TURN-AROUND**

Asset based approaches such as Appreciative Inquiry, socio cultural theory, constructivism, Vygotsky-inspired work, (to mention a few), focus on identifying what works, what is valuable and what needs to be built on, in any system. These approaches have existed for many years. In the Puerto Rican community one of the most famous asset based approaches was ASPIRA, a high school honors program founded by Dr. Antonia Pantoja. Her work focused on giving students a sense of pride in the significant historical contributions of the Puerto Rican community. In addition, scholars such as Sonia Nieto and Virginia Sanchez Korrol have written extensively with an asset-based eye toward education of Puerto Rican youth. We have also been inspired by progressive educational leaders such as Luis Reyes and Carmen Dinos. Today, in education, there is some lip service to asset based approaches, but in practice educational reform, in NYC, in particular, has focused on deficits. And it has failed spectacularly. When only 26% of New York State children are reading on grade level, the dropout rate for Puerto Rican students is over 30%, and only 13.3% of Latino students are college ready after High school (Reyes, 2012, p. 11) we must invoke Einstein's observations on the insanity of doing the same failing thing over and over. In addition the deficit model is an example of using the same tools to solve a problem that created the problem to begin with.

Our youth have amazing assets and strengths. In a school environment these assets would include a rich and complex history of anti-colonial struggle, the bilingualism of the students, and/or teachers, the strength of culturally competent teachers and administrators, an active and engaged parent body. Our youth love culture, spoken word and music, they love to perform, to act. They want to help their families, their siblings their friends. These are the building blocks on which young people can develop.

In a study of two successful Boston High Schools where Latino students received a pass rate of 85%, one of the asset based indicators of success is to "encourage collaboration... The support Latino children give each other by translating instructions, supporting newcomers and pushing each other with

their academic work should be examined as it expands the concept of collaboration to include the strengths of bilingualism and biculturalism” (de los Reyes, Nieto, & Diaz, 2008, p. 136).

## **NEW PEDAGOGIES**

Many of us contributing to this collection of narratives remember moments in our education where teachers may have knowingly or not, diminished our desires to become doctors or lawyers and instead tried to gear us only to skills training. These moments were demoralizing to say the least. In the literature on successful schools one of the common denominators is an attitude and philosophy that relates to students as capable of development. This would appear obvious, but it is often not practiced in institutional settings. An asset based model would involve an entirely different approach and mindset to education. For example instead of parents hearing from their child’s teacher whenever the child does something problematic, leading to parents fearing any contact with teachers, what if teachers contacted parents every time the child accomplished something new? Teachers are told to contact parents when their children get good grades but what if parents are contacted when students intervene on a bullying situation or if they help another student with their work, or do something that builds the classroom environment. Instead of a motivation killing attachment to standards, what if we had teachers who celebrated students for moving forward in some way?

What if children learned to help each other in such a way that the unit of development is the class instead of the individual, and that part of the success of the class is the extent to which they take care of each other and create the environment where everyone learns; not at the same level or time but that there is growth and it is celebrated. This would require an entirely different attitude toward our children and a different approach to teacher training which currently focuses on evaluating children (and teachers) based on often impossible standards that only make children (and teachers) hate school.

In addition to research on high performing schools one of the missing links in understanding and learning from assets is the high performing teacher. There are teachers who are in failing schools but whose methods are working. Their students not only fare well statistically on tests but even more importantly, their students are motivated to succeed. These teachers should be the focus of research and encouragement. All too often they are stymied with a blind and dogmatic attachment to the current “flavor of the week” educational policy. Whether it’s Common Core or the Danielson evaluation rubric currently in vogue, (Danielson 2013 Rubric Adapted to New York Department of Education Framework for Teaching Components), the system is riddled with stories of excellent teachers whose spirit is killed by bureaucracy and a one size fits all mentality. These teachers often leave those schools that need them the most.

## **HOLISTIC VIEW OF EDUCATION**

An asset based approach to primary education would include having a holistic view of children's development that includes creative development, cultural development, social development and critical thinking skills. Schools that succeed are those that "define success/achievement as having a social and an academic component. These schools have a vision of students' future as engaged members of society and productive participants in the economy." (de los Reyes et al., 2008)) In addition such a holistic asset based approach would include families and their engagement as assets to the educational environment. One of the key recommendations from the Boston study is "Strengthening relations with Latino families, with the knowledge and input of experienced and proven Latino faculty, shifting from a deficit to a strength based perspective. This requires transforming negative beliefs and perceptions into positive and empowering approaches that build on Latino students academic and social strengths." (de los Reyes et al., 2008)

In addition to the Boston study, schools such as Nuestra Escuela in Puerto Rico and Mayama in Mexico (two schools out of many), are actively working with a holistic, asset based approach and further research on their methods would be useful.



## **PERSONAL JOURNEYS AND REFLECTIONS - OUR STORIES**

### **Why Tell Our Stories?**

As you read the following narratives contributed by members and associates, you will note how some things have changed and some have remained the same. The quality of public school education and access to higher education remains a challenge for most families of color as well as those living in poor communities. The challenges faced by the best of teachers and counselors in areas lacking in economic resources seems to have changed very little. Yet the numbers of young people of color and allies who have claimed a right to education appears not to have waned. Nor have the numbers dropped of those battling the legacy of bias, discrimination and racism in employment and housing. The numbers of incarcerated and those working in low wage jobs in cities that have become unaffordable to most, continues to generate activism. This is particularly reflected in current social movements including the Occupy Wall Street movement and Black Lives Matter as well as the millennial support for a socialist presidential candidate. What brings us full circle in these narratives, is that as Puerto Ricans, as Latinos, as people of color there is the expression of pride, dignity and outrage. Whether flying the Puerto Rican flag, creating poetry, writing plays, fighting the good fight for better schools, to “feeling the Bern,” activists have contributed based on their strengths and talents in ways that make sense in our social media world. These activists reject victimhood. In the 60’s and 70’s we generational activists didn’t have much, but we used what we had and we built more than we thought possible. Like us, the new activists are challenged with reframing the debate and discussion despite the seemingly overwhelming wave of reactionary forces.

