

Witnessing the Power of Environment at Norris Square

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As we sit on the wooden benches, the students and I feel our torsos squiggle up the wall with the Crayola green vines, our heads in the canopy reading about dinosaurs and dragons. Under the tumultuous palm leaves, blue butterflies, red parrots, and spotted jaguars, lies peace. The students and I share a common bond, as we grow and learn and laugh together in the jungle. Everyone who joins our class seems to feel at ease, too. It's from the mystical power of the jungle, or better yet, it's the power of Norris Square Neighborhood Project. It's the power of environment.

In the kindergarten room of Norris Square, a jungle mural painted on all four walls is part of the powerful Latino atmosphere. This non-profit community center embraces the Puerto Rican culture and in the process encourages students to do so as well. Its mission is carefully painted on a wall mural: "to nurture and actively involve neighborhood children and their families in learning responsibility for self, culture, community and environment." During my service at Norris Square, I discovered that the cultural influence of this after-school center — from its bright colors and gardens to the Puerto Rican adornments, staff, and education programs — constructs a powerful environment that affects the children's identity.

The Norris Square Neighborhood gardens were not only the first Puerto Rican, but also first Latino, gardens in Philadelphia. In an effort to resist the intense violence, drug presence, and racial tension in the 1970s and 80s, Norris Square turned vacant lots into flourishing gardens. In 1982, the 2nd Street garden was named *Raices*, which means "roots" in Spanish. At Norris Square Neighborhood, the organization has transformed six abandoned lots into "culturally-themed gardens that preserve green space and energize the Norris Square Community" (Norris Square Neighborhood Project 2011).

The first time I walked up to Norris Square I remember smiling and thinking, "I already love it here." The two colorful townhouse buildings, bright turquoise with pink doorframes and yellow doors, stand out from the rest of the monochromatic suburbia. It's hard not to fall in love with it. Murals with portraits of Puerto Rican men, women, and children are alongside the building. My two favorite murals are of a Puerto Rican boy. The first is a portrait of a young boy, standing in the countryside wearing a traditional *pava* hat, made of straw, and holding a Puerto Rican flag. The next mural is the boy grown up wearing a cap and gown, standing against the same scenic background. The murals and their bright, enthusiastic colors embrace the Puerto Rican culture and send a powerful message of achievement and community. Utilized as a powerful story-telling device, they instruct, remind, and empower the community about its culture.

The beautiful faces on the murals bring a name, face, and story to social justice issues. The personal stories portrayed on the murals enable others to understand and connect to deep and complex issues. Layered with culture and history, the murals allow people to understand not only their own interesting viewpoint of the world, but also another's family history, unique Latino culture, and lifestyle.

"Latino" is a term used to include a multitude of ethnic groups, such as Mexicans, Cubans, Dominicans, Central and South Americas, and Puerto Ricans (Corlett 1999). Although the groups differ in history, they relate in language and culture. The Latino culture is one that

embraces and celebrates these ethnicities. Norris Square encourages its students to reach academic success, but to never forget their rich Puerto Rican culture.

Painted in the lobby in bold colors are the words, “health, environment, *casa*, community, *amor*, respect, latino, *jovenes*, enriching, *historia*, *amigos*, self, bridges, *dominicano*, leadership, culture, *mexicanos*.” The message is displayed in English and Spanish seamlessly, enhanced by the flow of multihued colors. What might sound chaotic and fragmented is just the opposite — a serene atmosphere of unity. The combination of Spanish and English words in the lobby creates a welcoming environment. The entire building is splashed with vibrant colors, creating the feeling that the Puerto Rican culture is lovingly wrapping its arms around you. A warm ambiance is created with walls that are drenched in cheerful shades of greens, purples, blues, yellows, and reds. Puerto Rican flags are scattered around the building. Many are prominently portrayed on walls and in windows, and others are tucked away into corners and sidewalls. Norris Square does not shy away from its heritage, but embraces and displays it proudly.

A colorful sunflower mural serves as a metaphor for the center. The center provides the roots and stability from which to grow. The children are the sunflowers, growing from the careful care, sunshine, and watering of after-school programs. The teachers at Norris Square are the gardeners that water the minds of the growing youth, positively promoting the Latino culture, and serving as role models.

The teachers at Norris Square not only nurture the minds of their students, but they also serve as common ground between two languages and cultures. Culturally competent teachers are necessities for Latino youth and serve as “cultural brokers” (Nevarez and Rico 2007). Orlando is from Puerto Rico like most of the other Norris Square educators and students. A kindergarten and first grade teacher at Norris Square, he is a prime example of a “cultural broker.” Orlando is a 25-year-old gay man, who is proud of his Latino culture and secure with his homosexuality. Orlando has a strong presence as an educator and his confidence inspires his students and others around him to be proud of who they are. Teachers also serve as positive role models for the youth as they provide academic education in their after-school programs while reinforcing their Puerto Rican heritage. All of the teachers at NSNP are bilingual, speaking Spanish and English. Many of the students at the center attend bilingual elementary schools. While most of the parents speak English, there are a handful of parents who do not. Children who do not hear English at home benefit from teachers who use both languages at Norris Square. Orlando and the teachers at Norris Square serve as the middle ground and resource with which to merge the two cultures.

