

## Dominican Youth in New York City Schools: A Community Stands Up and Delivers

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### ABSTRACT

What are the changes in sociolinguistic and socioeducational contexts in the U.S., and specifically in New York City, that have made the schooling of Dominican New Yorkers a unique challenge and that have led to the educational inequities they face today? The article focuses on a specific instance of Dominican community organization that has worked to reverse these educational inequities — the creation and development of a high school organized by Latino educators specifically for Latinos, primarily Dominicans. Focusing on the past, present, and future of Gregorio Luperón High School, the article looks at the caring context of this particular school, as it stands up to the challenges of new educational policy and delivers a just education for adolescent Spanish-speaking Dominicans and other Latino newcomers.

Keywords: Dominican education, Dominican students, New York City, bilingual education, immigrant students, emergent bilinguals, English language learners, students

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with interrupted formal education, No Child Left Behind, testing, Regents, bilingualism, adolescent students, high schools.

## RESUMEN

¿Cuáles han sido los cambios en los contextos sociolingüísticos y socioeducacionales en la ciudad de Nueva York que han convertido la educación de los neoyorquinos dominicanos en un reto único y que nos ha llevado a las desigualdades a las que nos enfrentamos hoy en día? Este artículo se centra en un caso específico de organización de base en la comunidad dominicana que ha luchado en contra de las desigualdades educacionales a través de la creación y el desarrollo de una escuela secundaria organizada por educadores latinos, específicamente para los latinos, y los dominicanos. Centrados en el pasado, presente y futuro de la Escuela Secundaria Gregorio Luperón, el artículo estudia el contexto humanitario de esta escuela que, mientras se enfrenta a los desafíos de las nuevas políticas educacionales, ofrece una educación justa para los adolescentes hispanoparlantes dominicanos y demás latinos recién llegados a Nueva York.

Palabras clave: Educación dominicana, estudiantes dominicanos, Nueva York, educación bilingüe, estudiantes inmigrantes, bilingües emergentes, estudiantes del Inglés, Estudiantes con interrupción de la educación formal, *No Child Left Behind*, exámenes, Exámenes Regents, bilingüismo, estudiantes adolescentes, escuelas secundarias

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This corner is my destiny...  
I found my island! I've been  
on it this whole time and I'm  
home!  
Usnavi, *In the Heights*

In New York City schools, 11% of the student body is of Dominican descent. Despite the great number of Dominican adolescents in New York City schools, the education of Dominicans remains understudied. Drawing on material from our four-year ethnographic study that is the subject of our book, *Additive Schooling in Subtractive Times: Bilingual Education and Dominican Immigrant Youth in the Heights* (Bartlett and García), this article reviews the status of Dominican students in NYC and its schools.

It then looks at the changes in sociolinguistic and socioeducational contexts that have made the schooling of Dominican New Yorkers a unique challenge and that have led to the educational inequities they face today. The article focuses on a specific instance of Dominican community organization that has worked to reverse these educational inequities — the creation and development of a high school organized by Latino educators specifically for Latinos, primarily Dominicans. Focusing on the past, present, and future of Gregorio Luperón High School, the article looks at the caring context of this particular school, as it stands up to the challenges of new educational policy and delivers a just education for adolescent Spanish-speaking Dominicans and other Latino newcomers.

## 1. DOMINICANS IN NEW YORK

Dominicans constitute the fifth largest Latino group in the United States, numbering 1,356,361 in 2009 (U.S. Census). Dominicans are particularly concentrated in New York City. More than half a million people of Dominican origin lived in New York City in 2009 (582,456), representing the city's second largest Latino group after the Puerto Ricans, and constituting 25% of all Latinos (U.S. Census). Thus, in New York City, people of Dominican origin are a most important presence.

Dominicans have constituted the majority of the Latino immigrant population to the city since 1990; in 2009, they made up 12% of the entire foreign-born population in New York City. Dominicans are thus the most numerous foreign-born group in New York City, numbering 357,876. Sixty-one percent of New York Dominicans have been born outside of the United States, making Dominicans the group with the largest percentage of foreign-born (U.S. Census).

The majority of Dominicans live either in northern Manhattan or the Bronx. From 1980 to 1990, 78% of the immigrants to settle in Washington Heights were from the Dominican Republic; by 1990, nearly half of all residents in northern Manhattan were of Dominican descent (Linares). Indeed, from 1990 to 2000 the Dominican population in Washington Heights increased from 88,000 to nearly 117,000, and it constituted 53% of the population of Washington Heights by 2005. However, the

gentrification of the area in the 1990s, as whites pushed north in a crowded and expensive Manhattan housing market, forced many Dominican families into the cheaper housing stock of the Bronx. Dominicans in New York are numerous, are more foreign-born than other groups, and are concentrated in Washington Heights, Usnavi's island in the Broadway play, *In the Heights*. Their numerical concentration in Washington Heights has had one important effect — the achievement of greater political representation and increased control of neighborhood schools.

