

Alma y Pueblo: Educational Disparity of Caribbean Latinas in NYC

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Abstract

Recent statistical data reflects a consistent and alarming disparity regarding the educational attainment rates of Puerto Ricans, in relation to other Caribbean Latino groups. According to a 2010 Policy Brief, “Puerto Ricans face the greatest challenges of all youth sub-groups living in NYC.” The situation is further exacerbated for Puerto Rican women by higher than average early pregnancies, resulting in greater incidences of poverty and single parent households. My comparative research study, involving Cuban, Dominican and Puerto Rican women was unique in that it focused on intra-cultural diversity, and, not only produced new disaggregated comparative data on the educational achievement of distinct Caribbean Latino groups in New York City schools, but focused attention on the circumstances and strategies employed by Puerto Rican “outliers” that contributed to their academic and professional success, in hopes of providing a blueprint that might benefit educators, curriculum designers, and educational support personnel in working with Puerto Rican youth, as well as other similarly disenfranchised populations.

1. Introduction

As of 2008, over 20 percent of students in U.S. schools are Hispanic/Latino. By 2050 this number will increase by 166 percent. Latinos now number 2.3 million in New York City and make up the largest share of the population under age twenty-five [1]. In spite of these dramatic numbers, little attention has been given to the plight of Latino students in American schools. Latinos, as a group, have been among the most educationally disadvantaged in the United States for decades. The problem is even more alarming for Latinas, who are further handicapped by high early pregnancy rates and family caretaking responsibilities. According to US Department of Health and Human Services in 2014 Latinas ages 15-19 had the highest birth rate (38 births per 1,000), followed by black teens (34.9 per 1,000) and white teens (17.3 per 1,000) [2]. Pew Hispanic Center reports that in 2013, 62% of Puerto Rican women living in the United States ages 15-44 that gave birth were unmarried [3]. Moreover, Latinas are less likely to return to school after giving birth than African

American or white girls, as it is understood that a woman’s obligation to her family is central to her identity as a Latina woman, and supersedes any educational and/or career plans [4]. The graduation rate for Latinas in New York City, as reported by the Community Service Society, based on census reports, was only 40.8 percent in 2008 compared to 86.6 percent for whites [5]. There has been a growing body of literature that addresses cultural/familial conflicts encountered by adolescent Latinas in American public schools and their possible correlation with increased drop-out rates ([6], [7], [4]). Sadly, very few apply a comprehensive inter-disciplinary approach that also addresses the many non-cultural intersecting factors that encourage or hinder academic success, something this study has sought to remedy.

Moreover, previous studies rarely specify countries of birth, ancestry, or immigration status, which is highly problematic. Recent evidence illuminates the differences in educational achievement among different Latino groups in the United States and poses some interesting questions regarding the continued low educational achievement of Puerto Ricans in relation to other Latino groups nationwide [8], as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Educational achievement of Caribbean Latinos by nationality (Pewhispanic.org 2000–08)

	H.S.	College	BA +
National	90%	40.8%	27.7%
Hispanic	79%	27.9%	12.9%
Cuban	91%	45%	27%
Dominican	88%	N/A	16%
Puerto Rican	83%	30%	16%

For the purposes of this discussion, and to better understand the subjects implicated in this study, it is

important to differentiate among the various Latino groups living in the United States. There has been much criticism regarding the use of the label *Hispanic* or *Latino* to homogenize very diverse groups. For example as Jorge Duany states, “According to the critics, the Hispanic Latino classification lumps together a wide variety of immigrant histories, colonial legacies, racial and ethnic groups, social classes, cultural traditions, languages, and dialects” [9]. Arlene Davila warns against the “growing consolidation of a common Latino/Hispanic identity” [10]. There are significant differences in the educational achievement of the various Latino groups living in the United States that can not be ignored. For this reason, I chose to limit participation in this study to women either born in or descended from the island nations of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, due to shared geography, history and culture up to the late 19th century.

