Articulating social change in Puerto Rico: Environmental education as a model for youth socio-political development and community-led school reform

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Articulating Social Change in Puerto Rico: Environmental Education as a Model for
Youth Socio-Political Development and Community-Led School Reform

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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© Copyright 2010, Federico Cintrón-Moscoso
A María Cristina Moscoso-Álvarez, gran mujer caribeña, por introducirme a la antropología e inculcarme el amor y el respeto por los demás.

A Federico Cintrón-Fiallo por demostrarme con la acción y la palabra que en la política siempre hay espacio para la sensibilidad y que el arma más poderosa de un revolucionario es su humanidad.

A mi clan Moscoso por siempre ser y estar…
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Articulating Social Change in Puerto Rico: Environmental Education as a Model for Youth Socio-Political Development and Community-Led School Reform

Federico Cintrón-Moscoso

ABSTRACT

Recent attempts at developing an environmental education agenda in public schools emphasize the need to foster greater public awareness about environmental rights, issues, and solutions, while producing citizens with the knowledge and skills needed to address the ecological challenges of contemporary society. However, some scholars have argued that the attempt to integrate environmental principles into the school curricula has created a conflict between the politically-oriented goals of environmental education and the more passive practices of uncritical assimilation and reproduction found in many schools today (Stevenson 2007). Moreover, although there is a need for public schools to take on the challenge of prioritizing environmental education, they may not be ready to do so. Ideological conflicts, structural constraints and perceptions about the urgency of the problem seem to affect the ways in which implementation of these new philosophies and practices take place.

One approach that the environmental movement in Puerto Rico is utilizing to fulfill what they perceive as their responsibility to the new generations of Puerto Ricans and society at large is to partner with local elementary public schools in an effort to develop activities and knowledge relevant to local ecological issues and environmental
principles. To better understand this complex articulation, I set out to conduct an ethnographic case study of Conuco, a youth-led activist group working in collaboration with four elementary schools in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico.

Utilizing an eco-critical approach, this study looks at the multiple-levels in which Conuco intersects as a public organization and a transformative space for its individual members. By caring for and working with elementary school children, the young people in the study learn to behave in ways that are ecologically conscious while, at the same time, fulfilling their perceived social responsibility as mentors and environmental activists. However, while these practices might improve the performance of individual teachers and the level of awareness and participation of particular groups of students, they raise questions about the ability of the school system to confront these new challenges systematically by transforming the system of instruction and improving its commitment to the environment. How effective these strategies are and what they mean for all involved—teachers, students, and activists—are the primary questions being explored in this study.
Preface

I would like to thank my major advisor, Dr. Susan Greenbaum, for her guidance and support throughout this long but rewarding process. Without her direction and reassuring deadlines this dissertation would have never been completed. Dr. Greenbaum’s clear understanding of the role of anthropologists in local politics and her engagement and willingness to support her students through new pathways of research and action have served as inspiration for my own scholarship. Special thanks go to Dr. Jay Schensul who introduced me to so many aspects of applied and educational research and who has devoted so much of her time to educating and transforming me into a better intellectual. I also want to extend a very important recognition to the other extraordinary members of my committee, Dr. Nancy Romero-Daza, Dr. Ken Williamson, and Dr. Barbara Cruz, for challenging me at every step of the way and for sharing their knowledge and wisdom with me. Their friendship, collegiality and enormous humanity provided me with consolation and sympathetic advice through the emotionally strenuous battles that accompanied this journey away from home. Loving thanks go to Karen Dyer for the hours spent revising and editing the multiple drafts, papers and memos produced as part of finishing this manuscript. Her dedication and caring concern for my success and improvement are a testament of love and companionship. I will be forever in debt. To Margarita and Ana, members of the Moscoso clan, thanks for their indispensable assistance in finalizing the technical aspects of this dissertation, for helping facilitate initial relationships with Conuco, and for sharing their graduate stories with me as
cautionary tales of what to do and what not to do. Finally, and most significantly, a heartfelt thank you to the young people who took the challenge of engaging in this continuing conversation about hope, possibilities and social change. To them, a big hug in solidarity and communion as we develop the friendships started through this research.
Chapter One: Introduction

The title of this dissertation suggests that social change occurs as a consequence of complex articulations in society that take place through the interaction between individual people, associations of people with common interests, and state and private institutions. All of these actors in the social drama come together at different levels of the public sphere and at different times in history to advance their specific interests, whether through the forging of alliances, the imposition of will, political negotiations or oppositional maneuvers that end up giving advantage to certain actors over others. In most cases, these articulations are not static and thus transform themselves through time, producing social change. The consequences of such changes are diverse. Some have great implications for nations, or even the world, and others affect only local settings and individual lives.

In this dissertation, my intent is to present and analyze one such articulation: the formation of a group of young individuals concerned with teaching environmental education to children in four elementary public schools in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico. This articulation is significant not only because it has clear implications for the individuals and communities involved, but also because of its potential in promoting change at a larger scale: (1) nationally, through the critique of the Puerto Rico Department of Education; and, (2) internationally, as part of the global campaign in favor of the environment. Therefore, an integral part of this analysis is the group’s utilization of environmental education as a model for youth socio-political development and community-led school
reform. As the reader will discover throughout these pages, this particular articulation brings together an intricate network of local and international players that includes the members of the youth-led activist group, the teachers, principals and students of the participating schools, and an array of public and private institutions (e.g. University of Puerto Rico, the Puerto Rico Department of Education, and the Sierra Club). All of these stakeholders hold unique perspectives on issues related to education, the environment, community organizing and development, citizen participation and the political and economic relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. However, before entering into that discussion, I believe it is important to share with the reader some points of departure regarding my involvement in this project and, particularly, with this exciting group of young activists.

**Why Study Young People? Young People Around The World**

The first point of departure has to do with my interest in studying young people. I will argue that, without a doubt, we live in a youth(full) world. According to the United Nations (UN 2007), which describes young people as a “powerful resource for development and critical actors in the realization of the Millennium Goals,” in 2007 approximately 45 percent of the world’s population was 24 years old or younger, and 20 percent (1.2 billion) was between the ages of 15 to 24, just as the participants in this study. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the percentage of young people in the population was close to 18 percent that same year, which compares similarly with proportions for underdeveloped countries across the world. In Haiti, for example, the percentage of youth (15-24) is 21.5 percent, in contrast with that of the U.S. (13.9 percent), or Puerto Rico (14.8 percent), where life expectancy is higher.
As reflected in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959, the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, and the recent proclamation of the International Year of Youth (from 12 August 2010—11 August 2011), the United Nations has recognized for a great part of its existence the need to protect children and develop the potential of young people around the world. This has been translated into an agenda that includes social, cultural and economic projects conducive to the individual and collective development of the younger sector of the world’s population. Above all, these programs acknowledge that this group is often the most vulnerable to the effects of social, economic, health and environmental inequalities, regardless of national borders.

Regarding the state of the world’s climate, young people have been especially vocal about the future of the environment, and with it they have found a niche from which to develop their own social, cultural and political work. This has accordingly granted them center stage as agents of change. Evidence of the importance of this issue for young people today is the UN dedication of the World Youth Report 2009 to Youth and Climate Change (www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/wyr09.htm). According to reports gathered by the UN in many countries, the issue of sustainability has moved to the forefront of youth organizations everywhere in part because of youth’s realization that they are the ones who will inherit the planet and therefore have the responsibility to protect it.

This sense of stewardship of the planet has resulted in at least four main areas of action championed by the youth of the world: (1) integration of environmental education into education and training programs; (2) facilitation and distribution of information concerning the environment and youth utilization of environmentally rational
technologies; (3) strengthening of youth participation in the preservation, protection and improvement of the environment; and (4) promotion of the role of the media in the dissemination of environmental topics among young people (UN 2003, 2005). Although the merits, execution and results of such campaigns could be subjected to immense criticism—e.g. who is actually benefiting from the programs, how the programs are being sustained, what standards are being used to define and assess the interventions, and the level of involvement accorded to communities in the process—the important aspect of these efforts rests in the recognition of the substantive role that young people could be, and are, playing in the formation and articulation of more democratic and just societies. The participants in this study are a testament of these efforts.

**Youth research and access to participation**

As will be discussed in Chapter Three, the UN is not alone in promoting the inclusion of young people in the daily life of their communities and nations and, hence, it could be argued that in today’s contemporary societies, young people have become one of the most dynamics sectors committed to social change. This is the case not only because of their continuously growing numbers, but more importantly because of a reconceptualization of young people’s roles, actions and meanings in the social, political, economic and cultural spheres.

Not too long ago, Western psychological and sociological approaches focused for the most part on describing youth behavior (adolescence in particular) as “pathological” and “abnormal.” This view negatively produced a stigmatized image of youth that blamed them for the malaises that afflict them—e.g. unemployment and dropouts rates, lack of access to quality health, and violent environments—in turn resulting in restricted
access to economic and political resources. This state of victimization constrains their ability to become successful producers of society (Ginwright, Noguera and Cammarota 2006; Lloyd 2005; Reguillo 2003).

On the contrary, recent socio-cultural models in anthropology and other behavioral disciplines pay greater attention to the structural factors that exert pressure and exclude young people from positive public participation (Ginwright and James 2002). These approaches attempt to describe youth as “experiencers” and active producers of society (Bucholtz 2002). Although we can still observe the negative consequences of the former approach, the more current perspectives attempt to reestablish the important socio-political, historical and cultural role of young people in the complex scaffolding of contemporary life. Consequently, now more than ever, advocates, policy-makers, educators, and researchers are looking for ways in which to engage with youth in finding solutions to the issues that affect them. Their search for youth participation has to do not only with the understanding that young people ought to be responsible for their own future, and the acceptance that they have valuable things to contribute to the process of social change, but also because of their particular perspectives and needs (Bucholtz 2002; Gonzalez et al. 2005; Luykx 1999; Schensul and Berg 2004).

Correspondingly, this dissertation argues that to effectively improve young people’s access to participation and decision-making opportunities, it is critical to understand the dynamics of youth cultures and their role in negotiating and contesting their space in society. Accordingly, one goal of this dissertation is to understand youth involvement in their communities, focusing on how young people have been perceived by the adult world, and how they have perceived and represented themselves to that
world. As such, this study focuses on multiple aspects of the youth experience, including, but not limited to, young people’s access to resources, political and communal participation, active citizenship, identity formation and historical positioning within their social contexts. I particularly focused on the intersection between schools and their surrounding neighborhoods, as well as issues concerning youth organization and community development. In sum, this dissertation is, above all, an examination of young people’s possibilities, adaptability, and choices.

**Getting Started: A Long Walk Back to My Backyard**

The second point of departure has to do with my involvement with this project and the group under study, as well as the pathway that led me back to my backyard in Puerto Rico. Numerous personal, educational and work experiences during the last eight years have been crucial in preparing me for this dissertation. In 2001, I joined the Institute for Community Research (ICR) in Hartford, Connecticut, seeking new anthropological approaches to addressing issues of social justice and applied research with children and youth. At ICR, I had the opportunity to participate in several research projects on these issues, including a prevention program for Latino parents and children, a pilot study on Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) with middle-school students, and a district-wide implementation of a social development curriculum in grades 6 through 8.