## 2. DOMINICAN NEW YORKERS AND EDUCATION

The large number of Dominicans in New York City means that schools all over the city, and especially in Washington Heights and increasingly in the Bronx, are teeming with Dominican students. According to Schwartz, in “1999-2000, roughly 16% of the city's elementary and middle school students were *foreign born* [emphasis added], with nearly one fifth — that is, nearly 20,000 students — originating in the Dominican Republic” (2). In October 2010, there were 34,138 Dominican-born students in the New York City public school system, accounting for 3% of the total NYC student body. Of these, 22,805 were classified as “English language learners” (personal communication, Angélica Infante, 1/24/2011). That is, over two-thirds (67%) of Dominican students are *emergent bilinguals*<sup>4</sup> working to develop their English.

Fifty percent of new immigrant students in New York City, including Dominicans, arrive as adolescents and enter at the high school level. This has important consequences for their education, for these Dominican adolescent immigrants often have not only little English, as do all recent immigrants, but also different (and sometimes deficient) academic Spanish. In fact, of all students classified as “Students with Interrupted Formal Education” (SIFE) in New York City, more than half are from the Dominican Republic (New York City Department of Education 13). This has to do with the poor conditions of the educational system in many parts of the Dominican Republic.

The Dominican Republic has suffered from low levels of investment in public education for decades. Though public financing of education has somewhat increased

over the past decade, the Dominican Republic has one of the region's lowest government expenditures on education in relation to GDP. Further, the Dominican Republic spends most of its educational resources on basic schooling — 62.7% in 2002/3, compared to 11.84% for secondary education. More generally, the 2002 Census reported that 15.7% of boys and girls between ages 6 and 13 do not attend school (UNDP). Many of the schools lack basic instructional resources. Perhaps even more critical is the fact that it is estimated that the average number of hours that a student spends in class does not reach 500 (Secretaría de Estado de Educación [SEE]). Furthermore, though the national curriculum calls for 5 hours of class time per day, the actual average of class time hours is a mere 2.5 (PREAL). This has serious implications for the quality of education enjoyed by youth who attended public schools before immigrating as adolescents.

Even when Dominican adolescents have attended better private schools, there are differences in academic literacy practices between schools in the Dominican Republic and in the United States. For example, Rubinstein-Ávila describes how teachers in Santo Domingo expect students to copy notes from the board and memorize them, while teachers in the United States want students to interpret and give their opinion, and to base their opinions on facts and data gathered from different sources. This means that Dominican adolescent immigrants, even if adequately educated, have to extend their academic literacy practices in Spanish, beyond learning English.

As we have seen, Dominican youth are a sizeable group in New York City schools, and they are often emergent bilinguals. And the majority of NYC students who have been classified as having had interrupted schooling, often resulting in poor Spanish literacy, are Dominicans. And yet, although Dominican students are numerous and have tremendous needs, they are often ignored. This treatment possibly has to do with two issues. On the one hand, Puerto Ricans have historically been the predominant Latino group in New York City. On the other hand, the majority of Dominicans have immigrated at a time of profound changes in the nation's and the city's educational policies, particularly those having to do with language minority students. These two issues, having to do with changes in the sociolinguistic and socio-educational context of the city, form the topic of the next section.

### 3. CHANGES IN SOCIOLINGUISTIC AND SOCIOEDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Puerto Ricans have been US citizens since 1917. During the Great Migration of the 1950s, many settled in New York to work in factories. In 1960, Puerto Ricans constituted 80% of Latinos in New York; but Puerto Rican students were failing miserably in schools. In the 1970s, ASPIRA, a Puerto Rican advocacy organization, filed a suit against the New York City Board of Education (Reyes). In 1974, the New York City Board of Education entered into a Consent Decree with ASPIRA that mandated that Spanish-speaking students who were not proficient in English be identified and instructed in a transitional bilingual education program. Consequently, bilingual education programs for Latino students grew steadily in the city around this time (Reyes).