## **A Community's Agenda for Change**

**Milga Morales**

Over the last century, many Puerto Rican families who left to find jobs in New York City and elsewhere in the United States, in alliance with African Americans and others, have waged battles with regards to the most basic civil and human rights. The results of these battles, have taken a toll on all involved resulting in the arrests of national and community activists, and have significantly impacted the lives of our children, youth and families. Much has happened in this regard in the Puerto Rican community and precious little is recorded for our Puerto Rican and Latino youth to refer to, to learn from and to be empowered by.

The Puerto Rican community has responded to the invisibility in school curricula of the lives of people of color in general, and Puerto Ricans in particular. We have rejected the de-valuation of the heritage and language of Puerto Rican families. We fought against the lack of inclusion in decisions regarding our communities. Flavored by the sense of Puerto Rican nationalism and patriotism as well as appreciation for our rich and diverse heritage, we have consistently moved forward an agenda for change. It was in this context that we drew attention to the lack of opportunity for high school completion and access to college in the '60s and '70s. We did not know it at the time, but we were framing expectations and making demands that contributed to the on-going struggle for civil and human rights. We took a stand that we were not the problem and railed against the deficit model (without knowing that was its name), when confronting issues that we understood to be related to race, gender, language, economics and colonialism.

On our own, many of us read about the lives of political activists such as Jesus Colon. But we also came with our own familial experiences which included a civic sense of duty to our local Puerto Rican community and other communities of color. We were encouraged when we found political texts, some available only in Spanish and we challenged our lack of literacy in a language we were told not to speak in our public schools. The Spanish texts helped us to explore the conditions of colonized peoples and provided names for our feelings and frustrations of disempowerment and lack of voice. In addition, both Puerto Rican hometown organizations and labor unions provided some of the experiences needed to understand how to organize communities for radical reform. As a daughter of health care worker and hotel worker, both union activists, I was privileged to learn from my parents about political agendas, mobilizations, worker's rights and organizing. I was also the daughter of a father who had Puerto Rico in his "corazon." (heart). As a child I heard the words to "La Borinquena" and "En mi Viejo San Juan" and a song memorializing Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos, every Saturday night in my home. As one might expect, in our generation, the ensuing clamor for de-colonization of our Puerto Rican homeland was also linked to the demands for progressive change in our communities.

It was through the Migration Division of Puerto Rico in New York City, in the late 60's that some of us became more fully aware of the possibilities for influencing change. It's "Great to Be Puerto Rican" was one of my first encounters with "atrevidos." This conference hosted by the Migration Office featured Piri Thomas as a speaker and, we were all exposed to the classic, "Down These Mean Streets". Joaquin Denis, another generational activist and one of the founders of the Puerto Rican Alliance and the Department of Puerto Rican Studies, remembers that Ramito and Myrta Silva, icons in the Puerto Rican community, were also present at this conference. After experiencing very emotional and challenging moments, we felt we had the momentum we needed to continue the work of the elders of the time, albeit from a more radicalized perspective. This perspective developed within the context of the War in Viet Nam, the Civil Rights Agenda, the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, the fight against the sterilization of women in Puerto Rico, the impact of the feminist movement, as well as the rising influence of activist organizations on campuses such as the Young Lords, the Black Panthers, the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, the Dubois Clubs and Students for a Democratic Society. Many of us participated in the founding of The Puerto Rican Alliance, a student group, at Brooklyn College in 1968 and raised many of the community's demands on campus. In different ways, we all contributed to building a movement that stood on the shoulders of our parents and grandparents. They fought for the Voting Rights Act, for Bilingual Ballots, for social justice for the unjustly accused and incarcerated, for a minimum "living" wage, for parity in legislative representation both at the local and national level. They set the groundwork for our activism. The Puerto Rican Alliance continues this activism on the college campus and will soon commemorate the culmination of 50 years of struggle in support of local and national issues of concern to all of us including Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico.

## **The Economics of Education**

### **Cesar Cardona**

My intention in this narrative is to raise awareness regarding the status of Puerto Rican youth particularly with regard to access to higher education. To say that the predicament of Puerto Rican youth is dire and critical does not lend proper description to their educational straits.

I was born in Puerto Rico and from six months of age, raised in New York City. I attended Brooklyn College in 1969 when the percentage of Puerto Rican youth dropping out from High School was approximately 30%. This had an effect on the available pool of students wanting to attend college. While the numbers of Latinos attending college in NYC have slightly improved it is because more Dominican Americans are attending college. The percentage of Puerto Ricans has not increased in any significant regard.

In 1969 the number of Puerto Rican students was approximately 900 in the evening and day programs, of a total enrollment in Brooklyn College of approximately 25,000 students. At that time

Puerto Ricans in NY made up about 12% of the population. If this was reflected at the college, Puerto Ricans would number 3000. I remember walking on campus and when I saw someone who I thought was Puerto Rican I nodded in acknowledgment. I noted that I was not the only Puerto Rican doing that. The sense of isolation and hostility from others on campus was always prevalent.

When I and other students approached the administration about bringing in more Puerto Rican students we were told they were not applying. If this statement was designed to shut us down, it did not work. Four of us from the Puerto Rican student organization on campus went out to our communities and obtained 3,000 applications! Of this number 800 students were accepted into college.

Sometimes the colleges do not have the infrastructure to recruit Puerto Rican and Latino students. All too often they don't have the will. Adding to the problem is that many Puerto Rican students do not envision the likelihood of a college education. At the present time the dropout rate in high school for Puerto Rican youth is 28.2%. From the time I attended college to now, almost half a century later, the dropout rate for Puerto Rican youth has not been addressed or altered in any significant manner. Indeed, the percentage of Puerto Rican youth attending college has decreased. Puerto Rican enrollment at CUNY has gone from 28% in 1999 to 11% in 2010. (Falcon, 2016)

The Community Service Society's policy brief (Treschan, 2010) commented on the challenges posed to a large Latino population expected to play a significant role in this city while facing substantial educational issues. A telling indicator of those challenges is the fact that 41.9% of Puerto Rican males between the ages of 16-25 had not finished high school. It is well known that high school graduates earn significantly more than high school dropouts and college graduates earn significantly more than high school graduates.

In an article entitled The Economic Consequences of Inadequate Education for the Puerto Rican Population in the United States, Clive R. Belfield proffered actual numbers to show how serious the consequences are. Expressed in present values the loss of income as a result of dropping out of high school are staggering. For example: gross lifetime incomes are lower by \$111,390; income tax payments are lower by \$69,130; government expenditures on health are higher by \$45,880; and spending on the criminal justice system is higher by \$25,850. In total each new Puerto Rican high school graduate benefits the taxpayer by \$111,390. From a social perspective the costs are even larger. Each new Puerto Rican high school graduate generates a present social value benefit of \$597,960. Raising the graduation rate to the national norm would yield a social surplus of \$4,106,000,00.