Further differences in Latino academic achievement can be attributed to residential patterns. Urban inner-city students are generally expected to have lower educational outcomes than rural or suburban Latino populations. Socio-economic status is a primary indicator of educational outcomes and must be considered as well. On average, Latina girls come from homes with lower socioeconomic status (SES). “Latino youth live in households with the highest rates of poverty. Using the thresholds established by the U.S. Census Bureau, 28 percent of Latino youth households are poor, and 56 percent are “low income” (either poor or “near poor). By comparison, 44 percent of black and Asian youth live in low-income households. White youth are much more likely to live in moderate-income or higher-income households. In the New York City area, Puerto Rican youth have the highest rates of poverty, with 33.4 percent of their households having incomes under the Federal Poverty Level” [1]. However, to avoid essentialism with any of these categories (race/ethnicity, gender, class, or place of residence) it is important to consider these as descriptors and not as indicators of educational achievement.

2. Caribbean Latinas: A Brief Educational Historiography

In 1493, Christopher Columbus wrote to Queen Isabella about a group of women he encountered while sailing in Caribbean waters. He referred to these women as Amazons. “These are the women who alone inhabit the island of Mateunin (or Matinino). These women, moreover, perform no kind of work of their sex, for they use bows and darts, like those I have described” [11]. And in another account it was reported that these warrior “women so fiercely held off the landing parties that cannons were fired to frighten them off” [11]. Columbus searched in vain for the island of Matinino. Based on the combined accounts of Las Casas, [12] de Fernandez, and Pane

we now understand that the mythical Caribbean “Amazons” that Columbus sought were actually native adolescent girls undergoing their rites of passage. These young girls were isolated from their villages during their liminal phase of development, beginning around the ages of twelve and thirteen and lasting for approximately two years. They were “off limits” to all men during that period of time so that they might be educated in the knowledge and skills necessary for full participation in their society. In reading the archival journals of the early conquistadors, one is struck by the high level of freedom enjoyed by native women. The period of European colonization in the Caribbean was perforce one of chaos and cultural disruption. Many indigenous traditions and cultural practices were irrevocably lost. However, as a result of Spain’s assimilationist colonizing practices, concubinage with native women was widespread. It was through these women that aspects of the indigenous culture survived and were passed down from generation to generation to the present time.

Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic share a common cultural heritage rooted in Spanish colonialism, Catholicism, and a plantation economy. Moreover, all were subjects of U.S. hegemony. The Spanish church implemented formal education for boys in the Caribbean in the early sixteenth century. There were no educational resources for girls until the nineteenth century. And then, only those families, who could afford it sent their daughters to same-sex private or parochial schools, “Lessons for girls usually included sewing and embroidery. Boys and girls were taught separately by teachers of the same sex” [13].

As a result of the Spanish American War, Puerto Rico was ceded to the United States in 1898. The United States opened thirty-four new single-sex vocational schools that continued the training in the traditional skills of embroidery and needlework that Puerto Rican girls learned in the home. The needlework industry became the second most important industry on the island, with American-owned businesses profiting from the labor of Puerto Rican women [14]. This delayed the introduction of public coeducation in Puerto Rico until well into the twentieth century. Today, the Literacy rate for Puerto Rican women on the island is over 93%, and though women attain post-secondary degrees at higher rates than men, they make up only 37% of the labor force. Additionally, very high levels of domestic violence and rape continue to plague Puerto Rican women as they continue their struggle for gender equity.

Postrevolutionary Cuba has the highest literacy rate (99.8 percent) of any Latin American country and one of the highest in the world [15]. Education is mandatory and free. According to the 2011 study by the AAUW, *Gender Equality and the Role of Women in Cuban Society*, Cuban women make up 66 percent of the labor force in Cuba, 70 percent of

professionals, and 43.6 percent of the unicameral legislature (women's representation in the U.S. Congress is only about 17 percent) [16]. But in spite of high educational levels and a socialist political system, which promotes more egalitarian and stable gender relations, Cuban women still perceive their fundamental role as mother and housewife. Teen pregnancy rates are high today, as they have always been. The average Cuban girl becomes sexually active at 13, and has her first baby by the age of eighteen.

The rate of illiteracy in the Dominican Republic is the highest in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Secondary schools begin at age thirteen, and only 55 percent of the population attends [15]. Most institutions are religious and many are still gender segregated. Public secondary education suffers from poor facilities and inadequate funding. The Dominican Republic is still largely a male-oriented society based on the values of paternalism and machismo. Female children are closely chaperoned and their lives are heavily circumscribed. Brothers and male cousins are expected to protect them and their reputations, and those middle-class and elite parents who can prefer to send their daughters to private or parochial same-sex schools. Dominican girls generally set up their first homes by the age of fourteen or fifteen, many while they are pregnant or already have children.