Over the next quarter century, the linguistic composition of New York City changed radically, as immigration from Asia, Africa and Latin America grew as a result of the Amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Puerto Rican migration to the city declined, and with the greater heterogeneity and vulnerability of immigrants who were not citizens, as the Puerto Ricans were, the New York City Board of Education started to lose its commitment to bilingual education programs. But during the early 1990s, as the nation's and the city's educational policies were shifting, a space emerged that was exploited by the Dominican community, following on the footsteps of the struggles fought and won by the Puerto Rican community. It is this space that enabled Dominican educators to fight to create a high school that would meet the community's needs, a school that emerged as the Gregorio Luperón High School.

In 2002, in the wake of the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, Mayor Michael Bloomberg assumed mayoral control of the schools. The Office of Bilingual Education became the NYC Department of Education's Office of English Language Learners, focusing on the English language development of emergent bilinguals, and giving less attention to providing bilingual education or using the students' home languages and their bilingualism to educate them. But at the high school

level, there was an ambitious campaign to replace the lowest performing comprehensive high schools with smaller schools. The number of students enrolled in high schools with fewer than 600 students grew from 29,000 in 2002 to 85,000 in 2008 (Bloomfield 50). This space of small-school development was seized by the Luperón school community as it struggled for a new building, as we will see below.

At the same time, New York State was aligning its policies to the federal government's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policies to test all students and make schools accountable for their performance. Besides identifying all those whom the federal government calls "Limited English Proficient" or "LEP" students, emergent bilinguals have to be annually assessed with the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT), a test that measures English listening, speaking, reading, and writing. New York State has also raised its educational standards by implementing high-stakes exams and requiring higher scores on four content-based Regents examinations and an English language Regents exam in order to graduate.

The federal, state, and city educational policies of higher standards and greater accountability have had a profound effect on the education of Dominicans and on today's running of Gregorio Luperón High School. But before we describe those tensions, we turn to how the Dominican community organized to create a high school that would alleviate the educational inequities that the community was experiencing.

#### 4. THE COMMUNITY ORGANIZES AGAINST EDUCATIONAL INEQUITIES

Dominican students in New York City have been routinely segregated — in under-resourced and under-performing schools, where "96% of the students are poor... [and] virtually all [are] black or Hispanic," while the schools' "test scores are significantly below average" and "teachers are less experienced and less well educated" compared to teachers for other immigrant groups (Ellen et al. 197). These findings are confirmed by the comparative study of immigrant groups in New York City conducted by Kasinitz et al., who wrote that "Dominicans, who settled closest to Puerto Ricans and native blacks, lived in the worst school districts and had the most limited mobility" (151).

In the 1980s a full 80% of the 25,000 students attending elementary and middle schools in District 6 were Dominican, but the schools were miserably overcrowded and had some of the lowest reading scores in the city (Linares 78). According to Vélez:

By the early 1980s, Dominicans made up the majority of students in New York's Community School District 6 (in the Washington Heights neighborhood), at that time home to the city's most overcrowded schools. It was then that the Community Association of Progressive Dominicans confronted the school board and superintendent to demand bilingual education and other services for recently arrived immigrant families. The concerted efforts of community organizations, a parents' network throughout the district, and an aggressive voter registration drive led to greater Dominican representation on neighborhood school boards (and a majority in District 6). As a result, bilingual programs were started, [and] new schools were constructed in the district... (136)

In 1991 political agitation for equal representation led to the redistricting that yielded a predominantly Dominican electoral district in upper Manhattan (Ricourt). This shift produced the election of the first Dominican to the New York City Council, Guillermo Linares, and, in 1996, the election of Dominican-born Adriano Espaillat to the New York State Assembly as northern Manhattan's representative for District 72 (Pessar and Graham). Dominicans began to use their newfound political power to remedy the deplorable conditions of New York City schools for Dominican children and youth.

George Washington High School was, at that time, a large high school with over 4,000 students in Washington Heights to which most Dominican students were assigned. In the late 1980s, the school experienced an astronomical drop-out rate hovering close to 50%. There were also concerns with violence within and around the school.

In 1992, then Schools Chancellor Joseph Fernández announced a Call for Proposals to create new schools. One assistant principal and several teachers at George Washington High School took Fernández's call for proposals seriously and met to imagine what a school serving newly arrived Dominican students and their community might look like. The group was moved by the possibility of creating a school where youth from the community would be able to "*superarse*" [improve themselves] – a school in, of, and for the community. One of the founders relayed: "Queríamos ser nosotros los



artífices de ese cambio, y los motivadores.” [We wanted to be the creators of that change, and the motivators.] (E. interview, April 11, 2007)<sup>2</sup>.