Although seemingly different, all these projects had in common the integration of alternative group and inquiry-based pedagogies that incorporate academic content with the examination of the social conditions affecting local schools and communities. My work at ICR opened my eyes to new perspectives in applied social research and
interdisciplinary community-based intervention, but more importantly, it allowed me to
develop the research, communication and affective skills vital to my own development as
a critically engaged researcher. Additionally, it was through this experience that I found
and nurtured my passion for educational and youth research—a passion that has
motivated me to develop a dissertation topic that intertwines the topics of community-led
school reform, civic engagement and activism, and youth socio-political development.

Years later, as a graduate assistant, I had the opportunity to assist and train
undergraduate students participating in three separate ethnographic field schools, one in
Costa Rica and two in Puerto Rico. From my visit to Costa Rica emerged my first
dissertation proposal examining the effects of globalization and unplanned development
(caused mainly by unorganized tourism) on youth in central Costa Rica. The intention of
the research was to work with local youth in understanding the relationship between these
phenomena and their role in bringing about change for them and their communities. In
other words, I was interested in studying the possible ways in which young people could
respond to the impact of tourism in this zone by understanding local participation in the
developing process. However, after initial arrangements were made for me to partner
with a local research institution, elements out of my control prevented me from
conducting the research at that site. Much was learned about the uncertainties of
conducting research internationally and the complexities surrounding community
partnerships. However, a debt is still owed to the families that opened their houses to me
and the young people who taught me so much about their life experiences while working
in the field school. Hopefully, one day I will be able to return.
My back-up plan was to follow the relationships newly established through the field school back home to Cayey, Puerto Rico. Similar to the youth in Costa Rica, young “Cayeyanos” were quite critical of the circumstances affecting their development and expressed interest in developing a project to explore some of the causes and possible solutions to those circumstances. Once more, my objective as critical ethnographer and engaged researcher was to develop a study to document the implementation of a YPAR project that would serve as a space for young people to analyze and actively participate in the lives of their community. I argued that by creating formal spaces for youth participation, communities recognize and legitimize the right of young people to be part of the community’s development and their own personal growth. The process of gaining access to political power (i.e. youth inclusion and participation in public life) can be facilitated by the formation of a structured process of discussion, research and action that will allow young people to make better informed decisions about what they want for their community and for themselves. More specifically, I wanted to know: How do young people learn about their social and natural environments, and how do they translate that knowledge into action? How can we work with youth to create positive spaces within their communities where they can critically and collectively engage in conceiving and experiencing what is best for them, their families, and their society? What are the characteristics of youth collective participation? And, what cultural spaces promote or inhibit this participation?

Contrary to my previous efforts to go to Costa Rica, this time I was able to start my research in Cayey, where I interviewed young residents and adult community leaders about the possibility of carrying out my research in that neighborhood, among other
topics. This time I was also careful not to take for granted my still-fragile relationships with that community until it was clear that the project was moving along. Also, given my familiarity with the country, I took the opportunity to explore other sites for research and map out different anecdotal instances in which young people were engaging in community development and collective action.

Rather quickly I learned about many of these instances, which unfortunately seemed to be unstudied, especially by local anthropologists. Most of the youth engagements were in the areas of cultural revitalization, sports and environmental degradation caused by development. In particular, there were several activist groups advocating in favor of preserving the beaches along the coast of Puerto Rico and stopping the development of mega-resorts in the north side of the island. These groups were connected, sometimes unintentionally, to the broader pro-environment movement and in many cases the participating youth were being politically formed by national and international organizations like Casa Pueblo and the Sierra Club. Furthermore, some of the young people trained by these organizations were now sprouting off them to form their own groups and associations. One of these such groups was Conuco, founded by a young women trained in part through the environmental leadership program of the Sierra Club, and also through connections with local environmental and social justice grassroots organizations.

Conuco was particularly interested in my research, since it was founded and directed by young people and their goal was to affect community-led school reform through environmental education and action research. This appeared to be a great opportunity to document that process without having to bring together otherwise
unfamiliar youth to work with each other. However, deciding to work with Conuco would remove me one step further from the process of youth development itself, positioning my persona as an “unobtrusive” observer vis-à-vis the youth group. This tension was never resolved, given the interest of the group in dissolving those distinctions by including me as a member, an allied and a collaborator depending on the occasion and task at hand (this will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters). However, for some of the most active members—all women and always present at every meeting and activity—the separation of roles became affectionately clear as on occasions when they referred to the group as “four women and an anthropologist.” This situation was quite entertaining among this group of young women as my positionality and identity—i.e. anthropologist, graduate student, Puerto Rican, older and male—was continuously redefined as a “role model,” an “outsider,” “knowledgeable” about topics of their interest (like anthropology/research, education, community organizing and YPAR), and even just “another from the bunch.”

For me, this brought a separate type of excitement. I regarded the group as possible future students in an academic institution, committed participants in a research project where they were the central focus, and fellow Puerto Ricans looking for alternative ways to improve the conditions of this particular neighborhood and society at large. I also experienced a certain familiarity and unsolicited pride in seeing how this group of young activists—some of whom shared similar political and class backgrounds with me and my cousins their age—engaged with issues of social justice, politics, education and visual and plastic arts. However, this also sparked frustration and disillusionment at times when I interpreted their actions as “slacking” or not being
serious enough. Hopefully, all of these personal struggles came through in the analysis of the data, as they are an integral part of the research process. As qualitative researchers, we are the most important instrument of research and we collect and analyze data with our intellect and our emotions. This instrument gets tuned and sharpened as we develop rapport with others and as we immerse ourselves in the process of research. The product of our work is thus the balancing act of systematically gathering data while consciously committing ourselves to the advancement of social justice (Bonfil-Batalla 1966; Fals-Borda 1979; Schensul and Schensul 1978; Singer 1994; Stavenhagen 1971).

About this Dissertation: Synopsis of Chapters

This dissertation is organized into six chapters, each dealing with a different aspect of the research project. Chapters Two and Three present a review of the literature in the areas of anthropology, development, environmentalism and youth research. Although few studies in anthropology have focused on groups of young environmental activists, the literature presented in Chapter Two on land preservation, ecotourism, indigenous/local knowledge, and environmental rights is highly pertinent to fostering a deeper understanding of related aspects found in Conuco’s objectives, values, and practices. Some of these elements include the history and currency of the environmental movement, the political economy of development strategies and the exploitation of natural resources, and the role of grassroots and other alternative models of development that address the balance between the preservation of the natural environment and the promotion of cultural identities and human rights. Other topics included in this review are the advancement of environmental education as a way to ensure sustainable and just change, and the study of young people’s participation and experiences in social change.
Chapter Three deals more in-depth with the reconceptualization of young people as experiencers of social change. To achieve that, the chapter takes the reader on an interdisciplinary exploration of youth’s work, social and cultural production and reproduction, educational anthropology, and critical pedagogy. The first part of this chapter deals with the history of adolescent studies as they have been dominated by psychological and sociological theories. The second part is dedicated to more contemporary approaches to the study of young people, centering on those developments within the discipline of anthropology. The third and final section of this chapter deals specifically with the topic of youth participation in an attempt to discuss previous efforts at developing methodologies and strategies to enhance young people’s participation in a broad scope of issues and through an equally extensive range of activities.

The next chapter, Chapter Four, describes in detail the goals and objectives of this study, the research questions that guide it, and the procedures utilized for data collection. Additionally, it discusses the data analysis, the challenges and limitations of the research project, and the importance and implications of this work for the people who collaborated in it and, more generally, for academics and others with a special interest in the topics addressed here. Crucial to this chapter is the elaboration of a methodological approach that draws from previous ecological and critical perspective in anthropology (Berg, Coman and Schensul 2009; Carspecken 1996; LeCompte and Schensul 1999; Schensul and Tricket 2009). The eco-critical approach presented here attempts to move beyond individualistic interpretations of behavior in an effort to shed light on collaborative, multi-level perspectives that take account of relationships between individual actors and
social institutions. This is done critically, by examining those contextual elements that
directly affect behavior, reduce social inequality and promote positive social change.

Chapter Five presents the findings of the research. This chapter is organized in
two main sections, *Historical Antecedents* and *Conuco: The Members and the
Organization*. The first section attempts to place Conuco within the broader context of
the environmental movement in Puerto Rico and the history of school reform. This is
done through a discussion of the external elements that influenced the formation and
characteristics of Conuco’s project and a socio-historical analysis of the broader political,
economic and geographical factors influencing the group’s creation, objectives and
educational activities. The second section expands on the previous one by exploring in-
depth the personal experiences of the individual members. In this section, I intend to
map out the various anthropogenic landscapes in which Conuco’s members interact,
suggesting that collective socio-political behavior and environmental advocacy require
structured opportunities and strategic networking. It should be noted, however, that the
data presented in each individual section cuts across one or more of the suggested
domains and sub-areas, just as they do in the everyday lives of the participants.

Finally, Chapter Six brings all the elements together to discuss the articulation of
young people’s participation in social change and school reform. The chapter also
considers the broader implications of the study for the group and the local community
and suggests strategies for the advancement of environmental education and applied
anthropology, as well as furthering the study of and with youth.
Chapter Two: Anthropology, Development and Environmentalism

Introduction

Recent attempts at developing an environmental education agenda in public schools emphasize the need to foster greater public awareness about environmental rights, issues, and solutions, while producing citizens with the knowledge and skills needed to address the ecological challenges of contemporary society. However, some scholars have argued that the attempt to integrate environmental principles into the school curricula has created a conflict between the politically-oriented goals of environmental education and the more passive practices of uncritical assimilation and reproduction found in many schools today (Stevenson 2007). Moreover, although there is a need for public schools to take on the challenge of prioritizing environmental education, they may not be ready to do so. Ideological conflicts, structural constraints and perceptions about the urgency of the problem are some of the elements that often affect the ways in which implementation of these new philosophies and practices take place.

One approach that teachers in Puerto Rico are using to fulfill what they believe is their responsibility to their students and society is to partner with external environmental groups that can assist them in developing activities and knowledge relevant to local ecological issues and environmental principles. But while these practices might aid individual teachers and increase the level of awareness and participation of particular groups of students, they raise questions about the ability of the school system to confront these new challenges systematically by transforming the system of instruction and
improving its commitment to the environment. How these strategies take place and what they mean for the people involved—teachers, students, and activists—are the primary questions being explored in this study.

The current chapter explores the literature on environmental anthropology and sustainable development in order to develop an analytical framework from which to examine the work of Conuco. Although few studies in anthropology have focused on groups of young environmental activists, the literature produced by this discipline on land preservation, ecotourism, indigenous/local knowledge, and environmental rights is highly pertinent to fostering a deeper understanding of related aspects found in Conuco’s objectives, values, and practices. Some of these elements include the history and currency of the environmental movement, the political economy of development strategies and the exploitation of natural resources, and the role of grassroots and other alternative models of development that address the balance between the preservation of the natural environment and the promotion of cultural identities and human rights. Other areas relevant to this study are the advancement of environmental education as a way to ensure sustainable and just change, included in this chapter, and the study of young people’s participation and experiences in social change, which will be discussed at length in the following chapter. It is important to note that this dissertation is unique in the sense that no other anthropological work has been carried out in Puerto Rico that studies young people’s organizations in the areas of environmental justice, urban social development, and educational reform. The majority of the work outside of anthropology has centered on gathering youth opinions about topics of their interest, or evaluating programs directed at them.
Environmentalism: The Self, the Land, and the Struggle to Change the World

Anthropology has always been interested in studying the ways in which children and youth learn about their surroundings, as well as how they use that knowledge to interpret and act upon the world. Whether knowledge is acquired and produced formally or informally, deliberately or incidentally, educational processes play a critical role in the formation of individuals’ cultural identities and social competence (Bourgois 1996; Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti 2005; Levinson and Holland 1996). Moreover, the content and context of education are always shaped by time and culture, according to the specific needs of distinct groups of people in particular moments of history.