In spite of differences in social, economic and political systems and ideologies, all have experienced significant increases in women's education and professional employment rates since the 1960s, in most cases surpassing those of the male population. The Spanish-speaking Caribbean has historically been based on a matrifocal system, with an emphasis on complementary gender relations. Raymond Thomas Smith uses the term *matrifocal* to describe families in which women, in their roles as mothers, are the focus of family relationships [17]. Taking care of the family is seen as a sacred trust, and the status and respect afforded women in this role can be highly rewarding and satisfying. For Latinas, contemporary attempts at gender equality have largely been an effort to expand on this role and extend it into the public sphere. The persistence of consensual unions, especially in the lower classes, reflects resistance to interference from patriarchal/colonialist church and state institutions into the private realm of conjugal relations [18]. These more indigenous marriage patterns benefit women in that they allow them to maintain control over the home and children in the event of dissolution of the relationship. The processes of education and acculturation of women in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean were grounded in a common indigenous legacy that preceded the colonial period and, though it has gone through several transmutations, continues to be a source of

both female empowerment and respect for cultural tradition, which prioritizes family and motherhood.

3. Research Design and Method

From 2009 to 2016, I conducted a longitudinal two phase mixed methods comparative research study that explored the academic achievement of Caribbean Latinas from Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic and Cuba. Participants in both phases of the study were academically and professionally high achieving. Phase 1 (P1), 2009 – 2013, of the study compared attitudes toward education and professional success and differing parental educational support strategies across groups, as well as basic demographic data. The fifteen participants in P1 (5 from each national group) ranged in ages from 20 to 38 and were .5 or first-generation American (born and/or raised in New York City or New Jersey). Their families were lower to middle class. All had acquired at least one postsecondary degree.

Phase two (P2), 2013-2016, was specifically designed to delve deeper into the factors that impact educational achievement by focusing more intently on the most educationally and economically disadvantaged of the three groups in New York City, Puerto Ricans. P2 focused on ten Puerto Rican participants with similar demographic descriptors as the Puerto Rican women in P1, but ranging in ages from 40 to 73. It is important to restate that even though these women are members of a disadvantaged group, they themselves represent the outliers. Thus their stories can provide insight into the success oriented strategies employed by their families and/or primary caretakers, as well as the protective factors that enabled them to survive poverty and its associated affects.

The theoretical framework for this study was Critical Race Theory, which seeks to challenge existing dominant scholarly assumptions regarding race, ethnicity and gender as they relate to education, supported by John Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Theory of Minority School Performance, which will be explained in more depth later. My methodology was primarily ethnographic and consisted of a brief demographic survey and semi-structured individual and focus group interviews. My research dealt with a very small research sample and in that sense is not generalizable. However, as Buroway explains in his description of "the extended case method", ethnography "can examine the macro world through the way the latter shapes and in turn is shaped and conditioned by the micro world, the everyday world of face-to-face interaction" [19].

3.1 Demographic Findings

An initial demographic survey was employed to collect basic background data on the participants. For P1, there were no significant differences regarding

current SES, parental educational levels, religious participation, or type of school attended (public, private, parochial) across groups. The majority of the participants were between 25 and 30 years of age (seven), were born in New York City or New Jersey (ten), were Catholic (nine), had attained at least a BA degree, (fifteen), and were employed in a human services field—Education, Health Profession or Social Work (ten). The parents were, for the most part, foreign born (twenty-seven) and arrived in the United States after the age of twenty-one (twenty).

For P2, the majority of the ten participants were born in New York City or New Jersey (seven) or Puerto Rico (3), were atheist or agnostic (six), had attained at least a Master's degree (ten) and were employed, or retired from employment, in a human services field, Education, Health, Social Work or Law (seven). The remaining three were either employed or self-employed in an Arts related field. The parental education levels were lower for this group. Only one had gone beyond high school, and all were born in Puerto Rico (twenty), the majority arriving to the US before the age of 20 (ten).

3.1.1 Ethnographic Findings

P1 participants were each interviewed a total of five times, two individual, two in focused nation groups and one with all participants together. Two to four additional interviews were conducted with family members (parents, siblings and/or spouses), per participant. P2 participants were interviewed a total of three times, two individual and one focused group with all participants together. No family members were interviewed for P2.