## 5. A NEW YORK-DOMINICAN PUBLIC SCHOOL IS BORN

During 1993-1994, with full funding from the New York City Board of Education, the faculty and staff of the future Gregorio Luperón Preparatory School started shaping the school. The school staff decided to make bilingual education a priority. They believed that young new immigrants could not keep up with rigorous academic work in a language that they did not understand, and thus content courses had to be in Spanish. The founding staff also believed that Spanish was an important resource that needed to be developed so that their student population would be fully bilingual. Their key idea was to build a solid program of English as a Second Language, and to encourage English language development, but to remain academically competitive by offering core courses in the content areas in Spanish (V., interview, March 13, 2007).

Gregorio Luperón Preparatory High School opened its doors to students in a converted warehouse with few windows in September of 1994. It opened as a transitional program for Spanish-speaking newcomers where students would stay for one to two years before transferring to a four-year high school once they had developed basic English and had accumulated a sufficient number of academic credits.

In 2001, after much debate, the school became a four-year high school and its name was changed to Gregorio Luperón High School for Science and Mathematics. It remained a transitional bilingual education program where emergent bilingual students are educated initially through Spanish in rigorous content courses, while receiving three periods of English as a Second Language. As students learn English, content courses become more bilingual and many advanced courses are taught in English only.

As we will see below, the change to a four-year high school left Luperón subject to the many educational policy changes that accompanied the high-stakes testing of No Child Left Behind, the greater accountability system of New York State, and the mayoral control of the school system. But through all the changes, the school's foundation built on care and trust has endured. How this foundation was laid is the topic of the next section.

## 6. CONSTRUCTING CARE AND TRUST IN EDUCATION

Fifteen years after the founding of the school, eleven of the original seventeen staff members remained in the school. It is their voices, drawn from intensive interviews, that we portray in this section, as they communicate the hope, love and **care** that was at the core of the process of developing a school, and sustaining it during radically transformative changes in New York City. Their clarion motivation was hope in the improvement of their community and the opportunities for their children. In telling us the story of the dream, one of them told us: “Estábamos muy ilusionados, con los muchachitos que estaban perdidos, no hablaban el idioma, pero tenían ilusiones de hacer carrera.” [We were very hopeful, with the youngsters who were lost, who didn’t speak the language, but who were hopeful to have a career.] (EE, interview, March 12, 2007). The determination among the original staff that not knowing English should not lead to academic failure motivated them to start the school. It is interesting to note that their motivation was not just to have individual students succeed, but to “trabajar haciendo gente” [to work building community / people]. In this regard, one of them told us that the task was to balance the individual success of students with the collective effort for the improvement of the community: “Balancear el progreso individual unido con el esfuerzo colectivo” (Y.R., interview, March 11, 2007). A teacher summarized this hope, this *ilusión*:

Ilusión. El deseo de ver su gente superándose o dejar de ser estadística negativa con los latinos, especialmente con los recién llegados. Si los padres no pueden, por lo menos los hijos que puedan ser vehículo de romper ese círculo en la familia de la miseria. (Interview, April 12, 2007)

Hope. The desire to see your people improving, or no longer being the negative statistic of Latinos, especially those who have recently arrived. If parents can’t, at least their children can be a vehicle to break that family circle of misery. (My translation)

For them, the school is their community, “la comunidad de uno”; the youth are immigrants, just like the teachers once were; the youth struggle with the new language and culture, just as the adults once did. One of the teachers told us that by working with these students, he is regularly reminded of when he arrived in New York City as a

teenager: “Me recordé cuando yo llegué aquí como estos muchos recién llegados como yo, *teenagers*” (E.E., interview, April 12, 2007). This personal experience motivates the educators to help the students beyond what is required. A staff member explained that helping those who struggle as she did when she arrived makes her feel good: “Me gusta ayudar y bregar como cuando yo llegué. Uno se siente bien” (J., interview, April 12, 2007). The school provides a familiar context in a strange land to students who arrive “*nuevecitos en una tierra extraña*” [very new in a strange land] (B., interview, April 12, 2007). The pride these educators took in the success of the students was palpable.

Just like their newcomer students, many of the teachers and the staff spoke little or no English when they arrived in the United States. They served as models of how to become professionals in an English-speaking world. Some teachers felt that their Spanish accents when speaking English could actually encourage students to try to speak English:

Ellos ven que yo tengo dificultad en inglés; tengo mi acento. Ellos ven mi energía de hablar en inglés, y a mí me parece que se han motivado. Si H. tiene su acento, si algunas veces dice palabras no bien pronunciadas, entonces, ¿por qué yo no lo voy a hacer? (H., interview, April 12, 2007)

They see that I have difficulty in English; I have my accent. They see my effort in speaking English, and I think that they have become motivated. If H. has his accent, if sometimes he says words that aren't well pronounced why then should I try? (My translation)

The school has been experienced by many as a family. A secretary told us: “Aquí uno no piensa en los sueldos; se piensa en los muchachitos, de la comunidad de uno; en que el personal pueda ayudar.” [Here you don't think of salaries; you think about the young people, of one's community; of how the personnel can help.] (J., interview, April 12, 2007). This motivation for work seems to be best summarized in what could be the motto for the school, expressed by another of the secretaries: “Todo por nuestra comunidad y por nuestros muchachos.” [Everything for our community and for our children.] (B., interview, April 12, 2007).