At least one social commentator has said that the religion of America is not Christianity, Judaism, Taoism, Islam, or Buddhism. The religion of America is money. Looking at these figures

people should be running in the street praying for our youth to graduate. It makes sense economically, not to mention morally.

How do we address this issue of disparate treatment and unequal education? How do we nurture dreams of children so they can believe that things are possible for them? All too frequently when I have addressed indifferent kids they pay attention when I tell them I lived in the Van Dyke projects, and they know where that is. Their attention is focused on possibility. "Hey this guy lived like I did and he was able to go to college and become a lawyer." Our role as APREE activists is to restore "why not?" to the vocabulary and dreams of kids.

## **Politics, Power and Professions**

### **Antonio Nieves**

I sometimes see my life as a struggle born of crisis. I was born and raised in Spanish Harlem to a Puerto Rican family: a warm nurturing environment where only Spanish was spoken and music and dance were always part of the culture. At the age of 3 or 4 I was hitching the back of cars down the streets of El Barrio, trying to sneak into the Apollo to see Bambi.

At 5, I was sent to a Catholic orphanage along with my three sisters and brothers where I was told that I was an American and "we do not speak Spanish here." And so I learned to speak "broken" English. The orphanage kept me out of the ghetto where it was so easy to get in trouble. I learned to fear god and how to pray to stave off my doom in hell as I was a sinner. As a young Puerto Rican boy from Harlem, I certainly was. They made me eat soap so I would stop cursing, so I learned to eat soap. I was sure I was going to hell. This fear of religion lasted until I discovered that there were other religions besides my own; an eye opener for me. It made me realize there was a larger world beyond me, including something called science.

At age 11, my mother was able to stabilize the family and I was back home in Brooklyn. When I left the orphanage I had dreams of being a doctor. I can still hear my mother saying "sin educacion, no hay nada" (without education there is nothing). "You are going to be a doctor - not like me - I only went to the third grade." I knew that in order to be a doctor I had to go to college and it's what I thought about all the time. Unfortunately I went to Erasmus High School and my education there didn't prepare me for college at all. I felt I didn't learn anything at Erasmus. I tried very hard to get into science classes but was never allowed to because I was told I didn't have the prerequisites. There was always some obstacle. My guidance counselor asked me what my father did for a living and when I said a carpenter, he said that being a carpenter was an honorable profession; Jesus was a carpenter. He tried to steer me away from academic courses. I finally threatened to drop out of High School if I didn't get the science classes I wanted. I was determined to be a doctor.

I was not political until my last year of high school when Vietnam started and I knew I was not going there. My older brother had become active against the war and in the civil rights movement so I went to my first demonstration against segregation at the Woolworth's department store on Fulton St. in Brooklyn. I never understood until that moment why white people didn't like me until I discovered it was because I had dark skin. So I identified more and more with Black people. I didn't really identify with being Puerto Rican until later. Being Puerto Rican was just something I was. - I lived in a Puerto Rican neighborhood, my friends were Puerto Rican and Black, but I didn't think about it. Looking back I lived in a fog until 18 years old when I became politically active. I got no education in High School but I was still determined to go to college so I applied to 27 colleges and was rejected by all of them. I finally got accepted to Brooklyn College from a special program for poor kids called Equal Opportunity Program. At BC my eyes opened. But I had no idea how to study. I had no idea what my professors were talking about. It felt like everything was thrown at me and I was completely overwhelmed. Add to this, the fact that I did not feel welcome at BC which at that time was 95% white. The racism was an everyday experience. At one point I was a part of student government and at one meeting I said we should run a Black candidate and was told that we couldn't run a Black candidate because he/she would never win.

At that time there was no Puerto Rican Studies Department. But there were a few Puerto Rican students who realized we were miseducated about our Puerto Rican history. I joined Puerto Rican Alliance (PRA) and the Black League of Afro-American Collegiates (BLAC) and eventually became the liaison between both organizations. This was a community I was proud to be a part of. As I became more educated about Puerto Rican history, I went to Oakland California to represent BLAC and PRA at a Black Panther conference. This was a pivotal moment that educated me politically as to my own history. I brought back to BC what we learned in Oakland about how to set up Black Studies and a Puerto Rican Studies Department. And that's what we did at BC. We established the first Puerto Rican Studies Department.

All this time my interest in medicine did not wane. I made it to Howard University pharmacy school. I felt very welcome at Howard, it was a total turnaround from BC where most white students wouldn't talk to me.

I then had the opportunity to go to Cuba in the 70's. After returning from Cuba, I realized that in order to change the world and help my community, I needed a profession where I could impact. Being in medicine for me had the kind of impact I looked for. So after Cuba I dedicated myself to studying. Reading politics helped me learn how to study and by the time I went to Howard my study habits were vastly improved. And so I became a pharmacist and practiced for 30 years. One important life lesson I learned, is that the pursuit of knowledge is powerful, if it's used in the interest of the community.

## **Authority Relations in POC Communities: Repression vs Empowerment**

**Crecensio Joey Morales**

From my elementary school years through high school, I lived in a predominantly Puerto Rican and Black community where poverty, drugs, prejudice of educators and harassment by police were factors that threatened my future academic and professional pursuits. Many of my friends dropped out of school, were incarcerated and struggled with drug addiction. Too many friends died early in life. I was lucky enough to survive the streets of Brooklyn, a minefield of an education system, and the war in Vietnam.

As early as the second day of the second grade, I got my first lesson in educational and racial prejudice. During the lunch break in the school yard, the principal approached me while I was talking with my new friends. Red-faced and in a booming voice that bounced off the school walls, he yelled at me. "This is America and you can't be speaking Spanish!! Only English can be spoken here!!" Immediately, he grabbed my arm and rushed me to his office where he continued his tirade. I was so shocked, I developed a PTSD block to speaking Spanish and a disdain for Puerto Rican culture. That continued until I began a conscious process of self-empowerment by learning the Spanish language and Puerto Rican culture upon my resumption of studies at Brooklyn College after returning from Vietnam. My education and acculturation included a substantial load of the Department of Puerto Rican Studies courses.