This cultural support is a vital component of academic success. Norris Square understands that to develop independent students and prepare them for meaningful roles in the larger society, it must provide cultural and academic resources. The center emphasizes social and academic responsibility by using “culturally-responsive teaching.” This approach improves students’ comprehensive retention by building on pre-existing knowledge (Padron, Waxman, and Rivera 2002). By reaffirming the students’ culture and knowledge, their self-confidence and self-esteem increase, as well as their openness and ability to learn about other cultures. By using familiar concepts to contextualize new information, Hispanic students feel more comfortable and proud of their academic achievements (Padron, Waxman, and Rivera 2002). Puerto Rican tributes, memories, and souvenirs are scattered throughout Norris Square. Three wooden king statues are displayed on the top shelf in the kindergarten room to represent the Puerto Rican holiday, Three Kings Day. By placing these small cultural objects in the younger children’s classrooms, the students’ understanding of their own culture is reinforced. Another area at the intersection of the kindergarten/first grade “jungle room” and the second/third grade room

displays knickknacks, pictures, and facts from around the world. Each month a new continent is chosen and new objects are exhibited. This encourages worldwide cultural understanding, as well as a deep appreciation of one's own culture. After-school programs such as Norris Square are crucial to the personal, academic, and social success of the Latino youth. Children gain knowledge of numerous cultures, while learning in an environment that fosters their own Latino culture.

Nature is a powerful force in the Latino culture. At NSNP, the garden program makes it possible for the youth to become in touch with nature, and in the process connect with their culture and identity. The gardens are a beautiful and effective method to incorporate Latino ethnicity, positively affecting the children's identity. Elements within the garden proudly portray Puerto Rican culture. What used to be a place of destruction is now a thriving garden of life, and the children understand the message of transformation.

The gardens are created by youth for youth. By planting trees, flowers, and plants, and taking care of them year round, the children watch their hard work blossom. The garden is more than just an area to grow plants; it's a place where the children feel safe, free, and accepted. They create the garden, take care of it, and call it their own. The gardens are decorated with stones depicting the students' dreams for the future and promises to themselves to become better people. Classrooms are assigned to certain fields, returning each week (weather permitting) to take care of their gardening projects. Every warm Monday afternoon, my kindergarten class went to the gardens to pick weeds, water, and care for the plants and vegetables. In the article "Enhancing Environmental Awareness through the Arts," Kumara Tarr (2008) reported that in a project involving 28 children in Sydney, Australia, an art-based method of teaching had an effect on the children's awareness of the natural environment or "natural world." Tarr evaluated the success of the method by assessing "how much the children talked about the natural environment, the way they incorporated concepts about it into their play and their attitudes towards it" (Tarr 2008). The Norris Square project builds on the principles of the Australian project, generalizing the method's effect of an increased understanding of nature to that of human culture and diversity. Not only do the students learn to utilize the natural gifts the gardens provide us, but gardens also serve as a metaphor for our world. Each of us is plucked from a different vine, a different plant, but is treated with love and kindness. It is important to appreciate the differences we have, while understanding our similarities.

Los jardines, or the gardens of Norris Square, are perfect examples of preserving its mission and living the Puerto Rican culture. The colors and atmosphere of the garden resemble that of the building itself: bright, colorful, and bold. Iris Brown, the Garden and Cultural Coordinator for NSNP, is said to have "brought herself and her culture to the open space and placed colors everywhere" (Norris Square Neighborhood Project 2011). The main garden is entitled *Las parcelas*, meaning "The Parcels," to echo the different yet connected gardens. The garden has 40 lots, belonging to the organization, big groups, and individuals. The garden has a tiny traditional Puerto Rican home, called *La Casita*. Many people within Norris Square and the community bring their artwork and knickknacks from their homes in Puerto Rico to the garden house. As Orlando stated, "In Puerto Rico, we live by natural resources." *La Casita* has turned into a mini-museum, filled with cooking utensils, crafts, instruments, and more. As stated on the organization's website: "Filled with found objects and hand-crafted wooden furniture, *Las parcelas* was a piece of Puerto Rico in the middle of North Philadelphia" (Norris Square Neighborhood Project 2011). *Las parcelas* and the rest of the gardens at Norris Square create a united and proud Latino environment, which enriches and reinforces the children's identity. As

they watch their hard work grow, the youth connect with nature and culture, and learn that they are capable of achieving wonderful things.

Murals serve as the backdrop for each garden and represent important aspects of the Latino culture and significant Puerto Rican leaders. They are educational and remind the students of their proud culture. As described by the center: “The towering mural is like an unfurled textbook, depicting the rich and complex history of Puerto Rico and its people” (Norris Square Neighborhood Project 2011). Our class’s garden, *raices*, had a mural of Hiram Bithorn, the first major league Puerto Rican baseball player. The murals are another type of creative art form that spread pride.

