

# Belonging in Schools

Building a school where all students belong  
in New York City's Williamsburg

by Miriam Magaña Lopez

**A** **VIBRANT LATINO COMMUNITY** on the Southside of **Williamsburg, Brooklyn** in NYC was taken over by drugs and violence in the 1970s and 1980s. Community members — especially young people — experienced a lack of safety nets, and self-determination was not imaginable. Invested in the success of young people, community leaders founded **El Puente Community-Based Organization (CBO)** in 1982. Luis Garden Acosta, Frances Lucerna, and other community leaders from the Southside community had a vision to improve and empower their neighborhood by providing crucial support to young people.

Over the years El Puente CBO has grown to include six leadership centers, a comprehensive athletic program and two public schools. This written case will focus on the schools: **El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice**, a public high school, and **Middle School 50 (MS50)**. El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice was founded in 1993. Although not initially designed by El Puente leaders, Middle School 50, was transformed and led by El Puente staff starting in 2014.

The majority of students entering El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice are Latino and low income. About a fifth of students are English language learners and 23% are considered special education students

(Hamedani et al, 2015). Before entering El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice and Middle School 50, many students had low attendance rates and were under-performing in literacy and math.

El Puente leaders understand that students spend their most formative years in a school setting, and believe that it is their moral mandate to co-develop an educational space that keeps everyone — school leaders, teachers, parents and students — actively involved in the design and decision making process. This case will outline how educational spaces can be co-created to ensure that everyone belongs.

**“Fostering belonging looks like creating a welcoming environment from the moment a student steps into the building.”**

# Identifying a Breaking Dynamic

**I**N THIS CASE WE IDENTIFY a systemic breaking point between the public school system and the young people of the Southside of Williamsburg. Students of color have historically been and continue to be othered in the traditional public school system. On the Southside, the traditional educational system meant to serve students of color was falling short. Students' needs were not being met and their daily routines included walking through a metal detector that criminalized them from the very moment they entered school. Frances Lucerna, founding principal of El Puente, asserted that "students' constitutional right to an inclusive and quality education were not being fulfilled."

To illustrate the breaking that happens between students and traditional educational settings, Frances recalled doing a word association activity. She asked El Puente staff to say what comes to their minds when they hear the word "school." The most commonly mentioned words included "invisible," "humiliated," "oppressed," and "ridiculed." These words reflect the experiences that most students of color have in traditional schools that do not prioritize a commitment to building trust, compassion and respect for all of those involved.

Breaking is further seen in the way students are taught. The curriculum and the way that conventional school settings are structured do not allow students to see themselves, their culture, their language, and their history as part of their educational journey. Teachers are seen as the person with all of the knowledge, and students as passive recipients of that information.

Furthermore, in a traditional school setting, parents are often isolated from the school — particularly those who are immigrants and do not speak English. Frances explains that it is often "easier to keep the community at bay because it complicates things [and creates more work] to get them involved." The schools that existed in Williamsburg's Southside community prior to El Puente were not designed to be welcoming and embracing to the community, parents, or students.

In order to address the breaking point between the

existing public school system and the young people of the Southside, El Puente founded its own high school, El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, and later also re-shaped Middle School 50. These schools are working to repair the relationship of educational institutions with students from the Southside of Williamsburg by creating an educational space where all students feel like they belong.

**BREAKING** between humans is a response driven by fear and isolation, when we turn inward only to what we know and who we know.

A *breaking dynamic* exists when one group turns against an 'outsider' group; the '*otherness*' and threat of the out-group can build psychological or physical walls between the two groups.

In this case a breaking dynamic is systemic, between the *traditional school system* and *students of color*. The traditional school system was not designed to serve students of color; this is apparent in how schools are designed, the curriculum used, the demographic composition of teachers and staff, and the lack of opportunities for parent and community involvement.

When students feel othered, it impacts their *opportunity to learn*.



## Snapshots: life at southside Williamsburg community schools

El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice and Middle School 50 richly demonstrate belonging — both in the schools and in the wider community fabric. These are some scenes of life at these schools.

Top right: El Puente students perform at their annual Unity Day celebration which takes place on the day before Thanksgiving.

Top left: Students gather for the launch of the school's Debate room. Then-chancellor Richard Carranza observes the Debate team members in action. MS50 has been the state champion for several years and also has a bilingual team that debates in Spanish.

Middle left: An art piece presented at the El Puente Academy Integrated Arts Project showcase.

Below: Members of the El Puente community march at the 2014 NYC Climate March with giant Madre Tierra (*mother earth*) puppet.



# Action Toward Bridging

**B**EFORE FOCUSING ON ACADEMICS, El Puente Academy and Middle School 50 prioritize forming relationships to ensure that students feel seen and heard. Frances raised a key question, “if a student feels invisible, how can we expect them to graduate or do well in school?”