In my community, I had many more lessons in authoritarian prejudice and abuse, as a result of harassment by the Police. Frequently, in my neighborhood, the Police practiced an early version of "Stop and Frisk." A squad car and some undercover Police would stop and with guns drawn, they forced us to a line up with our hands up against a wall. They physically searched us and then proceeded to threaten and verbally abuse us without cause or explanation. Moreover, as a young teen, I was a victim of an attempted mugging by a young white man. I defended myself by pushing off the attacker. Immediately, I was grabbed by the arm and restrained by a white police officer. And even though I was well dressed to play with my band that night and the attacker was filthy, the officer accused me of stealing his money. When I showed him that I had my own he said, "Do you get that money from stealing it?" He let the attacker go and threatened to arrest me.

What should I have taken from that? What if on a daily basis you and your friends are constantly made to stand with your hands against the wall, are searched and then threatened with violence and arrest? Fear? Hate? Anger? Is that a desired result of policing and a basis for community cooperation?

To this day, even as a Senior Citizen, I still feel uncomfortable when I see the Police and have the residual apprehensive feelings of imminent persecution which I am aware affects the consciousness of

many Black and Puerto Rican males, both young and old. These experiences with authority figures formed the basis of my perception that authority, as a concept, was inherently evil, oppressive and a tool to exploit and abuse young People of Color (POC). The study by the Vera Institute of Justice, (Fratello, Rengifo, Trone, 2013, p.10) supports that the continuing police practices perpetuate the negative perception of authority in communities of POC.

My mother fought very hard to get me into Brooklyn College despite the fact that I was rejected by every CUNY college. This situation was a result of my mediocre academic record at Boys High School in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn long considered one of the worst academic high schools in NYC. At the time, it was not unusual for young Black and Puerto Rican males to receive an inferior education in what were considered inferior schools in minority communities in New York. My mother, Patria Rodriguez, was a community activist and organizer. She became aware of the SEEK program (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge) which was being implemented for the first time at Brooklyn College. It was one of the first educational opportunity programs at Senior CUNY colleges. She had me apply and I was accepted on a part-time basis with the condition that I take and pass non-credit remedial classes in Math and English.

As result of my participation in SEEK, my activist and leadership role in the 1970's struggle for the self-determination of Puerto Rican Studies at Brooklyn College and consciously overcoming social, educational and authoritarian obstacles, I have succeeded in my personal development and my ability to make positive and lasting contributions to my community. I have had a career in education as Director of Special Services Program at City College, Deputy Director for Programs at ASPIRA of New York, and a Bilingual High School Guidance Counselor.

My studies at Brooklyn College enabled me to obtain communication and analytical skills; the Puerto Ricans Studies courses taught me the history of struggle, achievements and contributions that Puerto Ricans have made in Puerto Rico and the United States. My activism and leadership in the 1970's struggle for the self-determination of the Puerto Rican Studies Department instilled in me a positive sense of pride and confidence; my participation in ASPIRA of New York as a student leader and later as Director of City-wide Programs, a Bilingual Guidance Counselor and then Advisor to ASPIRA Clubs at City College and Long Beach High School, prepared me to empower young people to recognize and reject the impact that abuse of authority played in their lives. Finally, by encouraging participation in ASPIRA clubs, community organizations and the pursuit of academic excellence, I was well prepared to support and empower young people to strive for their educational and career goals to become powerful agents for change and positive role models in their communities and the larger society.



## Personal and Political Transformations

### Joaquín Denis

I asked myself at what point in my youth did I start thinking of myself as a Puerto Rican. An important element in my sense of identity is that I lived in the New York City Housing Projects in the Bronx. The cultural mix in the projects when I was coming up was a little bit of everything, but mostly Blacks and Latinos. I have always known that I was a Puerto Rican but at what point and under what circumstances did I outwardly say to people that I was Puerto Rican? My facial characteristics are clearly African type. I can remember being asked in social settings if I was Puerto Rican. In these situations I would become the focus of attention and I would feel uncomfortable; never knowing how people would react. I often felt that something unpleasant was going to happen. I would try to change the conversation and the focus away from me. Sometimes people wanted to explore my identity. This was often hurtful to me. Latinos wanted me to prove that I was Puerto Rican, by speaking Spanish. They didn't think there were any Black people in Puerto Rico. At this point I knew very little about the island and not many people around me had information about life in Puerto Rico. All we knew was what was printed in the newspapers and what we saw on TV. We were in a knowledge vacuum.

During this time I took on a street name - Joe King. My friends in the Projects who knew my given name said that Joaquin was unfamiliar and too difficult to pronounce and spell. I went with the change because I felt I was being given a name that meant I belonged and I was one of the boys. My goal was to fit in and the name Joaquin raised too many questions.

I do not recall any time in my youth when I joined a group where I was expected to declare that I was Puerto Rican (such as ASPIRA). I was a member of a youth gang and everyone in it were Blacks or/and Latinos. So I assumed that I was accepted as non-Latino Black.

During the years of the military draft, I completed four years in the Navy. It was during this period that my identity became an issue. It was my first encounter with Southern white people who didn't know what a Puerto Rican was but when they looked at me they saw a funny Black person who they thought spoke a funny language. This is when those earlier questions and conflicts really impacted.

It was at Brooklyn College when I started understanding who I was and began to have a sense of being Puerto Rican. It was my exposure to the Puerto Rican Studies Department courses that gave me the map of life and challenged me to define my life's journey. Deciding to go to Brooklyn College was based on an encounter I had with a group of Brooklyn College students at a three day seminar that I attended. The seminar was sponsored by Joseph Monserrat, Director of the New York City Migration Division of Puerto Rico. The seminar was titled "It's Great to Be Puerto Rican." I had been recently

discharged from the U.S. Navy and as a result I had traveled extensively. I had quite an attitude and thought I had seen it all. So in 1968, I attended the seminar with curiosity and skepticism about what these academics could teach me.

Until this seminar, I had not considered the extent of the race issue within the Puerto Rican community. During one of the workshops, I bitterly accused all white Puerto Ricans of being unaware of Black issues. My comment was countered by a white Puerto Rican woman who said that I didn't know what it was like to deal with white America as a white Puerto Rican. She said it was painful for her to not be recognized as a Puerto Rican. The feeling of rejection and her explanation of her experience was painful to hear.