The gardens, murals, and cultural messages do more than provide a space of comfort and unity; they also facilitate an understanding of the concept of identity. At Norris Square, we watched and cared for tomato, pepper, and lettuce plants as well as numerous types of flowers. We talked about the different plants and their unique characteristics, and that each requires the same attention, love, and care.

The wide array of plants within the gardens serves as a metaphor for the many types of people in the world. At Norris Square, teachers encourage students to understand that each unique plant has its own valuable attributes and qualities, and the children come to understand this lesson in the context of people. Within the gardens, plants from all over the world – both native and nonnative – thrive in unity, making it a global network. An article by educator Verity Jones (2002) titled “Identity and the Environment” discusses new approaches to teaching regarding cross-cultural issues. Jones found that visiting botanical gardens with an elementary school group served as a basis to discuss “native” and “non-native” identity. Unfortunately, some members of society view the words “immigrant” and “non-native” with a negative connotation. A 1998 journal article by Evans, a noted sociologist, explains, “when native means ‘good’ and non-native (or alien) means ‘bad’ the language comes to a form of racism.” Jones pushed her children to question the meaning of the words and discovered that through the process of identifying plants, the children changed how they identified themselves.

Identity must first be defined to form a foundation to move forward and create theories. Herbert Gans (2007) describes identity as a social phenomenon that must be discussed in a social setting. There are primarily two aspects that make up one’s identity: race and ethnicity. Race is described as an “imposed” identification, whereas ethnicity is a “chosen” identity (Gans 2007). Relating these two aspects to the garden metaphor, the “imposed” identity is the words “native” and “non-native” plant. “Chosen” identity is the biological name of the plant, for instance rhododendron, daisy, or iceberg lettuce. However, these two identifications describe different concepts. Although society plays a large role in the “imposed identity,” or race, it also influences our “chosen” identity.

As social animals, we humans choose to identify ourselves with something that is familiar and comfortable to what we already know. Therefore, community and society play a significant role in not just the “imposed” aspect of our identity, but the chosen aspect as well. Children in a new culture do not rely solely on their parents or form the same identity as them. “When two people of different ethnic origin have children, those children choose between the two parental identities or choose neither and identify as Americans, as many children of intermarriage do” (Gans 2007). Children at a young age are working to construct their own identity, and their environment plays a big role in its development. Parents want their children to identify with them and their culture. Yet, children often do not conform to their parent’s identity, even when they are in the same community or environment (Jones 2002). Therefore, the impact

that the Puerto Rican after-school program has on the child is extremely important. The center provides a positive environment in which children can thrive, learn, and value their heritage. In this rich cultural environment, they make sense of their own identity for themselves. Norris Square creates an environment that allows Latino youth to identify themselves with their cultural community. Their identification in turn reinforces the cultural identity of the after-school program (Nevarez and Timo 2007). The process is circular, as both the student and atmosphere reaffirm each other of the strong presence of Latino cultural identity.

Norris Square is also an important site for the Latino community to gather, reinforce family, and conduct social activities. In this role, the center facilitates the Latino culture in the social setting, where pride and solidarity are encouraged and promoted through education and the cultural atmosphere. Strong bonds are reinforced when the community gathers to address social and political issues. I was fortunate to do service at Norris Square during the 2012 presidential election season. Weeks before election night, the center handed out “It’s Time” stickers from the *Ya Es Hora* company. The stickers encouraged Latino citizens to go and vote and to let their voice be heard. The *Ya Es Hora* website is entirely in Spanish and presents videos and information on the presidential candidates. The site serves as a comfortable place for non-English Latino citizens to learn more about the political process of the United States. Norris Square did not attempt to persuade the families or endorse a particular candidate, but instead encouraged the families to let their voice be heard. Centers such as NSNP provide an opportunity to strengthen the values and “identity politics” of the culture. The community atmosphere influences thoughts, which in turn creates feelings of pride, solidarity, and nostalgia (Gans 2007). Activities that include “identity politics,” – meaning “political activity devoted primarily to expressing and defending activist ethnic or racial identity” – further reinforce a strong sense of community (Gans 2007).

The community created by the Norris Square Neighborhood Project embraces the Puerto Rican culture, and encourages its students to do so as well. The environmental aspects of Norris Square, such as colors, quotes, portrayal of flags, people, and educational, gardening, and social programs, create a powerful Latino environment, which influences the youth’s identity. Since identity is both imposed and chosen, society and community play a large role in both aspects. The environment impacts and shapes a society and affects one’s identity. Norris Square positively encourages and influences the youth to embrace their Latino identity. They reinforce the importance of community and culture, while imparting knowledge and education to the children. Norris Square celebrates the Puerto Rican heritage and culture in North Philadelphia. It is a home I will surely miss on Monday afternoon.

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