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## When Small Is Beautiful

Summer 2005

**An interview with Héctor Calderón by Catherine Capellaro**

*El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice in Brooklyn, New York, is an example of how education and community organizing can both serve the needs of a neighborhood. The academy, located in the Williamsburg neighborhood, serves 160 students, 80 percent of whom are Latino.*

*The school shares a mission with the community organization that created it: to nurture leadership for peace and justice. Students participate in an integrated curriculum where they take elective arts courses that are based on an overriding school-wide theme. Themes at the academy have included asthma, sugar, biodiversity, technology, and empowerment.*

*Luis Garden Acosta and a group of community activists who were concerned about high levels of poverty and violence in Williamsburg founded the organization called El Puente in 1982. El Puente, which means "the bridge" in Spanish, bridges the arts, health, environment, and education.*

*El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice was one of 40 schools founded in a five-year period by grants from the New Visions Foundation when Joseph Fernandez was chancellor. Fernandez invited unions, parents, and community groups to start public schools.*

*Héctor Calderón, principal at El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, says he was deeply influenced by the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and by students who were frustrated by education that seemed removed from their daily lives. He says his involvement with El Puente has helped him realize his vision for creating a kind of education that could help students "get the most out of school and out of life."*

*Despite the fact that 59 percent of Williamsburg's kids live below the poverty line and 90 percent of El Puente's students are eligible for free and reduced-price school lunches, 80 percent of them graduated in four years in 2001.*

*Calderón spoke recently with Catherine Capellaro, managing editor of Rethinking Schools.*

**Q: How did El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice come to be?**

**A:** El Puente as a leadership center has been around since 1982. But in 1993 we had the unique opportunity to envision what a school could look like. We had been successful in developing training for young people to become leaders in peace and justice. The heart of our mission is to inspire and nurture leadership. Kids did activities here: dancing, mural painting, or doing community health and environment internships. We engaged young people in a dialogue about this kind of life, this way of being. We were coming from the



Héctor Calderón, principal at El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice.  
Photo: Joe Matunis

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perspective of potential, rather than deficit. In most organizations, young people have to have a problem: They're drug addicts, or pregnant teens, or they have to identify themselves as something of a problem to get help. We wanted to shift that perspective and wanted to say, "OK, let's talk about your issues from the perspective of where you want to go, from the perspective of your potential."

There's an old saying that goes, "It takes a village to raise a child." We said, if it takes a village to raise a child, why not help raise the village? That was the mission that Luis Garden Acosta along with Frances Lucerna, two of the co-founders of El Puente, the organization, decided to embark upon. We took a lot of the ideas we had developed in the leadership center (the after-school program) to the academy. We tried to create a seamless program that would start at 8:00 in the morning and end at 8:00 at night.

**Q: How does the school develop leaders for peace and justice?**

**A:** There's a four-year vision. When we create our curriculum, the fundamental question that we try to answer is "Who am I?" So all curricula in the ninth grade has that as a central theme. In global studies, in English, in math, in science, they all are trying to figure out who they are. For example, if I'm a history teacher, then you understand yourself historically, culturally. In English, we look at literature that deals with questions of identity. We read a lot of books, from *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas, to *Bodega Dreams*, to *Drown* by Juno Diaz, coming of age stories that young people can identify with because the experiences resemble their own. There is study in science of self, which is biology, where they discover themselves as biological beings. They study life from conception to development and life around them. In math, you're also writing your personal narratives and experiences with mathematics. How have you experienced math?

**Q: This must take an enormous amount of coordination among teachers. How do you pull it all together?**

**A:** There were three things that we realized early on, three conceptual frameworks or tenets that we abide by. One was that disciplines came out of the needs and experiences of people. Whether you're teaching math, science, history, language — all of them were created because there were real community needs. We say that if disciplines came out of the needs and experiences of people, why are we separating community or community organizing from school?