I had never been in a place where so many dreams were shared. Hearing this side of the Puerto Rican identity issue was amazing. It was also at this seminar where I first heard a Puerto Rican say that he was going to be a doctor and was going to go to medical school. I had to step back and rethink everything I ever believed about myself and my Puerto Rican identity. The following year 1969, I enrolled in Brooklyn College with all the confidence that I was going to learn a lot from these students who rattled my thinking.

And I changed my name back to Joaquin.

The first major political issue I encountered was the struggle to give Puerto Rican Studies courses equal academic standing at Brooklyn College. I quickly realized, that this fight required direct student involvement. I was invited to volunteer at the office of the Puerto Rican Studies Department and I gladly signed up. When I arrived and opened the door I saw all these students working like bees, making signs, writing announcements, planning meetings and copying leaflets. The issue to be addressed was the selection of the Director of the SEEK Program. The students wanted a say in the selection. At that time SEEK was a major conduit for Black and Hispanic students. The Puerto Rican and Black student organizations formed a coalition to lobby for Dr. Carlos Russell who I knew as an activist with the Poor Peoples Campaign in Washington DC. Ultimately Dr. Russell was selected, confirming my new-found knowledge of the importance of political activism.

I became actively involved with the Puerto Rican Alliance where for the next three years we organized demonstrations, engaged in debates and standoffs with the administration but most importantly we had fun while learning. By the time I graduated, I was armed with the knowledge of history, economics, psychology, within the context of how the Puerto Rican community is impacted. I knew I was a different person from the Navy sailor discharged from military service.

## VOICES OF MILLENNIALS

### Brooklyn College Puerto Rican and Latino Studies: A Place for Empowerment

Gisely Colón López

Growing up I knew I wanted to be an educator. Like most of the Puerto Rican women in my family I wanted to be an elementary school teacher. After my first couple of years in college, I began to pursue a degree in bilingual and special education. My experience in the Puerto Rican and Latino Studies (PRLS) department at Brooklyn College in New York City intensified this interest, and also birthed a deeper, more critical desire to pursue more a research oriented career. My interest in becoming a social justice oriented and community engaged educator-advocate intensified as I progressed through their bilingual education program. I was learning concepts, theories, and practical skills to support and nourish the next generation of leaders, community members, and thinkers that would be present in my future classrooms. Through community events, collaborations, and various student internships, alongside the nurturing engagement of the PRLS professors and staff, I underwent a transformational, and empowering experience that continues to motivate me today.

After entering a Masters Program outside of New York City and encountering the reality of the so called *ivory towers*, I began to use my experience in PRLS as a form of empowerment that continued to guide my journey. As a terminal Master's degree student, the skill set that I gained through the extracurricular activities and research programs available through PRLS at Brooklyn College, enabled me to take on different opportunities at my new university, that were generally only available to those in doctoral programs. I was selected as a student to join the inaugural cohort for the University's Graduate Student in Engaged Scholarship Fellowship. I was also able to use my PRLS class notes, and readings to prepare for lectures as part of my teaching responsibilities. I embodied and channeled the energy I knew belonged to PRLS professors using a critical and Socratic approach throughout my them, emulating what I learned in PRLS.

My engagement with youth in student activities at my new institution and as a volunteer with a local high school and CBOs, originated from the community activist approach I was exposed to within the PRLS department. My commitment to giving back, stems from my participation in the department, but also from my interactions with the members of APREE. In conducting preliminary research as part of my Master's program, I have come to yet another painful realization that most, if not all, of the Puerto Rican students I have spoken with in the New England area are not familiar with their own Puerto Rican history. Some of the elementary school aged students are keenly aware of the stereotypes against them and their families, as Puerto Ricans, but none have been taught their history, which would

empower them and assist them in breaking free from the chains of such stereotypes, misconceptions and prejudices against them. My thesis focuses on the creation of a digital humanities project centered on Puerto Rican history and culture with the creation of culturally sustaining resources for educators and their links to student identity development. As I continue to embark on my own projects now, I keep PRLS and APREE at heart, constantly making sure I am grounded within the same objectives of youth empowerment, cultural sustainability, mentorship, and space of knowledge. I use the ample opportunities PRLS and Brooklyn College- CUNY made available to me for growth as a scholar in training to pursue doctoral studies in the next phase of my career.

As I move closer to accomplishing my goals, PRLS remains the infrastructure of my foundation, grounding me and reminding me of the importance of the intersectionalities within education, community involvement and activism, mentorship/giving back, and the power of self-liberation through critical consciousness awakening. It would be a dream come true, to be able to one day come back to PRLS and assist in the leadership of the department, contributing to its success and growth.

## **Marketer to Educator**

### **Jeanette Echeverri**

My name is Jeannette Echeverri. Currently, I am an ESL Elementary School teacher/ Grade Leader, in the Sunset Park, Brooklyn community where I was born and raised. My parents are first generation Puerto Ricans; to whom I refer as “Mami” y “Papi”. I received my Bachelor’s Degree from Brooklyn College in Childhood Elementary/Bilingual Teaching. My Master’s degree is in TESOL, which I received at NYU.

Before deciding to pursue a career in teaching, I pursued a career in Marketing and Promotions. My first opportunity was working with an independent record label at the time called RMM (Ralph Mercado Music). I eventually was hired by Universal Music Group and worked for Universal Latino. After a year or so, I was hired by Island Def jam Music Group and later Virgin Records. How is this relevant? Working in the industry made me realize that I was not content with my occupation, it was not self-fulfilling. I wanted to be part of something bigger; something that would allow me to touch lives in a large Hispanic Community.

When I began to pursue my career change, Brooklyn College stood out the most. It stood out to me because of its Puerto Rican and Latin Studies Department. Little did I know that I was going to be so empowered when I graduated from Brooklyn College. Before PRLS, I did not appreciate being Puerto Rican. The professors that I had the honor of learning from, impacted my life in such a way that I felt like a reborn Latina. I realized that all these years my parents have kept the Puerto Rican culture

and traditions alive. I now understood assimilation, acculturation, transculturation. I now understood my mission as an educator. I now understood my value. I now understood me.