Changes in political, economic and cultural circumstances bring with them new challenges for human societies, demanding that individuals and organized groups acquire new knowledge and skills in order to survive. For instance, today it would be almost impossible for most people around the world to avoid thinking about an environmental crisis. The issues are well-documented: the deterioration of ecosystems and biodiversity (Rapaport 2006), the contamination of water and other food supplies (Whiteford and Whiteford 2005), the decline of health quality across the world (McMichael, Woodruff and Hales 2006), and the disappearance of centuries-old cultural practices developed out of an irreplaceable relationship between human groups and their physical environment (Crate and Nuttal 2008).

Complex social, political, economic, and cultural forces add not only to many of the root causes of these problems but, most significantly, to the impact these issues have on different populations both humans and non-humans, and the possible solutions we might collectively engage in to respond to the global climate challenge. Overall, these
situations are maintained by a globalize political economy that continues to value the indiscriminate mass consumption of natural resources, the commoditization and exploitation of cultures, and top-down decision-making processes that tend to exclude the voices of the poor while privileging those of the wealthy.

While environmentalists seek evidence to demonstrate the effects of global warming, water scarcity or nuclear waste pollution, anthropologists and other social scientists have taken on the task of exploring the social aspects of these human-generated conditions and their impact in communities around the world (Casimir 2008; Johnston 1997, 2002, 2007; Milton 1993; Whiteford and Whiteford 2005).

**Breaking the psychological connection: Modernism and the unnatural self**

Interestingly, for example, are the propositions made by ecopsychologists who assert that the destruction of the world’s environments has to do with the development of Modernity as an ideological and material project that has forced a division between our identity as humans and that of nature, separating humanity from those elements other-than-human (Doherty 2009). Through the reconceptualization of human progress and the technocratization of all processes of daily life, Modernity acts in opposition to the physical world in an attempt to objectify, manage, control and ultimately subordinate it while privileging human existence and its perceived needs (Fisher 2002). This rupture not only has prompted a hasty, unprecedented, and uncritical consumption of the globe’s limited resources, but according to ecopsychologists, has also compromised individuals’ psychological and physical well-being ever since humans have come to believe that “we have no ethical obligation to our planetary home” (Roszak 1992: 14). The consequences of this psychological and emotional split are tangible and severe: a pathological state of
disengagement from the reality of the natural world, a dichotomized understanding of ecological problems as either individual or environmental ones, and a degraded process of psychogenesis resulting in irrational attitudes and behaviors toward the environment (Kidner 1994; Maller, Townsend, Pryor, Brown and St. Leger 2005; Milton 2009; Roszak, Gomes, and Kanner 1995; Rust 2008; Searles 1960). In order to deal with these afflictions, ecopsychologists have proposed an array of “naturalistic” and “experiential” therapies and interventions that both reestablish the moral relationship between human beings and their surroundings (Maller, Townsend, Pryor, Brown, and St. Leger 2005), and promote the pro-environmental behavior needed to confront the current ecological crisis (Rust 2008).

Nevertheless, this approach to psychological analysis and intervention has focused almost exclusively on the cognitive aspects of individual behavior, which attempt to bring about change in people’s actions through personal transformation in knowledge, attitudes and values (Hargreaves 2008; Schensul and Tricket 2009). Even when this conceptual framework is applied to community settings, it has tended to privilege individual outcomes over that of communities as the targets of social change, resulting in interpretations and interventions that isolate individuals from their historical, social, and cultural contexts (Sarason 1981, in Schensul and Tricket 2009; Brewer and Gardner 1996). Additionally, the lack of a multi-level, multi-sector approach to community change interventions has resulted in a lack of integration among externally derived theories and local explanations of change, non-transfer of technical and analytical skills to local populations, dependence on outside experts to carry out the work, and, consequently, unsustainable results, especially in the long-term.
On the contrary, as it will be discussed further below, a multi-level or ecological approach allows for a more flexible and comprehensive understanding of social behavior and change (Bronfenbrenner 1989; Schensul, Berg, Schensul, and Sydlo 2004; Foster-Fishman, Nowell and Yang 2007; Berg, Coman and Schensul 2009). For instance, this approach can aid individuals in identifying and evaluating resources, as well as supportive and stressful elements in their surroundings (Nastasi, Schensul, Balkcom, and Cintrón-Moscoso 2004). It can also assist researchers, service providers and residents in analyzing power relationships within and across particular levels, considering the numerous ways in which these relationships influence and affect behaviors and decisions at each level and among individuals and groups. Combined with a critical theory perspective, this conceptual framework moves beyond the unmasking and amelioration of health and social problems to simultaneously promote interventions geared to reducing disparities and increasing social justice (Freire 1970, 1973; Schensul and Schensul 1978; Fals-Borda 1979, 1987; Weis 1990; Leistyna, Woodrum, and Sherblom 1996; Prilleltensky, Nelson, and Peirson 2001; Barlett 2002; Ginwright and Cammarota 2002; Schensul and Berg 2004; Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005; Martín-Baró 2006).

Anthropology and conservation: Cultural rights or the rights of the land

One of the first areas of interest for environmental anthropologists has been the apparent conflict between land protection and cultural rights. Ever since the increase in protected areas throughout the 1980s and 1990s, anthropologists have been concerned with the effects of these large-scale practices both at the local and global level. One such consequence of these developments is the imposition of Western conceptions of nature and culture as separate entities in places and among people where these distinctions did
not previously exist (Crate and Nuttal 2009; Johnson 2000; Seeland 1997; Strathern 1980). There are several implications behind this: first, it separates people conceptually from their environments; second, it excludes local residents physically from their land; and finally, it assigns them categories, practices and expectations impossible to fulfill—whether by changing their subsistence practices, or by the commoditization of their culture (West, Igoe and Brockington 2006).

Furthermore, with the withdrawal of nation-states’ support of social programs, both for-profit, and not-for-profit, organizations have taken on the responsibility of promoting environmentalism, which includes the creation and management of these protected areas. The sense of morality that underpins the environmentalist movement has reached the international social justice agenda, becoming a significant discursive element to justify and define development strategies throughout the globe (Escobar 1992 1995). Nonetheless, the internationalization of this struggle has created fuzzy new spaces that transcend the boundaries of previously defined political and economic social formations.

Many environmental non-governmental-organizations (NGOs), for example, tend to promote strict notions of nature and culture, devaluing local practices as ‘unnatural’ and therefore harmful to ‘nature’ and humanity. In other cases, the situation is the opposite, where these organizations interpret local cultures as being closer to nature or even part of nature. This interpretation, instead, supports the misconception of indigenous groups as ‘noble savages’, and their cultures as static or untouched (West et al 2006). By renaming and categorizing the physical environment, these international organizations attempt to manage and control the relationship between protected and
unprotected areas, challenging the ways in which towns, nations and regions organize themselves in relation to these new categories and to each other (Chapel, Blyth, Fish, Fox and Spalding 2003; Wilshusen, Brechin, Fortwangler, and West 2002).

According to many anthropologists, this approach to conservation and environmentalism has resulted in limited access to and use of land for rural (mainly poor) people (West et al 2006). Control over these resources has been possible through a series of structural and ideological adjustments including national and international legislations, criminalization of rural people, and privatization of services and natural resources (Greenough and Tsing 2003; Igoe 2003; Mahanty 2003; Negi and Nautiyal 2003).

Although classifications of protected areas vary greatly, depending on size, purpose, and restrictions on human activities, they have become a “way of seeing, understanding and producing nature (environment) and culture (society)” (West et al 2006: 251). This new “cosmology of the natural” has been advanced for the most part by civic environmental organizations and private individuals who see the protection of ‘natural’ areas as a just, moral, and right cause (Brosius 1999; Watts 1993).

Another area of concern that has caught the attention of anthropologists is that of cultural rights and population displacement, resulting from conflicts around the creation and management of protected areas and development projects (e.g. water dams and fisheries). Several anthropologists have examined changes in the daily practices of groups of people after displacement (Brockington 2001; Ganguly 2004; Saberwal, Rangarajan, and Kothari 2000), while others have paid attention to the economic cost and social impact of these population movements (Geisler 2003; Hulme and Murphree 2001). These efforts have resulted in the application of new methodologies to effectively assess
the consequences of these changes and ameliorate the negative impacts (West et al 2006; Cernea 2005; McLean and Straede 2003).

Furthermore, one area that still remains a challenge for further research is to clearly understand the rate of use and occupation of these protected areas, since many of them are owned by nation-states but continue to be used by local people. Although still greatly understudied, what is known is that the ambiguity surrounding use and occupation has to do with changes in land rights and legal definitions (West et al 2006). There is evidence documenting how these changes have resulted in the destruction of traditional land tenure systems, hunting and agricultural practices and grazing activities around the world, creating new conflicts among groups competing for these resources (Knudsen 1999; Rae, Arab, and Nordblom 2002; Sato 2000; Vivanco 2006). Conflict between local communities and conservationists are common in part because of top-down approaches that disregard the needs of previous users of these lands. State violence is also common, especially in poor countries where the nation-state becomes the guarantor of access to and protection of foreign interests, including, in particular, the tourist business. Indeed, West and colleagues (2006) argue that the major impacts of protected areas can be seen in the spread of ecotourism and the commoditization of local cultures that so often follows it (West et al 2006).

**Sustainable development and ecotourism: Alternative models for a new paradigm**

Developing countries that have adopted tourism as a way of earning foreign currency soon realize that only a small amount of the money generated through this industry is actually reinvested in the countries where it is produced. Most of it is filtered
back to the industrialized countries in which these properties and services are actually owned—according to the World Bank, as much as 80-90 percent of the surplus generated by tourism is been repatriated out of Third World countries (Honey 2003: 41). Not only are the profits being lost, but big hotels and cruise ships maintain the practice of purchasing all of their goods overseas, contributing almost nothing to the local economy. On top of that, foreign development exacerbates systems of inequalities already in place in these countries, and creates new ones as a result of changes in political, cultural and economic structures. This brings to many poor countries an array of social ills not seen before—e.g. environmental degradation, and increases in prostitution, crime, drugs and health-related issues.