Though the focus has been on caring for the adolescents, the entire community also established important mutual support relationships. “A uno lo cuidan,” [They take care of you], said one of the staff members. As in a family, the school is the home — “Todos nos sentíamos como en la casa, en familia.” [We felt as at home, as a family] (J.

interview, April 12, 2007). But the founding teachers and staff stressed that it's a Caribbean home, where the doors are always open. This image of open doors emerged frequently in the staff's talk about the school. One told us:

Our doors are open. We can assist people in ways you can't imagine. Our valedictorian last year had problems with her green card, without it she couldn't get a scholarship. You wouldn't believe what the principal did to help her get her green card before graduation. We have a student having financial difficulties this year. People pitch in to help them. If a parent comes with a problem, even if it has nothing to do with education, and we can be of service, we're willing to do that. Or a referral. We are open to work with any agency in or outside of the community. (P. interview, March 29, 2004).

And because they feel at home, these teachers and staff members work well beyond what is required of them because, as one of them said, they have to "stretch their hand" a bit more, go the extra mile, in order to make the difference ["Estirar un poquito más la mano de lo que le dicen a uno, go the extra mile para hacer la diferencia."] (E. interview, April 12, 2007).

These relationships require immense amounts of **trust**, which emerged as another theme in our conversations. Clearly the teachers at the original George Washington High School didn't trust the Central Board of Education to do well for the Dominican students who were newly arrived and didn't speak English. Referencing their guiding vision in the founding of Luperón, one explained: "¿Qué me ilusionó? Íbamos a tener nosotros ahora el poder para decidir qué necesitaban nuestros estudiantes. A diferencia de la Washington donde otros eran los jefes, aquí íbamos a ser nuestros propios jefes." [What did I dream? We would have the power to decide what our students needed. Unlike at GWHS, where others were the boss, here we would be our own bosses.] (April 12, 2007). A different teacher told us that her main motivation for leaving George Washington was to know that the new school would be in the hands of people she trusted who believed in the students not as numbers, but as human beings, as people: "Saber que la escuela estaba en manos de alguien que creía en los estudiantes no como número, sino como seres humanos" (Y.R., interview, April 11, 2007).

That trust continued to operate during the four years of observations the authors conducted in the school, for the most part. The teachers often reported that

everyone in the school felt responsible for improvement, and that none needed to be watched — “Aquí no hay que estar vigilando a nadie”.

The founding teachers and staff-members also expressed deep levels of trust in the present principal, Juan Villar, whom they affectionately call “Juanchi.” As an immigrant who came to the United States after completing high school in the Dominican Republic, Villar understood not only the teachers’ struggles, but also those of the students. Despite the changes that have affected some of the new teachers differently from the founding ones, Villar has remained a central figure in the school — always present, sometimes controversial, and fully committed to his students and community.

The care and trust that came from constructing a school for Dominican youth by Dominican educators was challenged by the expansion in faculty and students that came later. And the caring and trusting community was also tested by changes that came from the outside, as the school responded to new national, state and city educational policies. The ways in which these changes defied the schools’ foundation, and yet how the educators stood up to the challenges is the subject of the next section.

## 7. ADJUSTING TO CHANGES WHILE PRESERVING CARE AND TRUST

The school experienced many fundamental changes simultaneously. We discuss here those having to do with the shift to being a four-year school and the changes in the city; that is, the expansion and diversity of faculty and students, as well as the greater accountability systems of the city and state. We draw here from repeated interviews with staff.