It has been almost 10 years since I have started teaching in my community. In those 10 years I have learned so much about myself through my students and their personal family struggles. I have made it my mission to empower Hispanic students, which has now transitioned into immigrant students of all ethnicities. Because of PRLS, I continue pursuing positions in my school where I can be a voice, an advocate for immigrant families. Because of the PRLS family, I continue seeking out Hispanic activists and hence APREE is now my family. Pa'Lante siempre!

## **APREE PERSPECTIVES ON POLICY ISSUES**

It is hoped that the stories and personal journeys in the previous section made the struggles faced by these very real grass roots activists, alive and tangible. In addition we hope that the stories provide a socio-historical context for the various struggles faced by our communities. These stories reflect the impact we can make when we focus on our assets as a community. In the following section, we hear from those working, or engaged in research, in a variety of educational contexts. We focus on the past and current challenges and offer models or examples of best practices that may be further reviewed and, possibly, adopted or re-visited in some cases, by educators and educational institutions. The topics addressed here include “Open Admissions”, Bilingualism, Mentoring and Cultural Approaches to Pedagogy. While these areas are not new to the discourse on educational equity, APREE considers that they are critical components and will continue to be subjects for discussion and debate.

### **Access to Education**

**Esther Farmer**

The issue of access to education is now in the news due to the 2016 presidential campaign and the frustration of working class families confronted with the non-affordability of college or inundated with student loan debt. For the Puerto Rican community this is a particularly salient issue given that nationally, 33% of Puerto Ricans live below the poverty line. (Reyes, 2012, p. 7). There are some who say that a free college education is “not a realistic” policy for the US. However we seem to have forgotten the time in the early 1970’s where as a result of intense social activism, led by the African American and Puerto Rican community, NYC implemented free and open college access: proving that with political will, it can be done.

In 1970 NYC implemented an Open Admissions policy which lasted for seven years. Puerto Rican students and their allies in the community made a pivotal contribution to fighting for Open Admissions which made college free and accessible to all High School students in the city. This struggle was often intense. For almost a year there were daily demonstrations, rallies, newspaper articles, sit-ins, and civil disobedience. After Open Admissions was won, CUNY reached the goal of making its colleges reflect what NYC high schools looked like. Before the implementation of Open Admissions the composition of CUNY undergraduates was 14.8% Black, 4% Puerto Rican and 77.4% White. After open admissions the size of the CUNY freshman class grew by 75%, and the number of Black and Hispanic enrollees quadrupled at the system’s four-year colleges (Schmidt et al., 1999).

## **The Impact of the Failure of Primary Education on CUNY**

Some of the literature implies that Open Admissions was responsible for the lowering of standards at CUNY. But the issue is not open admissions (which is really increased access). The culprit here, is the poor quality of primary education. It must be remembered that CUNY has relied on NYC public schools for their student body. If education in the public schools fails to educate, then CUNY will get students who are unprepared. It is to be noted that the student/activists involved in fighting for open admissions, included in their demands a program of remediation to address the poor quality of their education. For example, Brooklyn College activists in 1970 stated in one of their 19 demands, that there be free tutorial programs and basic skills courses instituted so that students can fulfill their scholastic potential. This was in recognition of the fact that “Black and Puerto Rican students are given a decadent education that cannot fulfill the academic requirements.” Today almost 50 years later, 75% of students entering CUNY need remedial help. (Reyes, 2012, p.11)

## **The Impact of Open Admissions**

After the re-institution of tuition in 1976, the overall population at all CUNY colleges decreased from 270,000 to 220,000. At Brooklyn College it decreased almost half, from 35,400 to 17,567. The trustees of CUNY knew that minority students would be hurt the most from tuition reinstatement but the periodic financial crisis of the city and the refusal of the powers-that-be to help CUNY survive the crisis, led to the end of the open admissions experiment. (Schmidt et al., 1999).

In the book *Changing the Odds: Open Admissions and the Life Chances of the Disadvantaged*, David Lavin and David Hyllegard (1996) argue that from every perspective, open admissions was a success: “graduation rates in low-income and minority communities soared; the students who participated in the program earned much more than those who did not; and many of the negative impacts of cumulative disadvantage were overcome. The authors conclude that all these benefits came without sacrificing academic standards.” (Lavin & Hyllegard, 1996, p.1)

To those that say that free and open access to higher education is impossible we would say that the issue is not lack of realism but lack of political will. If policymakers make college access a priority it can become one.

## **No More Doormats! Bilingualism Matters**

**Antonio Nadal**

An often stated ethos about the U.S. is that it is a nation of immigrants representing the ethnicities, races, nationalities and religious backgrounds of the entire world, melded together to achieve the American “melting pot” under a common language and a derivative common American culture. This ideal belies a history of racial, national, linguistic, religious and ethnic conflict that is more

characteristic of U.S. development and civilization since its founding. The linguistically diverse congregational communities that lived in contiguous regions with their English speaking counterparts, for example, in the early colonial history of the country, insisted on passing on their religious legacy by establishing school instruction in their native language, i.e., German, Spanish and French. The geographical proximity and steady immigration from South and Central America, as well as Mexico and the Spanish speaking Caribbean, have gradually shaped the U.S. as unofficially bilingual and multicultural. Add to this the illegal invasion and colonization of Puerto Rico and the failed attempt to linguistically Anglicize and “Americanize” the island.

Presently, the Latin@ or Hispanic population of the U.S surpasses 55 million. Two thirds is of Mexican origin. The remaining third is mainly Puerto Rican, Central and South American, with growing segments of Dominicans and Cubans. The constant renewal of first generation Hispanics from Mexico, Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean, in contrast to earlier Western and Eastern European diasporas whose numbers are dwindling, is posing an enormous challenge to large, urban educational districts that are not pedagogically nor financially supported by state budgets. The progressive reaction to address the educational genocide of our children with the advent of federally funded bilingual and English as a second language programs in the 1960’s was met by a well-orchestrated and funded, nativist reaction whose mantra was to establish “English Only” programs and de-fund federally mandated and Supreme Court supported language programs aimed at “creating educational remedies” for language minority children. Whereas middle and upper class white Americans support the cognitive benefit of raising their children bilingually, they are not so generous in expending their tax dollars in the provision of bilingual education for poor and first generation immigrant children. Some states, notably California, have adopted propositions and referenda to eliminate bilingual programs in favor of immersion (sink or swim) English language instruction, devoid of any support for the child’s native language. As in the past, this has led to a progressive lack of academic achievement and high drop-out rates, particularly for adolescent Latinos(as) in the middle and high school grades.