The Dominican participants were more likely than the other two groups to be bilingual, to have been strongly influenced by their immigrant history and to have the strongest cultural ties to country of origin, and the most cultural/community affiliations. All parents were foreign born with varied educational levels. Consequently, they placed a high value on hard work and financial independence. There was a strong family impetus to do well academically, professionally, and economically. Dominican participants had the most diverse and non-gender-specific career goals, ranging from human services to hard sciences and private industry. Parental messages regarding education were clear. "Education is the path to a better life." "Hard times make one value educational opportunities and learning." Family structure varied, with single-parent (strong mother) households being the norm. The general consensus amongst this group was that Dominican men are "unreliable." They "cheat and leave." Dominican girls are taught to be self-reliant and independent and to not be dependent on any man for support. Participants linked their success to parental expectations. "I can't ever say I'm tired because my mother never quit!" (DR5P1). "I do things for my

mom. I don't want to disappoint her" (DR1P1). "My mom always told me, 'I can't buy you brand names, but if you study, you can get whatever you want. Never feel yourself less than others'" (DR3P1). Only one of the Dominican participants was married, and none had children. Regarding friendship and dating, participants were encouraged by their parents to socialize with non-Latino peer groups. "I was taught that Dominican culture could be a hindrance to academic achievement and so I chose my friends, not by culture, but by academic strengths" (DR2P1). "I didn't want to be with a Dominican. I don't like the way they treat women. I wanted an Asian boyfriend"(DR5P1). Dominican participants were most likely to date or marry non-Latino and non-black partners (white or Asian).

Cuban participants were the most likely to have an advanced degree beyond the BA and to have at least one parent with an advanced degree. All parents were foreign born and most had migrated to the United States over the age of thirty. Cuban participants were more likely to have been raised in intact but troubled homes with weak father figures and male siblings. Most of the participants grew up in middle-class homes that were politically oriented. One participant stated, "Assimilation to American values was not even a question. Due to the political situation, there was no going back."(C1P1). Strong maternal influence also seemed to be an important factor in determining academic success, even in cases (two) where the mother was deceased. There was also an overwhelmingly strong cultural emphasis on educational achievement to the exclusion of other social activities. "Personal drive and determination to succeed academically was something instilled in me from childhood. It was a Cuban thing" (C2P1). Like the Dominican participants, Cuban participants reported a strong emphasis on self-sufficiency. "Success is the only way to take care of myself and I'm not used to relying on others, aside from my mother. I have a strong desire to be good—actually great—at everything I do. This ranges from relationships, to career and everything in between. It has to do with the Cuban version of Jewish guilt. You are to feel badly if you don't reach the goals set, regardless of how high and unreal the expectations might be" (C5P1). Participants felt that the focus on "perfectionism" and "obsessionism" had caused them to become "driven" and this in turn had caused "control issues" and a "high-achievement dysfunctionality." They never felt they were "doing enough" and "did not value themselves as they were." Peer groups tended to be school related and white or multi-ethnic, and biculturality was the norm, with a strong emphasis on adaptation. "Since I was in many honors classes, all of my classmates talked about the colleges they wanted to attend, the colleges their siblings went to, and this continued to fuel my excitement about college. Most of my classmates were white and their parents had all

gone to college” (C1P1). None of the Cuban participants were married, or had children.