In response to this scenario, environmentalists, development practitioners, indigenous rights activists and social scientists have promoted different models of sustainable development and ecotourism as more suitable alternatives to development for the preservation of natural resources and already protected areas. In this sense, sustainable tourism is seen not only as a specialized market within the tourist industry, but rather as a “set of principles and practices, closely linked to the concept of sustainable development” (Honey 2003: 42). Hence, these new approaches to tourism are under constant expansion, coining different terms such as “community-based tourism”, “cultural tourism”, or “alternative tourism” (Stronza 2001: 274). All have the goal of promoting a different sort of practice concerned with the integrity of social and natural environments (Smith and Eadington 1992). In Latin America, in particular, the concern for the Amazon region has raised awareness about the importance of preserving rainforests and biological diversity. The integration of these principles has supported the
basis for a new approach to economic and social progress, one in which benefits are bestowed both to the environment and to the people interacting with it.

Sustainable development, thus, is “inspired by the natural history of an area, including its indigenous cultures” (Ziffer 1989, in Stronza 2001: 275). For Ceballos-Lascurian (1996), this approach helps protect local natural and cultural environments while promoting economic growth. This is accomplished by creating activities that have low impacts on the environment, forging a market for the consumption of local culture, and creating new jobs for local people. The inclusion of local communities in the process of development marks an advance in the integration of knowledge systems that have previously been viewed as separate or antagonistic. Consequently, promoters of ecotourism and sustainable community development stress the need for reframing power relationships through the recognition of local systems of knowledge that will allow changes to be relevant and sustainable for the people participating in them.

Anthropologists interested in studying and preserving non-Western cultural practices as well as modernization and cultural change quickly saw the value of these ideas as conceptual tools capable of reshaping the dependency relationship between the Western-driven modernization approaches and the non-Western knowledge systems (Sillitoe 1998, 2002; Purcell 1998; Dei, Hall and Rosenberg 2000). Critical contributions from these investigations have helped to document and unmask the numerous failures of prescriptive approaches to development and progress, while arguing for more recognition and participation of local/indigenous knowledges (LK), which are in most cases equally or better suited to solving some of these developmental problems. LK looks at issues of power structure, hierarchy and integration of knowledge from a cross-cultural,
interactional perspective. It assumes the existence of multiple sites of knowledge and rejects the dominant Western scientific paradigm as universal (Nader 1996). Understanding the context in which these knowledges are produced and used not only validates other ways of looking at the world, but also challenges the hegemonic powers that currently control and shape their production and discourse (Escobar 1995).

Revitalizing them becomes a subversive act: an act of liberation.

Purcell (1998), however, cautions us that in certain occasions, the term knowledge limits that of culture, especially when we want to analytically differentiate between knowledge produced outside of the Western dominant concept of “scientific knowledge” (Purcell 1998). On the one hand, the term indigenous is politically and culturally deceptive, since it can convey notions of backwardness, ignorance and primitiveness. On the other, it sometimes masks relationships of power. In her work among the San of Southern Africa, Sylvain (2005) warns that we need to be very cautious when classifying some groups as indigenous without surveying local perceptions of the term. Even though discourses about indigenous people at the international and academic level are more flexible and generic, she notices that in the context of post-apartheid Africa that same category becomes saturated with conceptions of culture that are “essentialist” and “primordialist”, mainly because of the historical power relationships of these groups and the European colonizers. This creates problems in at least two ways:

“First, pegging culture to natural resource use may suggest that indigenous people’s cultural rights are limited to the preservation of their (traditional) culture (‘continuing with their way of life’). Second, limiting a definition of indigenous culture to a particular relationship to the land precludes any role for political economy in the historical formation of cultural identities or cultural practices. […] In so far as indigenous culture is rooted in the land, separable from other important political and socio-economic relationships, indigenous culture becomes defined in essentialized and static terms” (Sylvain 2005: 219).
Furthermore, one given culture can accommodate many specialized or ‘privileged’ knowledge systems, which may or may not be in conflict at different moments in time—e.g. doctors and healers, developers and community activists, politicians and environmentalists.

The concept of LK, nonetheless, is central to this dissertation because it is relevant to processes of economic, political and cultural development. It must be understood in association with that of culture to stress the importance of locating knowledge in the practices of those who use and produce it. Dei and colleagues (2000) argue that knowledge is a symbolic system of values, beliefs and experimentation that is shared, learned, and taught from one generation to the next. Similar to culture, knowledge is dynamic and context-specific, and is acquired through participation and interaction with other members of the group. Following Roberts (in Dei et al 2000:71), and Purcell (1998), LK is defined in here as knowledge accumulated by a group of people, who by years of continuous residence develop an in-depth understanding of their particular place through time, which is then used in their long-term adaptation to their cultural and physical environments. The work presented her focused on illustrating how Conuco’s work reflects a particular construction of LK in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico, which is at once cognizant of individual and collective identities, context specific, and reflects a long tradition of social justice and activism in Puerto Rico.

**Environmental Education: Transforming the Young, Sustaining the Future**

As the argument above shows, anthropology has played an important role in critiquing and formulating new approaches to the study and practice of environmentalism in its many dimensions. Nonetheless, one area that seems to have been neglected by the
discipline is that of environmental education. For the most part, educational anthropology has been concerned with other equally important issues such as: (1) cultural conflict; (2) discourse analysis and bilingual education; (3) youth identity formation and socialization; (4) failing pedagogical and administrative practices; and (5) modernization and cultural change, among others. All of these studies in one way or another have questioned the sociological and cultural foundations of schooling as well as the diversity in school and community practices to promote or limit the achievement of educational goals and values. As it is delineated in the next chapter, the contributions of this area of inquiry have been enormous including the broadening of the discipline to address educational issues outside the classroom. For this reason, I believe anthropologists are well-equipped to contribute to the dialogue about environmental education, as it is intent to radicalize education through the systematization of pedagogical practices in favor of a new type of citizen. This reinterpretation of education and the lived experience is embedded in a new cultural paradigm that defies the existing model of economic development and consumption. But it also challenges the ways in which school children are educated and school systems organized. Understanding environmental education as a topic of cultural change is crucial to addressing the implications of a world absorbed by an environmental crisis as well as the needs of children being raised under these circumstances. However, since the anthropological literature on this topic is scarce, what follows is a review of the literature in other related disciplines. I hope to demonstrate the need for anthropologists to participate in this dialogue and the compelling case for studying young people as they experience and take a stance on these issues.
Youth participation on development and urban change

In her editorial in the journal Environment and Urbanization, Barlett (2002) discusses the new focus on the study of youth and their environment, primarily in countries of the Third World. She argues that in the 1990’s, researchers were concerned almost exclusively with children’s health, primarily accidents and early death, as resulting from living in poor-quality environments (Harpham 1990; Lee-Smith 1990; Omer 1990). However, the collection of articles in this issue investigated topics such as children’s experiences of detrimental conditions, and children’s capacities to identify, suggest improvements, and even act upon the problems that most affect them (Barlett 2002; ASOARTE 2002; Driskell 2002; Malone 2002). Furthermore, Barlett suggests that this recognition of the crucial role of youth in society calls for a more active participation of young people in building better cities around the world.

According to her, two main conditions limit youth insertion in the life of their communities. First, there is the issue of inclusion. Physical, environmental, and cultural barriers limit young people’s ability to gain access to a variety of spaces within their communities. These conditions exclude children from social participation regardless of their passionate desire to become active agents in their societies. She notes that “young people have some of the qualities of a minority subculture, and can be viewed by the adult world with suspicious and even hostility” (Barlett 2002: 4). In many localities, public spaces are “closed” to youth in order to protect them from “threatening” environments, or contrarily, to protect those places from their “inappropriate” behaviors. Therefore, youth mobility and access are confined to less and less public spaces, limiting their participation and visibility in the social arena.
The second aspect that hinders youth insertion in local politics and planning is their lack of access to participation. In many instances they are not asked how they feel or what they think about their life, families, and communities. They are not deemed “experts” on the things that affect them. Rather, they’re viewed as lacking the capacity and the knowledge to comment on such issues. Even when some adult advocates repeatedly take their voices into account, there is an overwhelming perception that youth can indeed talk, but not act. The acting is still reserved for the adults in the group. For that reason, the authors in this collection insist on the need to institutionalize youth participation and inclusion in local governments’ common practices (Barlett 2002). For instance, youth who have been given the opportunity to participate in solving issues that affect them have been involved in numerous projects, such as planning future developments in their communities (Corsi 2002), and managing city budgets (Guerra 2002).

For Ballantyne and colleagues (2006) intergenerational influence is a powerful means of addressing current environmental problems. Whereas adults are difficult to reach and bring together for discussions about environmental issues, children and youth are more accessible through the school and other social organizations. Angelis (1990) defines an intergenerational activity as an activity or educational program that benefits both young and old. Thus, intergenerational interaction has the capacity to not only expand the reach of environmental education to adults in the community, but also to strengthen children’s ability to transfer knowledge into action, empower students to make decisions in favor of the environment in their homes and neighborhoods, and support families and communities by emphasizing their collective involvement in these issues.
(Ballantyne et al. 2006: 415). This approach challenges the more traditional perspectives that view familial influences as unidirectional, from old to young. Instead, it emphasizes “the role of both the child (or family) and social environmental/contextual forces interactively shaping child development and family functioning” (Ballantyne et al. 2006: 418). Finally, the intergenerational approach assumes that changes in attitudes and behaviors need to occur both at the individual and the environmental levels, which includes changes in social institutions and groups of influence (Garbarino and Gaboury 1992).

A New Project for Education: Who’s Responsible for Bringing About Change?

Advancing new models for conservation, environmentalism and sustainable development requires a new ideology that simultaneously values the principles of ecological and social sustainability (Bozzi 2000; Ceballos-Lascurian 1996; Fien 1993; Stronza 2001). It requires a particular environmental education that can foster public awareness about environmental issues, problems, and solutions. This education must be directed, for example, at the production of new knowledge and skills needed to investigate the social and natural causes for environmental degradation as well as their possible solutions.

In the era of globalization and dramatic climate change, education must be able to help children and youth attain the “knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to participate in the reformation of the world’s social, political, and economic systems so that peoples from diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious groups will be politically empowered and structurally integrated […] to create [sustainable, ecologically sound, and] equitable national societies” (Banks 1997: 28-9). Accordingly, environmental education is
believed to integrate all these elements in an effort to train and prepare youth to be the “future” leaders of tomorrow through positioning them as the “present” catalysts of social change (Gallup et al. 1992).

Western public schools and universities, above all other social institutions, are bestowed with the responsibility of developing young people’s identities and social competencies through formal education or schooling (Maida 2005; McLaren and Houston 2004; Zarger 2008). However, it has been argued that the type of critical environmental education needed to prepare young people to politically act to address the environmental crisis, is in conflict with more dominant practices of schooling that “emphasize the passive assimilation and reproduction of simplistic factual knowledge and an unproblematic ‘truth’” (Stevenson 2007: 140).

The result of this clash in values and objectives is a system of education that directs its efforts almost entirely on training young people for the workforce rather than developing a social and action-oriented consciousness. Hence, the grand majority of educational institutions become centers for the reproduction of social and cultural inequalities and the maintenance of deficient pedagogical and administrative practices, which result in the alienation and exclusion of (especially, marginalized and poor) young people from constructive participation in society (Giroux 1988; Leistyna, Woodrum and Sherblom 1996; Levinson 2000).