A bright spot in this brief, albeit gloomy, educational landscape is the advent of bilingual programs stressing the dual language concept. In this model, half of the classroom population is composed of children who are English proficient, with the other half who are limited English proficient and speak (and perhaps write) the native language of their ethnic community. In most programs, the native foreign language is Spanish, although other languages, such as Chinese and French, have been featured. The objective, through carefully planned instruction and the use of language acquisition techniques and approaches in and outside the classroom, is for children to acquire and learn both languages as they proceed in the primary grades of K-6. The end process is to create functional bilinguals in the interaction and learning of both cohorts within an integrated classroom.



Reflecting on my own experience, coming from a first generation Puerto Rican migrant family in the early 1950's, there was never a question about the importance of retaining our native Spanish language as new residents of the Williamsburg area of Brooklyn. The prevailing notion of that community was to return to Puerto Rico once we had improved our economic wherewithal in the U.S. to be able to buy "la casita" in Puerto Rico and escape from "el frío" (the coldness) of New York. Meanwhile, the drama of settlement and adaptation played out in the alienating environment of the school system, where Puerto Rican children were to disown their cultural and linguistic heritage and follow the route of earlier European immigrants towards melding into the American melting pot. Not surprisingly, the disconnect between the home environment, the community and the school led to academic non-achievement, truancy and low self-esteem. In the absence of bilingual education programs, I entered the primary grades as a predominantly Spanish speaking six year old. My three older sisters, already in late teenage years, went to work in factory sweatshops. Ironically, my father, a retired school teacher who held teaching licenses in Spanish and English from the University of Puerto Rico, was denied a New York City common branches license because he had an accent in his spoken English. Already in his early sixties and virtually unemployable, he became the private tutor and unofficial bilingual teacher of his only male child. This was, in large measure, my motivation to study and become proficient in the Spanish, French, and English languages in my professional career. Through my research and teaching of high school, college undergraduate and graduate students, I developed an increasing awareness of the value of high quality and well administered bilingual programs which treated first and second language learning and acquisition with respect for the learner, at any level of the educational ladder. The socio-cultural and linguistic background of the learner deserves merit in the school situation if the teacher envisions all language acquisition as an "additive" and an asset rather than a "subtractive" process.

## **APREE MENTORING AS A TOOL FOR YOUTH AT RISK**

**Anselma Rodríguez**

My parents, while being very supportive, did not have any idea of what school was like in this country. In addition, their knowledge of English was limited. I was fortunate that upon arriving to the United States I had an aunt who supported and mentored me. I needed guidance on how to apply to college and what to expect from college life. Once I gained admission to college, I was fortunate to have two college mentors assigned to help me. At its orientation event, the College's Equal Opportunity Program assigned a junior and a sophomore student to guide me in the day-to-day activities of college life. Later, I was introduced to the Puerto Rican Department faculty and staff. At the department, there was an informal mentoring process that helped many of us, who were, in most cases, first generation Latino and Latina immigrants or migrants. I do not think that I nor the other Latino students would have made it to graduation without the guidance provided by the faculty and staff of the Puerto Rican Studies Department (now Puerto Rican and Latino Studies, PRLS). I was made to feel that I belonged in college. The Puerto Rican and Latino Studies Department was that safe space and place on campus where we felt welcomed and protected from what we thought was a hostile environment to new generations of students of color.

### **Extended Mentoring**

Like my family, many other immigrant families from underrepresented groups are supportive of their children obtaining a higher education, but they do not know what it takes to help them succeed, especially at the college level. A family needs to be provided with opportunities to understand the importance of mentoring, as it were, if it is going to give effective support to the children. The Department of Education recognizes that involving parents in mentoring programs has a positive impact on the success of programs. Getting parents involved in the process augments the positive effect of mentoring. (U.S. Department of Education Mentoring Resource Center, 2005). There is also the concept of "Mentor Families" being explored as a method of providing a network of positive role models and relationships for young people (Yoviene, 2014). This model groups familial mentors and their mentees to provide additional support. This is important because, as mentioned above, there are times when parents, although willing, are not available and other relatives are then able to provide mentorship. By having a "mentor family", more resources are available to the mentee. It is like having an extended family to be there to help.

Clearly, mentoring is not a "one size fits all" solution and there are various effective models. However, a mentoring relationship should offer a structured relationship between young people and caring adults who offer guidance, support and encouragement. Another type of mentoring is that of peer mentoring, as mentioned above, and which occurs among people in the same age group. The

research shows that when it comes to education the Big Brothers, Big sisters Community based mentoring programs work best. There is evidence that some residential programs have had a positive effect in getting students a high school diploma or GED and enrollment in college courses (Lawner, Beltz, & Moore, 2013). According to a study made in 2015, 76 % of youth at risk are more likely to aspire to go to college, as opposed to 56% at-risk youth without a mentor (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014). Methods focused on social skills and on education appear to be the most effective and at-risk youth respond well to community-based programs that last more than one year.

## NEW PEDAGOGIES - THE PRACTICE OF CULTURAL APPROACHES TO EDUCATION

**Tere Martínez**

In my professional world, theater and teaching are always intertwined. My plays are about Puerto Rican identity and our social and political struggles both in the US and the island. My passion for playwriting comes from a strong desire to educate audiences about these issues. For the past thirty years, I have been teaching in New York City public schools and colleges. And it never fails, when I engage students through drama; that's when most of the learning happens. Theater is the perfect vehicle for active learning. By its very nature, it allows students to experience self-discovery and social awareness while improving their academic skills.

Aristotle believed theater is the highest form of art and the perfect vehicle to learn the "truth." But he did not mean just learning facts from a theatrical experience. Instead, he was fascinated by the idea of the audience relating to a character and through that character's journey discovering something relevant about their own lives.

In 2011, I designed and implemented The Antonia Pantoja Project at Hostos Community College. The aim of the project was to engage students in community organizing and service. Research has proven that when students get involved, they perform better in school. So I decided to use Puerto Rican community leader Antonia Pantoja as an example to inspire the students. The project had three components. First, a play about her life and work. Then after seeing the play production, drama in education workshops were conducted in classrooms. These workshops recreated community organizing meetings, giving students the opportunity to experience what it is like to be a leader. And finally, a service learning component was developed based on students' ideas during these workshops.