When the school shifted to a four-year high school, the faculty grew considerably, introducing people who had not shared the original sociopolitical vision of the Dominican community or a commitment to the school. The faculty expanded from 11 members in 1994 to 27 in 2006/07. In the process, some of the earliest members of the school community came to feel that the clear original mission became somewhat diffused. The family atmosphere has shifted as the school has hired more teachers with diverse backgrounds who do not share the same immigration histories and might not have the same community commitment. One staff member noted the change:

Cuando comenzamos éramos como una familia, los muchachos, el personal, era como tan unido, una familia.... Estamos ahora en un sistema dónde no se puede seguir eso. Le ponen límites a ello. Ya no es como comenzamos.... Veo las personas nuevas que vienen. No se sienten como nosotros. Otra gente va llegando y no es igual. (Interview, April 30, 2007)

When we started we were a family, the youngsters, the personnel, we were so close, a family.... Now we're in a system where one cannot continue that. They put limits on that. Now it is not as when we started.... I see the new people who come; they don't feel like we do. Other people arrive and it isn't the same. (My translation)

Several of the founding teachers sensed a lack of interest among the new teachers and staff who did not identify as much with the mission of the school (and often did not stay more than a year or two). As one of them said: "*Hay que elevar el nivel de ownership*" [We have to raise the level of ownership] (interview, April 11, 2007). But others felt that, overall, the teaching staff was committed to the school's mission of serving immigrant youth. As one explained,

Algunos se han ido, otros han venido. En algunos hay una actitud de desinterés, no se identifican tanto con la misión. Pero Villar siempre ha tenido, me parece a mí, bien claro qué tipo de personal él quiere para la escuela, y qué tipo de maestro él tiene para sus estudiantes, siempre debe demostrar su interés por los estudiantes y su bienestar. Hay algunos más expresivos, otros más distantes, pero la mayoría en el momento decisivo estamos ahí. (April 12, 2007)

Some teachers have gone, others have come. Some are disinterested, or don't identify so fully with the mission of the school. But, in my opinion, Villar has always been clear about what kind of people he wants for the school, what kind of teacher he wants for his students, they should always demonstrate interest for students and their well-being. Some are more expressive, others more distant, but the majority, when it comes down to it, we are there. (My translation)

The expansion of the faculty also brought the occasional difference of opinion over language education. Some of the new English teachers who were not themselves immigrants felt that the school should be using more English across the curriculum. "I just worry about these kids," said one teacher, "I mean, how are they going to make it once they leave here?" (Interview, March 1, 2007) Another weighed in, "Three periods a day is just not enough for these kids. It would be different if they were getting lots of

English outside the school, but they aren't" (Interview, April 20, 2007). Others who had been there longer tended to see the value of teaching academic literacy in Spanish, though they admitted that it had taken them a while to come to this conclusion.

At the same time that the faculty was changing, the student population was shifting quite radically. Over the course of three years, as the school moved to a four-year model, the number of students more than doubled. The Dominican student population grew continuously more diverse in terms of class background and origin: in 2003, the Dominican Republic was experiencing a major economic crisis due to the collapse of major banks, which spurred even higher levels of immigration, especially among Dominicans from more rural areas (Amnesty International; Loucky, Armstrong and Estrada). Teachers reported receiving more and more students with interrupted formal education (SIFE), students who were not adequately prepared to enter high school; many of these students had low levels of Spanish-language literacy (observations, 2003-2004, conducted by authors).

In this same period, Latino immigration to northern Manhattan continued to diversify, with Mexican and Central American newcomers appearing in greater numbers. Across the street from the school, Dominican businesses were being substituted by *taquerías*. While this diversification brought many advantages, it also contributed, for some members of the school community, to a diminishing sense of cultural cohesion. While in the beginning more than 90% of the student body was Dominican, by the mid 2000s, only 60-70% of the students were.

Teachers noted cultural shifts among Dominican youth, as well, with youth becoming more worldly, bolder, and having more sexual and drug experiences than in previous decades. One of the teachers explained it thus:

Ya no hay la inocencia que había antes. Tienen mucho mundo callejero. Lo de gangas es nuevo, y vienen con esas experiencias desde allá, desde la República, El Salvador, desde México. Hay muchas niñas que tienen más horas de vuelo que una azafata de American. Tienen más mundo. (interview, April 12, 2007)

There's no longer the innocence that there was before. They're more street wise. The gangs are new, and they come with that experience from there, from the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Mexico. There are many girls that have more flying time than an American Airlines flight attendant. They are more worldly. (My translation)

The teachers' reference to "flying time" indicated not only the transnational movement of girls between the D.R. and the U.S. — it also suggested frequency of sexual experiences for young women.

The rapid increase of youth gang activity in the 2000s also influenced the student body at Luperón. Two of the more active groups specifically targeted Dominican immigrants for recruitment: Dominicans Don't Play, or DDP, and the Trinitarios (Baker, 2009). This increase in gang activity affected the students, and especially the boys. Some boys were worried about their transit to and from school, while others found the gangs exciting and attractive.