The second tenet is that knowledge in its natural state is holistic. In most schools, you learn math here, you learn English here, you learn history here. It loses the synergy between the disciplines. How do they speak to each other? That translates into questions from young people, like "Why are we doing this?" "How is this connected to what I'm learning in history?" So kids might be doing essays in English, for example, and we give them an essay in history and they're like "Whoa, why are we doing this here?" That's because there's a loss of those connections. There are larger connections at the conceptual level, like how the theme of identity goes through all the subject areas. Young people begin to see how each of the disciplines speak to it.

The last tenet is the Freireian idea of education for liberation. By liberation we mean the struggle to become fully human. We say that because at some level we are born fully human, but because of dehumanizing conditions — particularly for young people of color — they experience a lack of affordable housing, lack of health care, lack of access to good education, to things we need to help us develop in a way that allows us to become fully human. That struggle is a struggle for liberation. And I think schools have a profound obligation and duty to really allow young people to become fully developed and nurtured, to become the best they can be.

**Q: What does that look like in practice?**

**A:** One example is the sugar project, which began in 1996 and 1997. We were looking at trying to create an integrated arts project. It's a way of really infusing the arts throughout the curriculum and at the same time letting the disciplines speak to community issues, particularly because of the history of Williamsburg, where Domino Sugar is four or five blocks away from the school. At one point Domino Sugar distributed 50 percent of the United States' sugar. It was refined right at this plant. Many of the parents of the young people who came here worked at some point or another at Domino Sugar. We wanted to take



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the issue of sugar and look at it as a collaboration between community artists, organizers, academy facilitators, as a way of integrating language arts, history, government, visual arts, dance, and music. We looked at the history of sugar and how it came from Europe and the history of slavery — to really create something rich and profound as a subject of study.



Student mural painters from El Puente.  
Photo: Joe Matunis

We looked at the implications of sugar. If I was a chemistry teacher, I was looking at the composition of sugar and the chemical structures that make up sugar. History teachers looked at the history of slavery in the sugar plantations in the Caribbean and throughout the South. The health class looked at the effects of sugar, particularly in the crisis of obesity. The economics teacher was looking at the labor of sugar: the Domino sugar factory and their use of labor in this country, the wages that people get paid, and who got to work there. Students did a lot of oral history projects with former Domino workers.

All these ideas and projects culminated in an outdoor performance at our community garden where we recreated a lot of these things, the history of sugar, the effects of sugar. It became a carnival-like procession complete with stilt-walkers, performed through the streets of the community. The whole community came out and really just embraced the project. It was a great way of bridging the community and the work that we were doing. All the integrated arts projects have that as a final component.

**Q: What is the current theme at El Puente Academy?**

**A:** This year the project is health. As part of that we're looking at Radiac Research Corporation. Radiac is a low-level nuclear waste disposal plant, the only one in New York State — a block away from the school. If anything were to ever happen in that place, it would release a toxic cloud that would engulf all of Williamsburg and parts of lower Manhattan. We want to stop the permit this year for Radiac operating the plant on the waterfront.

Williamsburg reads like a "Who's Who of Environmental Hazards." We have the Williamsburg Bridge, we have the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, where cars are constantly emitting carbon monoxide into the air. We also have a nuclear plant right here. Every year, one project we do is to measure the level of particulates, and students look at the health effects of these particulates.

We also have one of the biggest underground oil spills, bigger than the Exxon Valdez. It's still spilling; they can't stop it; it's underground and it's been ongoing. We are part of what they call "the lead belt" and the "the asthma belt."

Asthma is a huge issue in this community. Through the Community Health and Environment Group, which is an organizing arm of El Puente, our students are doing surveys of the level of asthma in this community. We count within a 10-block radius and identify many families as having asthma. As part of the work, we try to provide extra services to those families. Biology takes on another dimension for our students when they're studying the respiratory system and they are looking at asthma and how it affects that population.

One of the things that the health coordinator at El Puente did was help students look at the Dominican and Puerto Rican populations that live primarily in the south side of Williamsburg. We found out that there is a higher incidence of asthma in Puerto Ricans. Then we tried to find out why that was. We looked at natural remedies that Dominicans use that may not be as prevalent in the Puerto Rican population. We had a whole presentation of this and it was really fascinating. That report was published in a health journal. It was really the first time that a community-based organization's work was actually published in a medical journal. This is what we mean by community knowledge, really engaging in this kind of work that we feel is important.