All the P1 Puerto Rican participants were born in New York City and were raised in intact but dysfunctional homes. Cultural affiliations during the elementary and secondary school years were very sparse, though this tended to change during the college years. Due to Puerto Rican political status, all parents were American citizens. Parents were more likely to have served in the military or to have worked for a city, state, or governmental agency and to have attained at least a high school diploma. Puerto Rican participants were most likely to have been victims of traumatic physical and/or sexual abuse from a family member and/or to come from households where there was domestic violence, alcohol and/or substance abuse. In spite of this, the Puerto Rican participants expressed a sense of family solidarity in the face of what one participant called “chaotic normalcy.” “We don’t seek help because we don’t want people to know. And so we pretend that there is nothing wrong with us, or our families... there was the sense that the family would face it together”(PR3P1). Puerto Rican participants were more likely to have formed peer bonds with pan-ethnic Latino or African American youth, as opposed to nationalistic (Puerto Rican) peer groups. For this group, “assimilation” seemed to come at a price, and participants stated that it led to a “loss of family” and emotional “rifts.” “The price of getting a good education is family (PR1P1). Puerto Rican participants were also most likely to engage in early sex, pregnancy, and marriage and to choose African American partners. All the Puerto Rican participants were married or in long-term relationships. One had a child and two became pregnant during the course of the study. Most participants stated that there was a cultural and traditional expectation to marry, while at the same time do well in school. Participants stated that the messages they received regarding marriage and education were often contradictory. Family traditions were kept alive in Puerto Rican families and the family unit was prioritized over all else. “Achievement was defined differently,” perhaps more holistically” (PR2P1). Puerto Rican parents were less likely to attend PTA meetings and parent teacher conferences, but in spite of this participants felt that parents held high expectations of them academically and instilled a strong work ethic. “We didn’t get ours; we want better for you” (PR5P1). They also tended to focus more on extracurricular activities such as sports, swimming, track, and camping (as opposed to piano, ballet, etc.).

The ten P2 Puerto Rican participants shared various similarities with the five P1 Puerto Rican participants, with differences most likely attributable to age disparity. Four participants in this group were born in Puerto Rico, whereas all P1 Puerto Rican participants were born in New York City. All P2 participants had attained at least a Master’s degree.

Parental educational levels were lower in this group, with only one parent from this group attaining post-secondary education. The majority grew up in intact but highly dysfunctional homes (7), with the remainder growing up in single parent homes with strong mothers. As in P1, all had grown up poor or working class, but in this group parental employment was more squarely in labor, with fathers employed as roofers, carpenters, laundry workers, and cooks, and mothers employed as seamstresses in factories. The majority had at some point in their childhood been on public assistance (8). The most glaring, albeit distressing, commonality in this group was childhood trauma. All P2 participants had experienced a variety of traumatic events ranging from severe repeated ongoing physical and/or sexual abuse and/or single shock traumas (death of sibling or primary caretaker) to moderate or mild traumas (poverty, neglect, severe illness and/or excessive disruptions), as well as psychological and/or emotional traumas (such as witnessing ongoing domestic violence and/or alcohol/substance abuse of a primary caretaker).

4. Research Analysis

As stated at the onset, all the participants in this study were either born in or descended from the Spanish speaking Caribbean and thus share common group histories, cultural traditions, beliefs and mores. However, during P1 of this study, I identified glaring differences in educational attitudes and parental support strategies across the three groups that could only be reasonably explained in the context of current socio-political status and subsequent identity construction within the United States. Cubans, the highest academically achieving of the US based Caribbean Latino groups, hold a unique and privileged status regarding immigration. Cuban migration to the US exploded after the Castro-led revolution in 1959, and since the 60s, most Cubans who land on American soil are granted admission through “special” humanitarian provisions of US law, as opposed to traditional immigration paths. Additionally, Cuban Americans that left Cuba during the *exilio* (first waves) had been middle class or upper middle class and thus were strongly motivated to quickly regain their prior SES, so as provide a secure base for their children’s studies.

Large-scale Dominican immigration to the US likewise began in the 1960s, in the midst of political and economic turbulence, following the assassination of the dictator Rafael Trujillo, and subsequent intervention by the American military and governmental forces. Almost all Dominican immigrants obtain legal American residency (green card) through the family reunification act, and they have continued to immigrate today to escape extremely high rates of poverty, as well as limited educational and employment opportunities.

According to John Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Theory of Minority School Performance, Dominican and Cuban immigrants are "voluntary minorities", as these groups moved to their present homes because of the possibility of "economic well-being, better overall opportunities or greater political freedom. These expectations continue to influence the way they perceive and respond to treatment by members of the dominant group and by the institutions controlled by members of the dominant group" [20]. These attitudes are reflected in higher educational achievement rates, hence substantiating Ogbu's theory. P1 participants from these groups have more positive attitudes toward education and were encouraged by their families to adapt to American culture, primarily as a strategy to acquire social capital by fully integrating with white America.