The changing student body – with more students who are poorly prepared and students coming from Latin American countries other than the Dominican Republic – has proven challenging. The higher accountability measures imposed by No Child Left Behind pose a test for all newcomers, but they are especially challenging for those who have low literacy in Spanish. Secondly, with a diversifying student body, the Dominican teachers (and principal) cannot always depend on a shared cultural background in order to build close relationships with students and ways of helping them learn.

Further, according to faculty at Luperón, the mandated focus on accountability that came with the transition to a four-year school forced the school to lose its flexibility and become more regulated. One staff member explained the change of tone in the school:

Con todos los cambios con la cuestión del departamento de educación, la escuela ha cambiado un poco el tono. El trato que los maestros tienen que tener con los muchachos. Es todo reglas. El tono ha cambiado un poco. ... Todos los cambios, hay más cambios, más cambios, más cambios. En el trabajo ha habido cambios, más de presión, porque para ellos everything is accountability, más bajo la presión de que hay que hacer más papeleo, más por la raya. Antes eran más flexibles. Ahora hay que tener más cuidado, porque ya no es así. (Interview, April 12, 2007)

With all the changes with the Department of Education, the school has changed its tone. The relationship that teachers have to have with the youngsters. It is all rules. The tone has changed some.... All the changes, there are more changes, more changes, more changes. The work has changed, more pressure, because now for them everything is accountability, there is more pressure that one has to do more paperwork, it is all more by the rule. Before



they were more flexible. Now you have to be more careful, because it is no longer that way. (My translation)

The school has slowly (albeit not perfectly) adapted to the new rules. Luperón Principal Juan Villar described the adjustments, while complaining about the homogenization of assessment expectations of No Child Left Behind:

*We're in the process of unlearning everything we have learned to see if we can make the most adequate transition, eso es bien difícil. Estamos teniendo mucha resistencia tanto de los maestros viejos, como de los nuevos, por razones distintas. Los viejos porque piensan que de alguna manera lo que ellos hacen genuinamente representa lo mejor para las necesidades de los estudiantes.... Los [maestros] jóvenes expresan su resistencia no a las nuevas cosas que piden y a las modificaciones, pero al *timing*, y al hecho de que todos son metidos en un saco y evaluados con la misma medida, y no hay diferencias para medir a los niños americanos cuando llegan a la edad de 14, y los que vienen de México a los 14 años. (Interview, March 22, 2007)*

We're in the process of unlearning everything we have learned to see if we can make the most adequate transition, and that's very difficult. We're having a lot of resistance from the old teachers, as well as the new teachers, for different reasons. The old ones because they think that what they do in some way represents the best for the students' needs...The young ones show their resistance not to the new things that are required or to the modifications, but to the timing, and to the fact that everyone is treated the same and measured with the same yardstick — [the same test for U.S. born] American children when they turn 14, and those who come from Mexico at age 14. (My translation)

The pressures of accountability and testing, along with the expansion of the school, brought important cultural changes. The sense of shared political commitment and hope that characterized the first decade was, according to some, replaced by an emphasis on accountability and numbers. “Now the computer can track us”, said one of the founding teachers, and “todo es número” [it's all numbers] (interview, April 1, 2007). One of the staff members regretted that they have had to turn down many students who had completed ninth or tenth grade in the Dominican Republic and wished to join their corresponding grade level at Luperón. Because of the stiffer graduation requirements, they would never be able to graduate; instead, their only option was to begin high school again, in order to buy the necessary time to develop academic English. And so, within a

period of five years, Luperón expanded and diversified its faculty and student bodies and experienced enormous changes in its school culture while struggling to adjust its curriculum and pedagogy to the newly imposed, high-stakes exams. And yet, the foundational care and trust remained and enabled them to strike back at the number of challenges they're facing.

## 8. WINDOWS ON DOMINICAN EDUCATION

During this time of significant accommodations to the strictures of New York State Regents exams and new city requirements, Luperón administration, faculty, students, and parents were also engaged in a political battle. The school facility was absolutely insufficient for the school that Luperón had become. Packed with more than 350 students, the former warehouse had only 21 classrooms, a very small cafeteria, few windows, no gym or athletic fields, no auditorium, and no science laboratories. The faulty air conditioning and heating left rooms steamy and uncomfortable for many days in the school year.

From its earliest days as a four-year school, Luperón teachers began to organize students and parents to agitate for a more appropriate site. They circulated petitions and held regular protests at the school. In the first few years, the Department of Education offered Luperón a few other locations. Two were outside Washington Heights; faculty and staff felt strongly that leaving the Heights would weaken their strong connection to the Dominican community. The students, parents, and faculty remained adamant and continued to pressure the city for a new building.