**Q: How are themes developed, proposed, or selected?**

**A:** Usually we bring together a lot of people, a team of stakeholders who are thinking about different things. It's usually co-facilitators, community-based organization folks. We come together in a room and we throw out ideas. It's a gestation process. And then we pick a theme based on our conversation. This year it was really, really interesting. We had a more community-based organization piece where we got all the communities of El Puente: the academy; the community organization; the Beacon program, which deals with *Puentitos* (ages 7-12); and Bushwick Center. Bushwick is a community next door to Williamsburg. We all came together and there were three questions: What do you think is the greatest issue affecting our communities? Which issue are you personally invested in? What is the issue you feel you have the

greatest capacity to influence?

For example, the issue I felt was facing our community is gentrification. Personally, I was invested in the issue of police brutality. And, lastly, I think the greatest place where the public can influence and really change things is the environment. I think there were enough of those common answers around, and that's how we chose the idea of the health/environment theme.

Once the theme is chosen, a group of facilitators/artists begins to brainstorm different angles and takes on the issue. Classes are developed. We have what we call educational options. A lot of those classes directly speak to the integrated arts project. The design team really is the glue that keeps all the different things together. They decide what the culminating piece will look like and, ultimately, they will keep the curriculum tight and together so that everybody is on board with the work that we're trying to do.

**Q: How does the size of El Puente contribute to being able to implement curriculum like you're describing?**

**A:** Size is definitely a key. On one level, it's great that I can go to any of my students. I know their names, who they are, where they live, the families they come from. I know something about what they're personally invested in. If you're putting a curriculum forward that deals with community, one of the key factors for any organizer is to know your community. What are they invested in? What are their self-interests? Being small allows us to really create the kind of close-knit communities that we have. It allows us to really serve the interests of our young people.

If we were larger, we could do this kind of work, but it would clearly be more difficult to be as attuned as we are to our young people. Size really matters — and it matters because I can go to staff and coordinate in ways that if I had a larger staff would be much harder. We also have a whole complementary group of people that are honorary staff people who are part of the community-based organization. They also integrate with us in the work that we do.

**Q: How tied to the standards and Regents does El Puente have to be?**

**A:** The work that we do is very rigorous and it hits a lot of the standards that are put out there for subject areas. For example, in an economics class, students are looking at lending practices of banks in our neighborhood. They talk about redlining. That project became a part of creating a report in which we disaggregated data by race, class, gender, and geography and looked at the disparity in lending practices. They took that to the city council. I think all of that requires rigorous learning. We give Regents, but for me, it's not the only gauge. We also do portfolio assessments in which we tie those assessments closer to the curriculum that we're teaching. So students have to take all the Regents that they would have to take at any other school. They also have to pass at a level of competence in each of six portfolios.

**Q: How do you define "rigor"?**

**A:** If you can really find answers to fundamental problems that are plaguing the community, that is rigorous. It takes a lot of work, a lot of effort. People understand that the work we are doing is explicitly tied to bettering the community.

**Q: What does a school for social justice mean to you? Why do you think this orientation is important?**

**A:** Schools were meant to address a need within the community, a need to educate people. Why would we want to educate our young people? Clearly, every generation must build on the next generation. With us it's about educating young people who don't understand the fundamental responsibility to the world and the environment in which they live.

Whether we're using the arts to get there or you're using the sciences to get there, we *all* as citizens of the world have a responsibility to make the world we live in much better. The Native Americans talk about building for seven generations. I think, in many ways, schools have really become about educating the self, devoid of community.

A lot of schools think they've done their mission if they educate kids who go to Harvard and become great at whatever they do. We want our kids to go to the best schools. We want them to have access to a great education. But we also ask the fundamental question: For the sake of what? For the sake of what are we educating our young people? It has to do with this sacred covenant that we have with the world around us. We have a moral and civil obligation to really make the world a better place. To me, the idea of social justice is not some pie-in-the-sky thing: It begins with our students. It begins in daily acts, in understanding the connection between what they learn in school and the community they live in. It begins in practical applications of their knowledge to better the world they live in.

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