I'd say I'm Cuban and I want to identify myself as a Cuban, but they would always say no, you're American. You're not Cuban. You know nothing about Cuba. You weren't born there. Tu eres Americana, you know, but I just never felt that way, even in school. (C4P1)

You're like a salamander. You're on water and you're on the the land. I once went to Cuba and they told me, you're not Cuban and I said I am Cuban. I'm Cuban American and they said, theres no such thing... But I'm not really American in the sense of like apple pie. (C1P1)

I've never said I wanted to fit in. I've said, ok, how can I fit in while still being me, a Dominican? Because I have to fit, I mean, in order to move up socially. . . . (DR4P1)

Cuban and Dominican participants felt they did not fully assimilate, but rather "accommodated" to American society as a means to an end— that end being economic survival and upward mobility. In a sense, it was a marriage of convenience, as they remained active in national/cultural groups, were more likely to speak Spanish and to maintain cultural traditions.

The Puerto Rican experience has been vastly different. Of the three island nations in this study, only Puerto Rico was conquered, colonized, and is currently controlled by the US government. John Ogbu would categorize Puerto Ricans as "involuntary minorities", "people who were brought into their present society through slavery, conquest, or colonization" [20]. Puerto Rican citizenship in the US has historically been colored by this inescapable reality. As colonial subjects, Puerto Ricans on the island must abide by American laws, but are not entitled to full freedom and rights under those laws. They are denied even the most fundamental of rights, the right to vote for those leaders who make the laws that control every aspect of their lives. "It is an unjust, untenable dependent status that is a constant

source of humiliation and shame" (PR10P2). As a result of this on-going dependent status, Puerto Ricans are stigmatized by American society, resulting in institutionalized discrimination that may negatively impact educational and professional opportunities and upward mobility that contribute to the high rates of poverty reflected in the demographic and statistical data. Puerto Rican youth, feeling the weight of this stigma and internalized shame, may develop adverse attitudes and oppositional behaviors toward American society and institutions, further hindering academic success. Moreover, based on this research, Puerto Rican parents develop more relaxed educational expectations and do not fully engage with their children's schooling process, instead prioritizing family cohesion and cultural pride as a defense strategy against perceived external threats. Puerto Rican participants reported that even though there was a strong emphasis on education in their homes, they were primarily taught the value of "education for its own sake" and the importance of being "well rounded." Marriage and the family unit were often prioritized over educational achievement. Puerto Rican participants reported undergoing adolescent identity crises and questioning who they were in the context of a nation that they felt had too often marginalized and excluded them from full participation in the American dream. "They perceive the social, political and economic barriers against them as part of their undeserved oppression" [20].

Puerto Ricans are colonized people. It has everything to do with that. You have a mixed identity and you don't know where you belong and you're a second class citizen and you believe that, even if nobody is looking at you and saying that and then people look at me and say you're not Puerto Rican you're white but I still feel in my head that I'm less than, because I'm Puerto Rican (PR1P2).

We're considered by the majority as being less than. There are stereotypical assumptions... There's a sense that we somehow don't have the skills or wherewithal to do the intellectual labor that other people can do, which is built on a colonial mentality, but it's also the structure of race in this country.... It's about white supremacy and that informed the status of PR way back when. The legacy of that is alive and well in how people react to us and the kinds of expectations they have about our behavior and the practice of that kind of exclusion and racism (PR6P2).

Overall, P1 findings strongly indicate that macro-processes involving socio-political status and cultural/national identity, in relation to the dominant society, affect educational attitudes and parental support strategies, which in turn greatly impact educational achievement. In summary, the overarching factors differentiating the educational attitudes and achievement of Caribbean Latinas were identified as follows:

- a) Socio-political: identity issues, associated with colonial, national and/or immigrant status, which consequently affect educational attitudes and parental support strategies.
- b) Socio-economic: residence patterns, support networks, access to quality educational and extracurricular resources, and incidence, frequency and severity of childhood traumas, which in turn affect educational achievement.

I had never been in an all white world before. It was shocking to me. I felt superior to all those kids who had pampered lives, while envying their pampered lives (PR2P2).

I was poor, and I was surrounded by wealthy people. Some of them never had to work in their lives, their mothers stayed home, my mother never stayed home, and then to realize that that correlates with grades. There weren't many places where I felt like I fit, so that was difficult for me, but it was a tremendous educational experience (PR7P2).