Finally, although there is abundant anecdotal knowledge about the multiple efforts taking place in these areas, little has been written about young people’s role in the environmental movement in general, and environmental education in particular. It is important to recognize the work of numerous youth-led advocacy groups, such as
Conuco, that have mushroomed recently across the United States and other countries and have been very effective in promoting a culture of democratic civic engagement and youth community-based social development (Barlett 2002; Schensul and Berg 2004; Melchior 2002).

Many of these groups have shown an interest in education and environmentalism, leading in various ways to successful collaborations among different sectors of society, including public schools and universities. Their effort has not only brought gains to their growth as individuals, but it has also demonstrated the benefits of opening public institutional practices to external groups with shared interests and commitment to change. At first glance, this gap in the literature could be misleading, given that while one of the guiding principles and aims of the environmentalist agenda is to protect and preserve the social and physical environment for future generations, the voices of that future generation seem not to exist or be represented. Thus, the next chapter will focus on conceptualizing the following questions about conducting research about and with young people: 1) how have youth previously been conceptualized in relation to their role in society and access to public participation?; and 2) what are some of the strategies implemented that facilitate youth involvement in these issues? By looking at these two questions I intend to develop a research-and-action framework that will allow me to further understand the practices and meanings behind Conuco.
Chapter Three: Understanding Youth Participation: Young People as ‘Experiencers’ of Social Change

“Knowledge is necessarily relative... it may become ideology when used as a guide for action: and if validated by praxis... it ceases to be ‘mere’ theory and becomes social reality” (Stavenhagen 1971:336).

Introduction

Before presenting this dissertation’s ethnographic case study, I want to discuss previous works that have influenced my own perspective and political positioning on these topics. The literature presented below moves across different disciplines all interested in areas such as youths’ work, social and cultural production and reproduction, educational anthropology, and critical pedagogy. The first part of this chapter deals with the history of adolescent studies as they have been dominated by psychological and sociological theories. A special focus of this section is the ways in which these ideas have influenced anthropological practice and theorization.

The second part of the chapter is dedicated to more contemporary approaches to the study of young people, centering on those developments within the discipline of anthropology. I have decided to focus the attention on two particular areas of interest: educational anthropology and action research (broadly defined). Both of these areas, and other discussed in previous chapters—i.e. environmental education—closely relate to the case study at hand and serve to illustrate some of the concepts and categories later used to analyze the data for this dissertation.
The third and final section of this chapter deals specifically with the topic of youth participation. It attempts to discuss previous efforts at developing methodologies and strategies to enhance young people’s participation in a broad scope of issues and through an equally extensive range of activities.

**Early Approaches: Psychological and Sociological Influences**

For the best part of the last century, anthropological approaches to the study of children and youth in the U.S. were heavily influenced by psychological and sociological theories. For the most part, these disciplines displayed a particular interest in the study of adolescence, specifically: 1) adolescents’ behavior, and 2) patterns of adolescents’ associations.

**Psychological influences**

Bio-psychological and developmental perspectives in the U.S. tend to characterize most of the research on youth under the early psychological tradition. The former conceptualized young people as “incomplete” adults, forced into an unproductive stage between childhood and adulthood. Adolescents under this approach were seen as “anxious”, “chaotic” and “deviant”. Consequently, society’s role, represented by adults, was to create “socialization patterns” and institutions to control young people’s behaviors and direct them into “positive” practices (Elking 1974, in Kahane 1997:15).

The developmental approach, on the other hand, viewed adolescence more fluidly as a period where young people move cognitively from concrete particularistic orientations to abstract universalistic ones (Piaget 1948). This was also a phase where young people were thought to form their individual identities (Erikson 1968) by
accumulating solutions to dilemmas inherent to each stage of life. Accordingly, the political, social, and economic concepts held by children become “more realistic”, varied, and pragmatic as they matured and acquired more “real-life” experiences (Ichilov 1990).

Following psychology, early studies in anthropology were characterized by three similar premises: 1) adolescence is a unitary category, with specific and generalized psychological and social needs; 2) adolescence is a particular formative stage of development where attitudes and values become anchored to ideologies; and 3) the transition from childhood to adulthood normally involves a rebellious phase (Cohen 1999).

Age and other biological markers emerged at this era as the organizing principles for most studies on young people, neglecting, in most cases, the socio-cultural elements of the youth experience. Consequently, pioneering works in anthropology such as Margaret Mead’s (1928) *Coming of Age in Samoa*, and Ruth Benedict’s (1934) *Patterns of Culture*, were less concerned with the concept of youth as a dynamic cultural category than with adolescence as a biological and psychological stage of human development (Benedict 1934; Bernardi 1985; Mead 1928; Worthman 1987; Robinson 1997). Some anthropologists explain this phenomenon by arguing that young people’s behaviors are part of an intermediate, “liminal” situation that brings them in line with social norms (Van Gennep 1960).

Nevertheless, critics of these psychological and anthropological traditions claim that these theories do not explain findings that depict adolescence as a relatively calm, protected period, without heavy pressures. Nor do they explain why and how institutional structures control or mitigate stress and “deviant” behavior (Kahane 1997).
More importantly, these approaches are based in biological determinism, which ignores the socio-cultural factors that underlie young people’s behavior (Kahane 1997).

Schlegel and Barry’s (1991) statistical analysis of the socio-cultural dimensions of adolescents across nearly 200 societies worldwide, and the Harvard Adolescent Project, (Burbank 1987; Condon 1990; Davis and Davis 1989; Hollos and Leis 1986), tried to address this gap through the investigation of the physiological and socio-cultural dimensions of adolescents in seven different societies.

**Sociological influences and educational ethnography**

It can be argued that sociological theories have influenced the work of anthropologists to a greater extent than those in psychology, especially in their study of young peopleiv. However, although sociological approaches to children and youth are not based on individual’s coping strategies and developmental phases, early theories developed in this discipline still maintained the idea that adolescence is a transitional and “problematic” stage between childhood and adulthood. Therefore, youth practices were for the most part seen as “deviant”, especially those that threaten hegemonic systems of authority and economy (Schlegel 1995). Nevertheless, contrary to psychology, sociological analyses offer a deeper understanding of power relationships, especially those related to institutional power (Parsons 1964).

For example, several investigations have looked at the power structures underlying youth institutions, such as schools, job programs, sport clubs, and others (Widdicombe and Woofitt 1995). Studies of this type tended to characterize youth associations as hegemonic mechanisms created by adults (instead of by youth
themselves) to control young people and to maximize social reproduction (Coleman 1961; Gottlieb et al. 1966).

Schools, thus, became prime targets for this sociological approach, especially at the end of the 1970s, when scholars such as Althusser (1971), Apple (1979, 1982, 1985), Bernstein (1973), Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Bowles and Gintis (1976), and Giroux (1983) presented radical critiques to the modern school system, arguing that they were not neutral spaces for knowledge transmission, nor the social equalizer promised by liberal capitalist democracies. Issues related to culture, gender, class, and agency emerged then as the cornerstone of critical educational theories and ethnographies (Carspecken and Walford 2001; Levinson 1998; Levinson et al. 2002; Madison 2005), as well as others that emphasize migration, racism, and sexism in the school context (Fordham 1993; Gibson and Ogbu 1991).

Although these critiques were fundamental to understanding the relationship between economic forces at the state level and the actions of individuals to reproduce such systems at the micro level, the theory of social reproduction neglected other cultural elements that also help reproduce inequalities and privileges but that are not based on divisions of class (Levinson 1998).

The work of Bourdieu (1974, 1977a, 1977b) addressed this gap, providing ethnographic evidence on how cultural styles and competencies get privileged in school and other social institutions. His comparative work on the Kabyle peasants of Algeria and French schools demonstrated how social interactions—whether through intimate, “face-to-face” exchanges (in the former) or more impersonal, bureaucratized dynamics (in the latter)—served to reproduce unequal symbolic social status (Bourdieu 1974,
These social hierarchies are distributed and validated in particular ways according to the power structures in each society. As a result, some individuals and groups acquire privileges and advantages ("social capital") over others, which result in increased access to political and economic resources. Bourdieu’s concept of social capital went further than the previous analyses, which were based solely on divisions of class, to include other types of social differentiation expressed in terms of gender, ethnic and racial relationships. His accusatory critique of the modern school system reprimanded the elite society for exerting a sort of violence ("symbolic violence") on those students who were not privileged by mainstream cultural forms and values.

Levinson and Holland (1996) have argued that although the work of these “social reproductionists” should be seen as the point of departure for a critical analysis of the modern school, their studies were nonetheless constrained by their emphasis on class structures, a focus on Euro-American societies, and “highly schematic and deterministic models of structure and culture, as well as simplistic models of the state” (Levinson and Holland 1996:7). Consequently, they assert the need for a broader lens that considers the intersection of class, gender, race/ethnicity and age, as well as educational systems, in non-Western or former colonial societies (see, for example, Fordham 1993; Luttrell 1989; Page 1994 for advances in these theories).

It is interesting to note that while social reproduction theory was being developed mainly in Europe and to some extent here in the U.S., American educational anthropologists, following the tradition of Boas and others, were paying closer attention to a different phenomenon in schools, that of ethnic differences.
Although not necessarily coming from a reproductionist perspective, U.S. scholars have been interested in understanding the reasons why diverse ethnic groups were performing differently in the very school systems that were supposed to eliminate social inequalities. Linguistic anthropologists in particular, but also some cultural anthropologists, have described the many ways in which mainstream culture is taught (or passed on) to every children in school, in opposition to or regardless of the culture of marginalized groups (Heath 1983; Ogbu 1982; Philips 1993[1983]; Trueba et al. 1989). These approaches, although much needed, are less interested in the structural conditions that perpetuated the differentials of power between these different groups than in understanding the micropolitics taking place in the classrooms, mainly through the study of instructional practices or the hidden curricula.

The idea of “cultural production” has also emerged as a response to theories of social and cultural reproduction. Through detailed ethnographic work, researchers such as Paul Willis (1977) presented a more complex panorama of daily activities within schools than the early sociologists operating strictly within a social reproduction framework. In a very influential study of working class youth, Willis utilized a post-structural framework to analyze the ways in which social classes in England get “reproduced” within the context of the public school system. By focusing on the experiences of youth, this study critiqued the previous model of social reproduction that had perceived this process as “natural” and “voluntary”. For Willis (1977), this model was too simplistic, since it did not take into consideration the perceptions of the working class and their oppositional strategies against the school system.
Moreover, Willis argued that it was the intersection between individual subjectivities and capitalist institutions that “help[s] to construct both the identity of particular subjects and also distinctive class forms at the cultural and symbolic levels as well as at the economic and structural level” (Willis 1977:2). It is within this interaction that Willis locates the ideas of opposition and resistance. For him, working class youth behave in opposition to the culture promoted by the school, creating instead a multiplicity of styles and “counter” cultural practices. But these oppositional behaviors are not emancipatory, since they do not free the youth from their working class condition. Rather, these practices—e.g. ‘acting out’ in school or dropping out of it to find a job—shape their future by inculcating in them a specific cultural ethos: that of the oppressed working class (Willis 1977).