Belonging at El Puente Academy and Middle School 50 is developed through The Transformative Community Building model. A few key areas of this model include (Lucerna, Parker and Scott, 2018):

- 1) holistic program and curriculum design that encompass inclusiveness, community, respect and creating a welcoming culture
- 2) principled mentoring that focuses on consistency and continuity, clear roles and boundaries
- 3) a membership process that encourages participation in and responsibility to a larger community, collaboration and interconnectedness among all members including staff, parents, and students

In practice, fostering belonging involves creating a welcoming environment from the moment a student steps into the building. When a young person enters El Puente or MS50, they are warmly greeted at the door, “Hola Maria” or “Good morning Danny, how are you feeling? It is good to see you!” When they enter the school, they see their family, their culture, their heritage, their traditions, and their language being honored and celebrated. In contrast to other school settings that greet their students with a metal detector – sending the signal that students are seen as a potential threat – students at El Puente are welcomed in the language of *potential, dreams, and possibilities*.

School programs and curriculum offer opportunities for students to make decisions, voice opinions, and experience agency and ownership. Both schools use the term “facilitator” to describe teachers; this recognizes the active role that each student plays in their own learning, rather than the conventional expert and passive learner approach. Tamia, an alum from El Puente, explained, “the teachers teach us and we teach them. We learn from each other.” She went on to say, “We use our experience in the classroom

El Puente students dressed as toxic avengers gather at a march against Radiac Research Corporation, a radioactive waste plant located in Williamsburg. Social justice is part of the curriculum, and the community at the school has a long history of marching in support of social justice issues — often with a banner in hand as seen here.



so we can create better conversations and talk about situations happening in the future or now.” The flipping of the teacher role acknowledges reciprocity: each student comes with knowledge and lived experience that can be centered in the curriculum, and facilitators can learn from their students as well.

Additionally, the school curriculum has art and other programs that reflect members’ cultures and identities, ensuring that students see themselves and their communities in their pedagogy. Tamia elaborated:

*Even though we have a curriculum, we can add or change it depending on the classroom vibe and energy ... For example, I can connect something that is happening in my homeland to a book that we are reading ... The more that you feel connected to something the more you want to give it your all.*

Additionally, the art curriculum incorporates youth culture that speaks to students, such as hip hop, spoken

word, and graffiti. Who students are and become through art is respected, honored, and celebrated.

Administrators provide facilitators with the space and adequate time to nurture relationships with students; in turn, these relationships support and honor the passion and potential of students.

The small school size allows for teachers to form strong relationships with students using “family” structures to further personalize relationships and map students’ developmental trajectory (Hamedani et al, 2015). These practices are in place to ensure that students understand that facilitators and other school staff are committed to supporting them, helping them to achieve their highest potential, and materialized the dreams they have for themselves.

Dashley, a current student at El Puente, explained that students and facilitators form a “trust bond” and feel as though a friend is teaching them. They described

**BRIDGING** is a project aimed at crossing identity-based lines. It addresses a breaking dynamic in order to develop a **cohesive, more inclusive, durable, and more expansive “we”** that can be identified and recognized to bring about belonging and greater social justice.

To “bridge” involves two or more people or groups coming together across acknowledged lines (such as race and/or power dynamics inherent within those social structures) of difference in a way that both affirms their distinct identities and creates a new inclusive “we” identity.

The new “we” that results need not agree on everything, or even very much; but its members should have a **shared empathy** and **lasting stake in one another**. All its members should also experience an authentic sense of belonging. Bridging rejects all strict “us versus them” framings, but without erasing what is different and unique in each party.

Since the breaking point being addressed is systemic, in this case bridging is systemic. El Puente leaders and staff are dismissing the traditional educational system and re-imagining a place that creates opportunities for students and parents to bridge with the educational system, teachers, administrators and other students.



El Puente's community of students, faculty, and family came together in a large sacred circle at this 2017 community event.

the significance of this relationship, and the safety fostered by the trust bond:

*If you don't understand something, you don't feel ashamed to ask because you see them [teachers] as your cousin or uncle or godmother ... and you know you can trust them and they are not going to judge you ... because you trust each other.*

A practice that is particularly critical to El Puente's model is the "sacred circle." Sacred circles are facilitated to create a space for students, teachers and parents to talk as well as to be seen, heard and respected through deep listening. Sacred circles are an opportunity for people to bring their body and soul in times of crisis, conflict, or a rite of passage celebration. In this space there are rules that help to foster inclusion and belonging, including equality with staff, parents, and students. Through conversations and deep listening, sacred circles reaffirm everyone's commitment to one another.

Dashley described sacred circles "as a tool to meet new people" as well as one's own self. They reflected on these sacred circles:

*They ask you questions like 'what color is your soul today?' and you have to think about it. You get to know more about you and the people around you ... It is a tool that I used to make new friends and to think about myself.*

El Puente includes parents in the decision-making process. Throughout the school year and at both campuses, the schools invite parents to evaluate what works and what does not work, and to co-create solutions and next steps.