4.1 P2: Inconsistencies and Contradictions

The objective for P2 was to delve deeper into the lived early childhood experiences of Puerto Rican participants, so as to identify and unpack the micro-factors, those taken for granted aspects of day to day life that are often overlooked by statistical/demographic surveys and quantitative studies. As indicated earlier, Puerto Rican youth in New York City have the highest poverty rates. Consequences of poverty reported by P2 participants included the following (in their own words):

My mother put me in Girl scouts in PR... There was kind of a conscious awareness, on my part very early on, that there was a problem. because we were reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in English, and I was this little kid saying "What's wrong with this picture?" There must be something terribly wrong that it was an exercise in Americanization, and I wasn't learning about PR (PR6P2).

1. Living in unstable and crime-ridden neighborhoods.

The LES became a wasteland. The buildings were on fire. The landlords were abandoning the LES, and we were stuck behind since we couldn't move out to the suburbs. We had to stay in the city and tolerate this as well as drugs. Drugs ravaged our families. Then crack came in, and it was like hell. It was really crazy to be out on the streets. Either you became a crack head, a dope addict or you fought it (PR9P2).

These frequent disruptions, though considered potentially negative stressors, also provided exposure to different lifestyles and experiences that motivated success driven behaviors, including perseverance, adaptability and an expanded social consciousness, what W.E.B Dubois termed "Double Consciousness." "It is a peculiar sensation, this **double-consciousness**, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity [21]."

Whereas the majority of Cuban P1 participants grew up in their own homes, Puerto Rican participants grew up in apartments and housing projects in low-income urban areas. Whereas Cuban and Dominican participants were more likely to have attended private or parochial schools and to have formed long lasting peer bonds with whites or Asians. Puerto Rican participants largely attended neighborhood public schools and were more likely to form pan-Latino or African American peer bonds that did not necessarily provide them with increased social capital.

3. Increased incidence and severity of traumatic childhood events.

He battered my mother, not us. It went on forever. I remember quite clearly the violence, furniture being thrown about the house, her being bruised and a lot of turmoil and I was like this little thing and there was all this violence going on around me. I felt horrible, scared, terrified, pissed (PR2P2).

2. Recurring disruptions to early educational and socialization processes as a result of frequent household moves (between 3 and 5 per participant by age 12) and/or removal from the school/home for prolonged periods, either for better educational or economic opportunities or as a result of circular migration patterns typical for .5 and first generation Puerto Ricans.

My father came home drunk and my mother didn't want him to sleep in her bed and he got really pissed and tore her nightgown and my youngest sister jumped in to defend my mother so he went after her and started choking her. So my mother had hot boiling water on the stove. She misses and it hit my little sister... third degree burns (PR5P2).

Traumatic events such as these often result in distrust of others, an inability to see the world as a safe place, disruptions in organized thinking associated with decision-making, aggression, anxiety and sleeplessness, all of which can dramatically impact the learning process. However, all the Puerto Rican participants had achieved remarkable academic and professional success. Further research into this paradoxical finding indicated that although most traumas are perceived as negatively impacting

educational progress, it is not always necessarily the case. Dr. Carl Bell, Professor of Psychiatry and Public health, explains that “risk factors are not predictive factors due to protective factors.” His on-going clinical work in this area suggests that “repeated exposure to minimal or moderate stressors can serve to build resilience” and “strengthen socioemotional and neuroendocrine resistance to subsequent stressors” [22]. This indicates that the severity of repetitive stressors/traumas, as well as the serendipitous spacing of traumatic events (SSTE) and mitigating protective factors, could theoretically produce a positive result, such as resilience, as also indicated by our P2 participants. Rather than decimating them, surviving these stressors and traumas, may have strengthened their sense of self-esteem and self efficacy, and made them feel a sense of power and control over their own destinies.

It was a struggle because I didn't have a job. I had to work part-time jobs at night to pay my rent and still make it through school. There's nothing you can't do. You can do anything you set out to do with integrity and honesty (PR9P2).

When it was time to go to college, they said, we're not going to recommend you ... So I got the papers myself, without their recommendation, without their blessing. I was self-motivated... Life isn't one, two three, four... Sometimes you have to go over there to get over there (PR2P2).