Willis’ contribution to the study of schooling lies in the idea that young people are as much an active part of the process of socialization as they are receivers of schools’ ideological teachings. In other words, the school does not “unilaterally socialize” the youth into one or the other class, but rather it is a dynamic process in which many other factors and institutions come into play—e.g. media, gender roles, social affiliations, and racial/ethnic identification, among others (Levinson and Holland 1996:9). Willis’ methodology (ethnography) and theoretical approach (cultural production) have influenced greatly the work of many anthropologists and others interested in the study of schooling and the production of multiple educational outcomes (Apple and Weiss 1983; Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004; Foley 1990; Hemmings 2000; Luykx 1999; Rockwell 1987, 1998).
For example, Gayles’ (2005) ethnography focuses on the notion of resiliency and cultural production in understanding how high-achiever, African-American students succeed in school despite the plethora of structural and personal constraints that surround them. Even though the students in Gayle’s micro-ethnography do not attempt to transgress the system, they still challenge it, creating spaces for individual success. Contrary to Paul Willis’ oppositional “lads”, Gayle’s participants approached success in school, and society at large, as nothing more than a game that has to be “learned” (Gayle 2005). By learning the “rules of the game”, however, students are also learning to accept the game as “natural”. Therefore, there is little opportunity for them to create new options in their lives, or to translate individual success into classroom success, since learning the game is to learn how to behave and think in a way that it is still oppressive. Although Gayles mentions instances of peer solidarity or class identity, he left unanswered the reasons why some students can learn the rules of the game and others cannot.

An approach that has also looked at young people both as cultural critics and producers of society is the influential work of the Birmingham School and Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) (Hall 1981; Hall et al 1978; Hall and Jefferson 1993). They sustain the importance of viewing youth as historical actors and not only as recipients of culture, and propose that the study of youth necessitates the inclusion of activities and processes at the margins of other state institutions—for example, youth who have left the school to enter the more difficult spaces of work, gender and race identities.
Building in part from the work started by Paul Willis and others (Williams 1977), the CCCS focuses on understanding the “social forms through which human beings ‘live’, become conscious, [and sustain] themselves subjectively” (Johnson 1986, in Levinson and Holland 1996: 12). The CCCS project, which has inspired many anthropologists, concentrated on studying cultural processes as dynamic mechanisms for the production of new cultural forms, even if in the process those forms get reproduced. The dialectic of this interaction was drawn from developments on Marxist theories, more significantly from Gramsci’s notions of a “war of positioning” and “counter-hegemony” (Brantlinger 1990; Forgacs 2000; Hall 1986).

For Gramsci (Forgacs 2000), a breach in the economic and political system represents an opportunity for the subordinates to gain access to power and to advance their own political and economic agendas. The war of position then implies the organization of the subordinates in such a way that they are ready to advance when the opportunity presents itself. This preparation is part of the strategic positioning of the subordinates vis-à-vis the hegemonic forces. The consciousness and subjectivities created in this war of position are what creates a counter-hegemony that is always resisting and struggling for access to power. The formation of this group consciousness and subjectivities were the center of attention for the intellectuals of the CCCS (Hall et al. 1978; Lutz and Collins 1993; Radway 1984). These new perspectives on cultural production and cultural studies brought alternative dimensions to sociological and anthropological theories at a time when youth’s actions were understood as social violations.
Anthropologists in the 1990s also brought Bourdieus and Willis’ ideas outside of the school into settings where they have been working for many years: non-Western societies. Drawing from theories of practice, for example, young people’s identities were conceptualized not as bounded forms, but instead as “agentive, flexible, and ever-changing” (Bucholtz 2002:532). Consequently, there was a call to shift from the study of adolescence to that of youth and to focus more attention on how young people’s experiences and socio-cultural practices shape their lives and those of others in society (Bucholtz 2002; Cole and Durham 2007; Durham 2004, Katz 2004).

Bourgois (1996b), for example, reminds us that while school ethnographies have helped to restore agency to victims of unequal social structures and to recognize resistance as a way to fight oppression, they have also “sanitized painful realities” (Bourgois 1996b:250) by avoiding the risk of researching education on the street corners. Rather, Bourgois (1995, 1996a, 1996b) argues for an engaged anthropology that ventures in the inner-city as a way of exposing other educational inequalities. This critique has provoked anthropologists to extend their analytical tools to study those who have been driven out by institutions of formal education (Fine 1991; Foley 1990; Weis 1990).

Youth Studies and Applied Anthropology Today

Kahane (1997) argues that previous approaches to youth studies have not clearly explained the “structural and symbolic aspects of various kinds of youth activities—their internal framework, the social context, the meaning they hold both for young people and adults” (Kahane 1997:19). This reconceptualization of youth and the future practice of anthropology may be better illustrated by surveying two separate bodies of literature: specifically, environmental education and youth participatory action research (YPAR).
am interested in focusing on those methodologies that integrate cognitive development, research skills, critical thinking and organizational techniques to further the position of youth as “organic intellectuals” and historical actors in society (Forgacs 2000; Freire 1970, 1973).

In the previous chapter I showed how environmental education provides a framework from which to redesign the educational and socialization process in a way that more socio-political spaces are open for young people to contribute and affect social change. Although several models have been suggested to achieve youth participation, I believe that YPAR in particular provides young people with the critical consciousness needed to not only involve themselves in issues of discrimination and lack of access to resources, but also to transform themselves through a self-reflective process based on constructive dialogue, collective action, and socio-political development.

Previous experiences working with participatory approaches have led me to believe that there is a strong connection between education (as in the process of acquiring and transmitting knowledge), and action (the ways in which people utilize that knowledge in everyday practices). Indeed, one of the objectives of YPAR is to unpack these connections and make them explicit, so that they can be discussed and acted upon. Consequently, the involvement of young people in participatory research provides them with a space and methodology to address the issues that affect them while they learn new skills and techniques in the process.

I should note, however, that in recognizing the breadth of influences that have given shape to recent participatory practices in research (see Reason and Bradburry 2006), my purpose here is not to formulate a definitive history of action research, but
instead to present the work of those who have influenced my own practice as a researcher/activist and have shaped my understanding of how to conduct relevant emancipatory research with adults and children.

There are several key questions that guide the objectives of this dissertation as well as my own research agenda: How do young people learn about their social and natural environments, and how do they transfer that knowledge into action? How can we work with youth to create positive spaces within their communities where they can critically engage in conceiving and experiencing what is best for them, their families, and their society? How can they take these ideas of critical thinking, social responsibility and action research to inform the way in which they look at the world, while developing effective strategies for social change? And finally, how can anthropology contribute to these liberatory processes?

**Applied research, action research and action anthropology**

For a long time now, anthropologists and other social scientists have shown particular interest in studying the intersection of theory and practice (Bonfil-Batalla 1966; Fals-Borda 1991; Gow 1993; Lewin 1946; Lins-Ribeiro and Escobar 2006; Reason and Bradbury 2006; Schensul and Schensul 1978; Singer 1994; Stavenhagen 1971; Tax 1960; Warry 1992). These scholars have engaged in a critique not only of the process of research but also the positioning of the researcher vis-à-vis the subject of study and society at large.

For example, Bonfil-Batalla’s radical article, *Conservative Thought in Applied Anthropology* (1966), challenges the notion of cultural relativism to expose the detachment of researchers who, while hiding behind this concept, would justify their
inaction and lack of involvement with the people under study. He argues that the extreme conditions in which poor people live force researchers, especially in poor countries, to position themselves as agents of change and not mere observers of social dynamics (Bonfil-Batalla 1966). Therefore, (applied) research is called to move forward to address the causes of the oppressed (Stavenhagen 1971). One way of doing this is by exposing inequalities and hidden discrimination through the “unmasking” of the relationships between the construction of knowledge and power (Hacking 1999:53). Social scientists as individuals as well as collectively need to gain access to positions of power from which to transform their experiences and knowledge into action and to support the efforts of popular movements all over the world.

Another way to improve the relevance of empirical applied research for those most affected by the topics under study is to engage in a process of “de-elitization” of the social sciences (Stavenhagen 1971:336). That is, not only to make research findings available for the masses but to give access to the masses to co-produce knowledge with the “methodologists” (Whitmore and McKee 2006). This can be achieved by making clear to partners, clients, and collaborators the uses and applications of our labor, as well as by engaging with them in a more dialogic (Freire 1970) type of research.

For Schensul (2002, 2006), the opening of the research process and outcomes to non-academics implies the “democratization of the social sciences,” in such a way that academics can transfer the tools of research to those who need them to produce relevant knowledge for the improvement of their live. This requires a conceptualization and practice of a “popular science” that “would be of greater use in analyzing the class struggle documented in the field, as well as in the political action of the working classes
as the ultimate actors in history” (Fals-Borda 1979:40). In fact, it is argued that this requires changing the rules of the game, and creating new spaces for mutual learning and development (Stavenhagen 1971; Freire 1970, 1973; Horton and Freire 1990). Moreover, this approach to research and action conveyed the famous Marxist maxim echoed in the title of Fals-Borda’s article, *Investigating reality in order to transform it* (Fals-Borda 1979). Hence, applied researchers would serve as catalysts for social transformation, and as such, they needed to take positions regarding what was going on in their societies: “We live, for better or worse, not only as men and women but as individuals ‘qualified’ to examine and criticize society” (Fals-Borda 1979:33).

Although these critiques, along with other similar ones (e.g. Kurt Lewin’s [1946] Action Research and Sol Tax’s [1960] Action Anthropology), reconfigured the role of the researcher and science vis-à-vis their subject of study, these intellectual programs remained constrained by their “limited empirical base and dearth of operationalized concepts” (Schensul and Schensul 1978). This reality frustrated many anthropologists interested in pursuing these engaged approaches to research. Today, the history of these applied approaches includes theoretical and methodological advances that continue to question the role of the social sciences in social change (e.g. Park 1992, 1997, 1999; Reason and Bradbury 2006; Zamosc 1987).

For instance, Marxist and post-structuralist intellectuals alike have argued for a dialectical relationship between theory and practice (*praxis*), suggesting that “action validates theoretical knowledge or is concerned with the practical significance of theoretical life” (Warry 1992:156). This critical interest reflects a special concern about
how knowledge is produced, how it gets implemented in everyday life, and how this implementation informs the process of knowledge production and theory building.

Applied anthropologists, in particular, have proposed a research agenda in which “researchers communicate theoretical assumptions to participants and engage the research community in a dialogue concerning the nature of theory and its relationship to intervention” (Warry 1992:156). They have also advocated for a community-centered praxis (CCP) approach that maintains “an ongoing conversation between activist community members […] and anthropologists with a long-term commitment to local community collaboration” (Singer 1994:341). In both instances, the anthropologist is expected to use her/his skills to facilitate and assist community members with their right to be involved in the management of their life and futures in a process of reciprocal learning (Schensul 1974).

Elden and Chisholm (1993), in a special issue of the journal *Human Relations* dedicated to action research, describe participants in action research as the “people who supply the data and participate in the research in such a way and to such an extent that they become full partners or co-researchers in running the research process itself” (Elden and Chisholm 1993:125). Both the inclusion of non-academics in the process of research and the engagement of researchers in transforming reality gives this new action research the foundation for a methodology that is more democratic yet also scientific. This participatory approach, which attempts both at the “decolonization” (Stavenhagen 1971) and “democratization” (Schensul 2002, 2006) of social science research, rejects any claim of positivistic objectivity and detachment by social scientists and, instead,
promotes the integration of participants as co-researchers and co-producers of scientific knowledge.