At Middle School 50, administrators implemented a parent home-visit with all incoming 6<sup>th</sup> graders. A staff member from the school visited each home to introduce themselves to the parents, and asked them what they dream for their students. In this way, El Puente aims to communicate to parents: "This is your school, this is your place, and we are committed to making those dreams come true."

Lastly, El Puente experiments with ideas when they see a problem. When they became the Community School partner of Middle School 50, attendance and morale was critically low. In addition to hiring a principal, community school director and El Puente staff to help turn around the school, the team implemented a Cafesito Corner. The Cafesito Corner (or "coffee corner," in English) was an intentional meeting space with coffee, donuts, and bagels that was open all day for staff, students, and parents to congregate and create community.

# Outcome — Moving Towards Belonging

**D**ESPITE THE CHALLENGES that students face in their lives, the El Puente schools have had successes. El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice is consistently an A-rated NYC school, and is one of the first nationally recognized “community school” models. Since El Puente assumed Community School leadership of Middle School 50, it has been recognized for its year-round Beacon Afterschool Leadership program, steady improvements in attendance and academics, and increased parent engagement.

A study conducted by Hamedani et al. (2015), found that students at El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice reported:

- 1) a more positive, caring school climate
- 2) greater engagement in school and social emotional support
- 3) felt efficacious and resilient as well as demonstrated a growth mindset
- 4) were more likely to value helping others in their community and work to improve society
- 5) more likely to have ambitious goals for higher education and receive support for these goals

Additionally, students go on to attend competitive universities and successfully graduate from them because El Puente helps match students with universities that have support systems for first-generation college students. Middle School 50 has

not been evaluated extensively but shows metrics of improvement. Attendance at MS50/El Puente Community School is now up to 94% and students had improvements in math and literacy.

It is clear that students feel seen and supported. When asked if they feel like they belong at El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, Dashley answered:

*When I got to El Puente, everything was so different. Even though I did not know the language [English], everyone tried to speak my language [Spanish] or try to translate so you can feel integrated. [This] made me feel like I was part of something, I did not have to be scared or stressed about the situation that I was in.*

“El Puente helps us make sure our voices are heard,” Tamia added, further articulating the sense of belonging at the school. “Through sacred circles, we get the opportunity to talk out loud without being so scared,” she said.

Frances also stated that she has seen the largest transformation in students who have special challenges. She specifically highlighted an art integration project that connected facilitators and artists to transform the Greek mythology curriculum into a bilingual play; the play incorporated performance and connected the issues observed in the Greek mythology curriculum to issues impacting the students’ community.

**BELONGING** describes values and practices where no person is left out of **our circle of concern**. Belonging means more than having just access, being seen, or feeling included. It means that every member has a **meaningful voice**, that their **well-being is considered**, and that they have the **opportunity to participate** in the design of political, social, and cultural structures. Belonging includes the right to both **contribute** and **make demands** upon society and political institutions.

Here belonging is experienced in the active role that parents and students play in **co-creating a learning environment** and **learning opportunities**.

Frances recalled a 6<sup>th</sup> grader who performed in the play who had language and reading challenges; prior to his involvement in this event, he was unable to participate in many of the text-based exercises in class. This student ended up being one of the stars of the show and learned very complex lines as part of the Greek chorus. The opportunity to partake in a bilingual activity that was presented in a creative manner allowed this student to feel confident participating. Additionally, the facilitators and artists involved expressed great emotion for the opportunity, to experience — as teachers — a new way of connecting with students and facilitating the learning experience.

Frances acknowledged that we must make large systemic changes to our country's school system, but through El Puente she has been able to provide a welcoming school environment to the students in her community. She hopes that others can begin to see students for their potential rather than their deficits, and one way to do that is to foster a schooling environment where everyone feels like they belong.

“Pride of the Southside / *El Orgullo de Los Sures*” was painted by Los Muralistas de El Puente on the school in 2016. The mural depicts a ‘people’s history of Los Sures’ — the southside of Williamsburg.

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## Further readings and resources

- For a cross-case analysis on social emotional outcomes of El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice read **Hamedani et al**, “**Social emotional learning in high school: How three urban high schools engage, educate, and empower youth—Cross-case analysis**” published by the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (2015).
- To learn more about El Puente’s educational frameworks read **Lucerna et al**. “**Activate: El Puente Transformative Community Building, a Toolkit for Change Makers**” (2018).
- To watch El Puente’s co-founder **Luis Garden Acosta** and others discuss the importance of including bridging frameworks into their work, watch “**Transforming Othering into Belonging: A Movement for a Fair & Inclusive Society,**” from the Othering & Belonging National Conference (2015).

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Tamia Dantzler and members of the Williamsburg Leadership Center painted this mural at MS50 as part of a Restorative Justice project.