At a very early age, I said in order for me to fulfill my goals, I have to get out of here... forge my own path. Really if I were to place an image, it was this little girl with a machete going through the jungle. No is the beginning. If somebody says no, I'm like the annoying two year old saying "Why not?" (PR4P2)

My childhood experiences, even the bad, helped me survive my life, made me stronger and wiser. Growing up, I saw what was not good for you, alcoholism and abuse, I saw that those things were not good and wanted to avoid that (PR3P2).

To be absolutely clear, the positive outcomes experienced by P2 participants were only possible because of intervening protective factors and should not be attributed to the traumatic events in and of themselves. Protective factors for this group included:

- a) Acknowledged early academic or artistic successes (P2 participants tested as advanced or gifted on early standardized exams, received Academic, Arts or Sports awards and/or demonstrated early artistic talent in drama or visual arts)
- b) Supportive adults (primarily teachers or counselors/advisors), P2 participants reported feeling loved/liked by their teachers or school personnel and consequently developing positive

- c) Removal from the home environment and/or neighborhood. Removal from their home lives, even for short periods of time, served as an “escape valve”, while at the same time exposing participants to other possible worlds and futures that existed outside of their experience, and expanding social consciousness.
- d) Strong Maternal influence: even in the context of domestic violence, participants described their mothers as strong, resourceful, nurturing, supportive and independent.

She had moxie. I never understood why she connected herself to that loser. He was big, loud, a bully (PR2P2).

I would ask my mother all the time, since the age of 5, mommy get rid of him, please, please, please, he's awful, and she was like no you girls need a father, you have to have a man in the house (PR1P2).

5. Research Recommendations

The numbers of children who live in homes where they endure severe poverty and trauma on a daily basis is beyond staggering. It has become so normalized that we, as educators, turn a “blind eye”, possibly due to the feeling that we are powerless to change the chaotic realities of their lives. Instead we close our hearts and blame the victims for their lack of attentiveness and engagement, oppositional behaviors and lethargy. This research provides evidence that educational intervention can mitigate and even reverse the negative effects of childhood trauma. The following are five simple educational recommendations for supporting the academic and holistic well-being of all children living in trauma.

1. Create a Safe Haven: make your class room a place where they are heard, loved and praised, a place they want to come to every day, because they are acknowledged for the brilliant and amazingly talented beings that they are.
2. Provide multiple opportunities for early success: This study indicates that acknowledged early successes in any of the academic areas, arts or sports can build self esteem, and consequently perseverance and self-efficacy.
3. Project-based Curriculum: Incorporate a project-based curriculum that encourages problem solving, critical thinking and coping skills, both in groups and individually, and will provide them with invaluable tools they can transfer to real life situations.
4. Make the world your classroom: Studies have shown that the highest impact learning is experiential and happens outside the classroom

environment. Expose children to worlds outside their experience, so they know that their current reality is only one of many available to them. Give them something better to shoot for!

5. Community-based schools: Multiple studies involving at-risk students indicate that the mother is the primary source of support, but she shouldn't have to do it alone, especially in the context of poverty and associated stressors. Open up your classroom and school to parents and families. Provide workshops, references and resources to support parents and families in all areas, not just academic.

6. Conclusion

Phase 1 of the study compared parental attitudes and associated strategies toward educational success across groups and found significant differences. These were largely traced back to differing colonial histories and subsequent socio-political and economic group status in the United States.

Phase two, specifically designed to delve deeper into the **factors** that impact educational achievement, produced both expected and unexpected outcomes. The historical, socio-political and economic factors that impact education, as per seminal educational literature and research studies [20] [23] were borne out in this study, but the very high incidence of trauma in the early lives of participants was unexpected. Even more surprising was the discovery of the importance of Serendipitous Spacing of Traumatic Events (SSTE) and protective factors in mitigating the impact of said trauma, and the subsequent construction of resilience and perseverance. This discovery is critical to understanding and formulating intervention strategies in educational settings.

This study was filled with contradictions and inconsistencies. As researcher, I was forced to dispose of my initial research assumptions, as well as some fundamental and foundational beliefs. Upon deep investigation, heretofore established certainties, became amorphous. I was challenged to look beyond my pre-conceived beliefs to uncover uncomfortable truths about the dual nature of trauma, turmoil and pain, and in the process garnered a greater understanding of the indomitable, adaptable and fierce nature of the human spirit.

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