**Participatory action research (PAR): Historical background**

The result of this reorientation of the research agenda and the roles of all involved in it have impacted an array of areas of study, such as participatory development (Barlett 2002; London and Young 2003), health prevention (De Koning and Martin 1996; Muñoz-Laboy et al 2004), policymaking (Guerra 2002) and education (Kozaitis 2000; McIntyre 2000; Soohoo 1993). Although many approaches to participation have indeed given voice to disempowered groups and individuals, only a few have utilized research as a tool for generating knowledge and acquiring skills to advance popular causes. Above all, we defined participatory action research (PAR) as an “experiential methodology” that simultaneously encompasses social research, popular education, and sociopolitical action (Fals-Borda 1979, 2006; Fals-Borda and Anisur Rahman 1991).

Early in the 1970s, drawing from knowledge gained through literacy campaigns, adult education and other concerns discussed above, social scientists and educators from Colombia, Brazil and Mexico developed a series of alternative strategies “focused on local and regional problems involving emancipatory educational, cultural and political processes” (Fals-Borda 2006:27). This group of scholars, preoccupied with the consequences of capitalist expansion as well as the impacts of “developmentalism” in Latin America, started to create spaces for a new social research agenda that would enable marginalized groups to negotiate local politics. This was argued to be accomplished through: 1) organizing individuals around a common issue; 2) facilitating the production of relevant local knowledge; and 3) promoting participatory and collective
action strategies that benefit not only the people directly involved in the research, but also others in the community (Fals-Borda 1979; Freire 1970; Salazar 1992; Stavenhagen 1971; Warman et al. 1970).

This practical and philosophical approach required participants to move beyond particular issues and technical solutions to establish connections with a broader project of social justice. PAR redefined the character of the relationship between the individual and her/his surroundings and also restored and strengthened individuals’ historical character as an agent of change (Freire 1970). As a consequence, a more emancipatory approach started to emerge in which participants would be involved in most, if not all, the stages of the research project in order to build more power for themselves.

This approach was not only designed to transfer knowledge about specific topics like community health and development, but also to raise peoples’ consciousness about issues of class oppression, gender inequalities and community organization. In the past three decades, this approach has spread throughout the world and has been utilized in an array of settings and research topics, proving to be an effective methodology for poor people to develop an understanding of the dimensions of their oppression, the structural forces that maintain it, and the possibilities to transform it (Anisur Rahman 1991; Bradbury 2006; Brinton Lykes 2006; Chambers 1997; Marja-Liisa Swantz et al 2006; McTaggart 1997; McIntyre 2000; Salazar 1991; Whitmore and McKee 2006).

Because the PAR process is iterative and cyclical, it is constantly reexamining relationships of power inherent within the various interest groups that are involved, the issues and methods chosen, and the context in which the research as a social phenomenon is conducted. Its flexibility also allows for improvements, modifications, and
reevaluation of the process, since the coherence and final success of the methodology is measured not by prescriptive theoretical deductions, but rather by the possibility of achieving specific strategic goals, and the negotiation of local theory, meaning and action among the research participants. Moreover, Peter Park (1992) explains that the novelty of this approach is not that common people question their conditions and look for better ways to act, but rather the fact that this process is seen as research and is conducted as an intellectual activity. But, how does it work?

**PAR components: Culture, research and action**

Following Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gaset, Orlando Fals-Borda (1991) explains that the process of PAR is embedded in a process of learning through experience, where the recognition and knowledge about something emerges from the fulfillment of experiencing it. Therefore, participating in the PAR process involves authentic commitment, or what PAR practitioners call *vivencias*[^viii], an “inner-life experience” (Fals-Borda 1991). Nonetheless, this experience does not just happen, but rather it is organized in a particular way to produce the intended transformation of individuals and groups.

PAR projects are usually organized in three main areas: 1) historical-cultural; 2) applied research; and 3) design and delivery of an action strategy. The historical-cultural element permeates all the activities of the project, since the project itself is a manifestation of the conscious production of new cultural forms that take shape according to the values, beliefs and practices that are revised and embraced throughout the process. With it, we also recognize the importance of critically uncovering the past to aid in the construction of a more relevant and significant future.

[^viii]:
The applied research component consists of two parts: the training in research methods and the application of those methods to the investigation of social realities. Thus, it is argued on the one hand that science—defined broadly as a systematic way of knowing—ought to be part of the process of social change and therefore available to everyone, and on the other hand, that the construction of knowledge and its application should be controlled by those who are most affected by the issues under study. If not, what results is a set of knowledges that get transplanted irresponsibly from one place to the next, without taking into account locals’ participation and wisdom and without the proper process of critical analysis needed to understand, adapt and implement any type of strategy that will lead to the desirable effect.

Lastly, the development and implementation of action strategies—or, the ways in which PAR participants choose to address the issue at hand after analyzing the findings of their investigations—attempts to take participants through collective, reflexive practices that lead them to design effective steps to bring about change. These actions can be framed around, but are not limited to, educational campaigns, dissemination of new knowledge, program interventions, or advocacy initiatives based on what was found. The implementation of these strategies is of utmost significance and probably crucial in achieving the goals of this approach. It is this component that makes the PAR approach a singular one, since it carries with it the principle of civic engagement as well as the responsibility of taking action once one has been part of the production of knowledge and has become a political actor in one’s society. Therefore, choosing an adequate action strategy, planning its implementation, and executing it, are without a doubt the most difficult steps in this model for social change. For that reason, going back to Fals-
Borda’s (1991) comment above, the process of PAR is one of commitment and experience, whereby the more the individuals know and can act upon their own knowledge, the more fulfillment they feel about their lives and the more capable they are to find solutions to their problems.

Moreover, this process does not occur in a vacuum. Therefore, it is important to establish support networks outside of the participating group that will expand the reach of this group’s efforts. This point is crucial for researchers serving as facilitators of this process and it would not come as a surprise for many applied anthropologists. According to Jean Schensul (1994), there are four key reasons to develop community action research partnerships. In the first place, she argues that when forming collaborations within communities, researchers must make sure that the questions asked are relevant to the parties affected by the issue under study. At the same time, different groups in the community get the opportunity to discuss, negotiate and arrive at a consensus on the issues that are of most importance for all. Furthermore, bringing community representatives into the research process as partners guarantees the continuous sharing of the information gathered and produced. In that way, knowledge is both collected by the community and transferred to it. Finally, because people in the community buy into the purposes of the project, and participate in it, it is more likely that the information will be used for change. Thus, both researchers and community members become activists and agents for change.

The approach suggested by Schensul (1994) is strongly influenced by ethnographical theories and methodologies. For example, she stresses the need to become familiarized with cultural settings and local meanings as a way of gaining access
to the place of study. Also, the use of interviews, focus groups, community meetings and
participant observations works both to produce local/relevant knowledge, and to generate
dialogue between different sectors in the study setting. The iterative component of
ethnography is embedded in PAR, since the process continuously reexamines the
relationship between the research questions, the problem, and the everyday life of
participants. Opportunities for improvement, modifications, and reevaluation are always
present since the coherence of the project is measured by concrete purposes,
circumstances and achievements, and not as much by abstract and foreign theoretical
commitments.

Finally, the principles discussed above give PAR the foundations for a research
paradigm that is ethical and beneficial for everyone involved. In PAR, for example, it is
believed that both researchers and participants will engage in a process of continuous
dialogue about the purpose of the research, the direction of it, the use and ownership of
the data, and the involvement of people in the process. This dialogic practice is intended
to develop a “processual consent” (Rosenblatt 1995, in Herr and Anderson 2005) that
goes beyond the traditional consent form stipulated by IRB procedures, which is often
seen as a “fairly static, one-time consent that poorly captures the possibility of the
evolving research relationship and process” (Herr and Anderson 2005:119).

When assessing the risks and benefits of participating in PAR, it is also argued
that this type of collaborative research minimizes possible harms by maximizing the
possible benefits of the research. By sharing the decision-making process, PAR realigns
the researcher/researched relationship in such a way that allows participants to “assess
their own vulnerability as well as how to best return the data to the setting” (Herr and
Anderson 2005:123). In other words, issues relating to confidentiality and ownership of
the information are not decided a priori by the researcher but rather in partnership with
the participants. Ebbs (1996) and others have referred to this process as a way of
“empowering” the researched. Herr and Anderson explain that this occurs as a result of
the researched coming “to terms with historical, social, and cultural contexts of their
communities and their position in those contexts through the collaborative nature of the
research” (2005:123).

Even though these concerns get magnified when dealing with children, I will
argue that the same principles of respect and reciprocity apply. Whenever possible, the
process of working with children and adolescents in PAR should involve household and
other community adults who have a *bona fide* interest in the well-being of children and
regard their participation in processes of change and research as a valuable one. This
requires a reconceptualization of children and youth as experiencers and agents of
change. Below, I will discuss some specific issues that arise when conducting PAR with
youth.

**Lessons from youth participatory action research (YPAR)**

The YPAR approach that I am presenting here is based upon one conceived by
intellectuals in Latin America as described above, but it has been given life through my
experiences (*vivencias*) conducting the research for this dissertation, and my previous
appointment as Research Associate at the Institute for Community Research (ICR), in
Hartford, Connecticut. At ICR, researchers and youth advocates have worked for more
than fifteen years in the formation of a YPAR approach that assists young people in
gaining a more central position in the shaping of “their own and their communities’ socio-political, cultural, educational and public health futures” (Schensul et al. 2004:5).

Although PAR started as an alternative approach to organizing adults, it was not until recently that it found its way into educational settings with children and youth. Therefore, little has been written about this experience of youth participatory action research (YPAR) and the implications of this methodological and theoretical approach in the formation of youth identities and social competence (Berg 2004; Ginwright, Noguera, and Cammarota 2006; Schensul and Berg 2004; Salazar 1992). YPAR attempts to transform the way in which previous research has conceptualized young people as “incomplete” and “transitional forms” moving uncritically from childhood to adulthood. Schensul and Berg (2004) argue that although approaches in mental health prevention, youth labor and development, and service learning have had positive outcomes at the individual level, none of these approaches has historically resulted in changes to the fundamental power structures that affect youth or the institutions in which they participate. Gutiérrez (2004), moreover, states that this *psychologization* (*‘psycologización’*) of the difficulties affecting youth hides the realities and complexities of social problems, and presents them as if they were issues concerning only individuals.

Social institutions where young people participate become, thus, sites of struggle where the psychologization of youth concerns and needs creates a symbolic disruption—or discontinuity—between the multiple cultural contexts that characterize them, therefore manifesting themselves in issues pertaining race (Noblit and Collins 1999; Ogbu 1982), gender (Kehily 1998), nationality/ethnicity (Torres-González 2002; López 1998), and class differentiation (Apple and Weiss 1986; Jerez-Mir 2003). The position of young
people in modern societies can thus be understood by looking at how their culture is seen as conflicting (or not) with that of adults. Social conditions are aggravated by age differentiation, hence, limiting youth access to participation.