The Antonia Pantoja Project is an example of how theater works as a teaching tool in the following ways:

*Self-discovery:* Watching a play about a Puerto Rican, gay woman who had to overcome so many obstacles when she first moved to New York was very empowering for Hostos' students. Many of the students involved were immigrants or first generation Americans who had struggled with race and socio-economic discrimination. To see how Antonia Pantoja was capable of creating change in her community forced them to think about their own purpose in life. When they were asked in the follow up workshops to come up with the most pressing issues affecting their communities and to create an action plan, many of them experienced for the first time how their ideas could make a difference. The excitement was contagious. All of a sudden, they realized they did not have to wait for anyone to start changing things. Having this sense of purpose is key for students to succeed academically, especially

minority students. Through the process, many of the participants discovered the strength in being different. Being bilingual and knowing how to navigate between the worlds of more than one culture are assets in today's diverse society.

*Social Awareness:* Theater is a team effort. Life is a team effort. No one can survive or create change alone. One of the biggest concerns for educators today is the impact of technology on human behavior and development. Smart phones, the Internet and social media are increasingly isolating our younger generations. Educators need to make classrooms a place for students to interact with each other and develop social skills. Recent studies show that students do not appreciate when instructors completely rely on technology for teaching. That is what students do in their private lives. They watch videos, play video games, find all kinds of information on line and connect with friends and family through social media. The classroom is where they want to learn by physically interacting with other people. It is the place where they can talk and listen while making eye contact and watching how others react. In order to develop emotionally and psychologically strong individuals, we must make students aware of each other's needs.

The Antonia Pantoja Project brought about four hundred students together for every performance. Together they experienced this extraordinary woman's journey, making them think about their own lives. At the end of each performance, students engaged in productive conversations about what they had just seen and made connections to their own experiences.

The theater workshops conducted in classrooms offered them the opportunity to listen to other classmates' ideas. A community organizing meeting became the perfect platform for them to actively share, propose and question these ideas. On top of that, cultural differences came into place. A Latino student did not necessarily have the same concerns as an African-American. They were forced to collectively address the differences and come up with solutions that would satisfy the whole team. And that is life.

*Academic Skills:* Theater in education provides teachers with a unique opportunity to incorporate a variety of academic skills within one lesson. Drama involves critical thinking, creativity, writing, reading, problem solving and time management skills among others. It is our duty as educators to develop critical thinkers if we want to see a more just society. When students do improvisations addressing different issues, they have to be able to think on their feet. When the students play the roles of people with different points of view, they are forced to think out of the box and get out of their comfort zone. As a result, when they are asked to write about these issues, they see them under a completely different light. Now all points of view are taken into consideration leading to stronger conclusions.

The Antonia Pantoja Project motivated thousands of students to read her autobiography: *Memoir of a Visionary*. She became the subject of countless assignments and papers written by students at Hostos Community College. Students also felt motivated to research and write about other community leaders from all over the world. That's real learning.

No doubt Aristotle was right. Theater is the highest form of art. And without question, one of the most powerful teaching tools.

## CONCLUSION

When we walk around Brooklyn College (CUNY) today we see a very different campus than we saw in 1970. Where once the student body was 95% white, today we see a totally diverse and inclusive campus and a truer reflection of the city. This change did not just happen. We fought for it. The 60s and 70's were a time where young people of diverse backgrounds were engaged politically and through political education, we ceased to be victims of our environment and became environment changers. If we were told no Puerto Ricans were applying to college, we went out and organized them and helped them to apply. If we were told we could not be doctors or lawyers we went out and became doctors and lawyers. We had dreams and our politics gave us some tools to refute the authoritarian notion that we were the "problema" (problem). We insisted on being educated and we would not give up so we could give back to our community.

Many members of APREE were some of the original student and community activists who made Open Admissions happen. They were also the founders of PRA (Puerto Rican Alliance at Brooklyn College) and created one of the first college Puerto Rican Studies Departments in the country. Open admissions was one of the social gains that were won as a consequence of our activism. We who are writing this now, have all advanced and grown enormously from being involved in that struggle. Unfortunately, that very significant historical period is given short shrift in the history books. It is important to us that young people in our community know the history and know how important the Puerto Rican community was to creating that history.

In the 80's with the so-called Reagan revolution we saw a pulling back of many of the gains we won, such as open admissions, free and open access to college and bilingual education programs. We also witnessed the destruction of young people's access, especially young people of color, to political education. The outright destruction of the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords and a so-called war on drugs incarcerating thousands, was no accident. It was a reaction to our community's empowerment. As racism, sexism and xenophobia rear its ugly head, we are committed to continuing to empower our community.

Our policy analysis on education urges that we reimagine and reframe traditional approaches that have offered simple solutions that have not worked. We promote an asset based model that requires a different mindset regarding our youth and their education. This asset based approach includes the importance of controlling the narrative relative to our stories and experiences. Only if we control the narrative can our history be useful to new generations. We also advocate for a college admissions policy that provides access to higher education and sustains financial support for our youth and others who aspire to obtain a college degree. We support a true dual-language (bilingual) approach to childhood education. We advocate for mentoring of our young community members and believe that

the involvement of families and community is a critical aspect of educational success. We also describe (and offer examples) of how cultural approaches to education are one of the most powerful teaching and learning tools. Finally, we have all been enriched by relevant ethnic studies curricula that makes use of our rich cultural and political history.

Our personal reflections, stories and histories attempt to make palpable the social and historical context we operated from. Our stories also demonstrate how we changed some things and 50 years later we can clearly see the things we did not change. We are no longer ashamed to live in El Barrio but now we can't afford to live there. We can eat anywhere we like, but people of color are still harassed and, sometimes, worse by the police. There are more Latinos in college yet the High School dropout rate for Puerto Ricans is still almost the same. It is of deep concern to us that 50 years later, many young people in our community don't think that college is in the realm of possibility. In the 60's and 70's we also didn't think college was possible. But we had dreams and we became activists, to make something happen with our dreams. We want young people to be empowered by our stories and our history so that they can live their dreams.

Today we see many new and creative social movements emerging. From Black Lives Matter, to Occupy Wall St., to Food Justice and the Indigenous struggles to save and reclaim land and water, we in APREE are moralized by the new activism we see in young people. We were deeply affected and motivated by the history of struggle that came before us. We want young people to know our history so they can use it to motivate their struggles and continue to create and advance their own movements.



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