Thanks to a groundswell of support, in 2005 Bloomberg announced that the city would spend \$41 million to construct a new high school for Luperón. Even with committed funding, finding an appropriate site for the building within Washington Heights proved difficult, as some local power brokers framed the teen-aged students as potential problems. With consistent community pressure, however, a suitable location was eventually found. Located at 165th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, the new facilities include a library, gym, auditorium, science labs, music and art room, kitchen/cafeteria, and wireless internet access. The project was completed in time for the opening of the 2008/2009 school year.

Even with the spectacular new facility, the challenges of educating poorly prepared Spanish-speaking adolescent immigrants remain. Nevertheless, Gregorio Luperón seems to have opened windows for the education of Latino immigrant adolescents in the city. The care and trust that have been the foundation is contagious. A student we interviewed expressed this when she told us about the school:

Ay, Luperón. Es la mejor escuela en la que yo he podido estar. A mí me encanta esta escuela. Me quedo aquí a veces hasta las 7 de la noche, porque aquí tú te sientes como en familia, como que tú estás en tu casa, que tú estás en República Dominicana. Además la gente con la que tú estás, tú te sientes como en familia... Una escuela en la que tú aprendes el inglés rápido, que tú aprendes bien, que te ayudan cuando tú lo necesitas... si ven como que te va mal en las clases ellos buscan la mejor solución para acercarse a ti y explicarte las cosas como es, y los profesores sienten como que tú eres su hijo, y de hecho como para tu futuro, como que ellos entran en tu vida, no para mal, sino para ayudarte. (Delia, interview, 2006)

That it's the best school that I could have hoped for. I love this school. I stay here sometimes until 7 PM, because here you feel like a family, like you are at home, like you are in the Dominican Republic. The people here feel like family. . . . It's a school where you learn English quickly, and learn well, and they help you when you need it. If they see that something is not going well in your class, they seek the best way to get close and explain things as they are; and the teachers act like you are their child, and think about your future; they get in your personal life, but not in a bad way, just to help you. (My translation)

And another student said about his teachers:

Desde que uno llega, le dan la mano, le quieren ayudar, como que ellos no están solamente porque le están pagando sino porque realmente le importan los estudiantes, a ayudarlos, que progresen. Muchos de ellos vinieron aquí a la misma edad, jóvenes. Tuvieron que aprender inglés y no había educación bilingüe. Entonces entienden la situación que nosotros encontramos. (interview, 2007)

From the time one arrives, the teachers here give a hand, they want to help you, as if they aren't here just for the salary but because students really matter to them, helping students progress matters. Many of them came at the same age, young. They had to learn English and there was no bilingual education. So they understand our situation. (My translation)

It is clearly care and trust that throws open windows in the education of these Dominican newcomers. Any number of real windows in a building cannot provide for the flight in imagination and new knowledge that care and trust supply. In building

those interior windows, Dominican culture and language have played an important part. And yet, the windows are thrown open precisely because in this context of care and trust, Spanish turns into bilingualism, and being Dominican turns into being Dominican American. Despite the challenges, Gregorio Luperón offers an important model of how Dominican Americans can stand up and become educated bilinguals through schooling. Luperón also offers an important lesson on how to deliver a bilingual education that is meaningful and rigorous, and yet flexible enough to accommodate differences in language and literacy abilities.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Through the historical process detailed in this article, the educators at Luperón have succeeded in forming what Ancess calls a “community of commitment.” Ancess explored various critical features of such communities in three high schools, including “human scale school size,” “caring relationships,” “close working proximity of teachers who collaborate,” and “strong, nurturing, and shared leadership,” among others (1-56). In this article, we have demonstrated the importance, as well, of a committed community that is responsible for the school (and to which the educators are responsible). Furthermore, using a sociocultural analysis of policy as practice, we have shown how federal, state, and local policies and politics have alternately threatened and made possible the survival of the community of commitment at Luperón.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Although the federal government labels these students, "Limited English Proficient", and the city calls them "English language learners", we follow García and García and Kleifgen in calling them emergent bilinguals, thus acknowledging that by adding English they're becoming bilingual.

<sup>2</sup> This article is based on a four year ethnographic study of the school, including observations and interviews with students and faculty. The full-length study is the subject of the book by Barlett and García, *Additive Schooling in Subtractive Times: Bilingual Education and Immigrant Youth in the Heights*. The authors are grateful to Vanderbilt University Press for permission to publish this article. All interviews with Gregorio Luperón staff are cited using the interviewee's initials to preserve privacy. Interviews with students, who were all minors, are cited throughout without any identifying information for the same reason. The Institutional Review Board, and federal and state regulations protect the confidentiality and privacy rights of minor children involved in this research.