YPAR, therefore, provides a framework that recognizes youth as frequently the agents and the “experiencers” of cultural change (Bucholtz 2002:530; Cole and Durham 2007; Demerath 2003; Durham 2004). Several components guide this approach. First, there is a conscious effort to address youth’s identity formation by discussing and enhancing socio-cultural, emotional and cognitive competencies. Second, this effort attempts to further develop a strong sense of group identity and affiliation based not on the dismissal of group differences, but rather on the investigation of diversity and multiple perspectives as organizing principles. This also requires identifying and reflecting upon environmental and personal stressors and support factors. Third, YPAR utilizes ethnographic research methods as the basis for personal growth, social analysis and social action. This is accomplished through the establishment of clear priorities for research and action, and the integration of academic, critical thinking and problem solving skills. Finally, the process of YPAR helps transform youth social roles from passive consumers of society to researchers and advocates for social justice and change (Schensul et al. 2004).

The YPAR approach presented in the ethnographic case study in this research follows those of others who view civic engagement as an alternative to improving participation (Williams 2004) and governance (Gaventa 2004) at multiple levels of the political arena. I believe that the principles and methodologies pertaining to YPAR, and the examples collected from the work of Conuco, give youth the opportunity to think
critically about their surroundings and engage actively in the transformation of their circumstances. This occurs in part through a collective, collaborative process in which participants work and learn with others, reaching towards a common goal. Researchers and educators reject their role as sole experts on the topic, and participate rather as collaborators in the shared learning process. This approach to youth development does not conceive of youth acting on their own, however, since I believe this only reinforces their marginalization and exclusion. On the contrary, it advocates for a more holistic approach where many elements of the community are integrated to the process as partners.

The opportunity of working with middle- and high-school children and adults in this area has taught me that none of these groups should work separately to solve issues that affect them all in the first place. Interestingly, in my experience the issues identified by children are, for the most part, related to adults and their relationships with young people (e.g. teacher’s attitudes and parent behaviors). Accordingly, most of the problems acknowledged by adults had to do with their own biological children or other children close to them (e.g. students’ outcomes, risky behaviors, and children learning and socialization). As Conuco’s work suggests, working together should not become a burden for either adults or children. On the contrary, it should provide both of them with the opportunity to create a culture of active engagement and shared responsibilities. Sharing these responsibilities with youth not only reaffirms their right to be active citizens but also gives them the opportunity to acquire useful skills, knowledge, and practical experiences. Bringing both sides to the table is not an easy task, and indeed it is sometimes impossible depending on how sensitive the topics under study are.
Nevertheless, this challenge needs to be addressed if we want to achieve the goal of increasing people’s participation while simultaneously building stronger intergenerational networks.

This study engages new developments on youth studies by focusing primarily on young people’s potentials and desire to succeed. This dissertation particularly looks at multiple sites where culture is produced and negotiated by youth, including most significantly those interactions that occur outside the classrooms—whether in parks, street corners, university hallways, cafes, or households.

I would like to end this chapter with a final note on research and dissemination. The literature on YPAR is scarce, and when available it goes by a variety of names within an array of disciplines, usually stressing one aspect of the approach over others. In Puerto Rico as well as in other parts of the world, applied research seldom find its way to publication, since researchers are under institutional or otherwise pressure to quickly move forward from one project to the next. Additionally, until recently there seems to have been a certain publication bias against projects involving action research, arguing a lack of scientific rigor and validity. Distribution and dissemination of experiences and findings more commonly occur during professional conferences and meetings or other informal ways. In recent years, for example, several sites on the Internet (e.g., www.youthinfocus.net; www.freechild.org; http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu; www.whatkidscando.org; www.wikipar.net) have taken on the task of putting together bibliographies, descriptions, networks, and guides for interested people looking for
information about this topic. However, this is not enough, and more efforts must be made to get the word out and promote this valuable and effective type of action research.
Chapter Four: An Eco-Critical Approach to the Study of Youth Pro-Environmental Behavior and Community Development

Introduction

In this chapter, I will describe in detail the goals and objectives of this study, the research questions that guide it, and the data collected to support its findings. Additionally, I will discuss the data analysis and the challenges and limitations, as well as the importance and implications of this work, specifically for the people who collaborated in the research *per se*, and, more generally, for academics and others with a special interest in the topics addressed here.

However, before moving on to the specifics of the data collection plan, it is important to elaborate on the methodological approach utilized to guide this plan. This methodological approach brings together otherwise distinct perspectives (i.e., the eco-critical approach, and the environmental education perspective) in an effort to capture and understand two particular cultural phenomena: the socio-political development of youth, and the organization and implementation of critical environmental education. The intersection between these two phenomena, although seemingly related—given their action-oriented goals and emphasis on social justice—has not been discussed sufficiently in the anthropological literature and, hence, this dissertation hopes to shed light on it and contribute to further discussions on the matter.
Building a Methodological Approach for the Study of Youth Pro-Environmental Behavior

The critical-ecological approach

By now, it should be apparent that I stand on the critical side of the qualitative research continuum. The reasons for that are, first, that I am interested in looking at youth practices that are overtly political and, second, that the main goal of this research is to bring about positive change. Carspecken (1996) describes this critical epistemological position in this way:

“Those of us who call ourselves “criticalists” definitely share a value orientation. We are all concerned about social inequalities, and we direct our work toward positive social change. We also share a concern with social theory and some of the basic issues it has struggled with since the nineteenth century. These include the nature of social structure, power, culture, and human agency. We use our research, in fact, to refine social theory rather than merely to describe social life” (1996:3; see also Lather 1991; Kinchloe and McLaren 1994).

When discussing an eco-critical approach, I am referring to the integration of this critical stand to the already well-known ecological lens so central to anthropological studies—and not to “Ecology” as a discipline of the natural sciences. For instance, important works in ecological and educational anthropology (as in the ones discussed in previous chapters) have already demonstrated the significance of studying behavior that is mediated through the social and cultural contexts where individuals function routinely (LeCompte and Schensul 1999). However, although these studies have been “concerned with the identification of contextual elements that affect behavior, contrary to critical
theorists, they don’t necessarily have preconceived notions about which ones are more important” (LeCompte and Schensul 1999, emphasis mine). Furthermore, the integration of the ecological and critical approaches emphasize the importance of moving beyond individualistic interpretations of behavior in an effort to shed light on collaborative, multi-level perspectives that look at relationships between individual actors and social institutions (Berg, Coman, and Schensul 2009; Ginwright, Noguera, and Camarotta 2006; Schensul and Tricket 2009).

These ideas are not estranged from the discussion presented in previous chapters about action research, action anthropology, and YPAR. On the contrary, they have grown side-by-side with these and other indigenous methodological traditions (Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith 2008) as ways to reinforce not only the commitment of researchers to social change, but also more integrative, interdisciplinary, and inclusive methodologies that address local interventions and community development. It is within this collection of provocative works that we find significant analyses about the role of young people in taking upon themselves the challenge of designing and implementing their own strategies for change, as well as how these attempts transform them in the process.

Methodologically, thus, these authors have all concluded that it is particularly important to have congruency among the purpose, goals, and values of the study, and those of the group involved in it. Only in that way, the researcher will be able to unmask inequitable circumstances, and engage in strategic actions to transform those circumstances. Hence, the commitment and involvement of the researcher should be directed at the “improvement of participants’ individual and collective potential”, in such a way that they are able to engage in “self-expression and representation, and
active agents in the furthering of their own futures” (LeCompte and Schensul 1999:47). Unfortunately, until now none of these approaches have been utilized to understand youth pro-environmental behavior.

The environmental education approach

It would be impossible to study a group of people involved in environmental education and pay little attention to the always-growing literature in that area, especially since the mid-1990s. For that reason, I have decided to draw from the literature on environmental education, and specifically those aspects that address the principles and value of experimentation, flexibility, adaptability, and research with regards to the understanding and promotion of social change. For instance, in an article for the NAPA Bulletin, Moran (2000) argues that

“It is under trying conditions that our species seems to open itself up to study (Moran 1979). Under rapidly changing conditions, human communities rally their accumulated wisdom while also allowing an unusual degree of flexibility to individuals to experiment with novel ways to solve the problems presented by a changing environment… From these challenging settings we can build new theories better rooted in the experience of humanity” (2000:132).

For Moran and others (see, for example, Novo 1996), the environmental crisis is challenging humans to be creative and ‘try out’ practices and ideas that have never been implemented before. Accordingly, research concerning the environment focuses primarily on application and change—as opposed to mere theory. These changes ought to include all aspects of the human experience such as culture, economy, and politics. Furthermore, the focus on social and behavioral changes comes from an ethical
realization of common responsibility to offer and disseminate solutions to these urgent and immediate problems.

Nonetheless, although these kinds of changes can take place in many settings, it is still widely believed that social institutions, in particular, have a significant advantage in affecting change at a larger scale. Therefore, institutions like schools and environmental organizations make excellent cases for the study of pro-environmental behavior, mainly because there has been a growing interest in promoting ecological principles and values to new generations through schooling, and given the reach of these institutions across diverse populations. Moran (2000) goes even further in assigning social institutions a larger duty, that of helping society to make “more effective and well-informed decisions,” given that these organizations have the possibility of serving as centers for the accrual and sharing of relevant and updated information and the building of broader public consensus (2000:142). The question that still remains, the author sustains, is how to improve the coordination of local institutions with others at the national and international levels.

While this is a very important question and, indeed, has been dealt with in this dissertation, I think that, regardless of the connections between all of these institutions, we also need to identify and document the content of the information and practices provided locally through them (i.e. elementary public schools and environmental organizations, in this case), as well as their actual participation in the transformational processes of social and behavioral change. More specifically to this dissertation, it is critical to understand how the youth-led institution and their partnerships with schools are formed in the first place, and who takes an active role in them.
These questions are important because, as we will see in the discussion later on, even though there is a global cry to tackle the environmental crisis, many countries, such as Puerto Rico, have yet to prioritize these objectives. This might be due to the fact that they are taking care of other equally crucial issues—e.g. poverty alleviation, technological and economic dependency, loss of self-determination, and the lack of critical citizen participation—or because their political and economic agendas are geared toward other efforts, such as privatization of public services, promotion of foreign-led investments, and government restructuring. Therefore, it would be misleading to assume that all social institutions are addressing the environmental challenge in more than a rhetorical way, or even that state institutions are in sound alignment toward a specific pro-environmental goal. The lack of coordination, and therefore coherence, among social institutions fractures and compartmentalizes the efforts toward a common goal, leaving particular individuals in certain organizations struggling alone.

The work of Conuco, for example, raises questions about this misalignment, claiming that Puerto Rico’s Department of Education is not fulfilling its obligation of providing children with the ecological training and awareness they will need to be active participants in the discussion of pro-environmental revolution. And this group is not alone in this position. Whether because it is perceived as truly affecting all (e.g., the fear of losing humanity’s home), or because it has been attached to a higher moral status (e.g., it is cool to be “green”), climate change and the movement toward its correction seems to be gathering more converts every day (although still not enough), including those previously engaged in other social issues with even longer histories of political and cultural struggles—e.g., gender discrimination, labor rights, racism, and
imperialism/colonialism. In the next two chapters, we will see how other organizations and activists in Puerto Rico express their concerns about this situation and lay blame on the government for what they believe is an irresponsible lack of ecological vision for the nation. In many occasions, the struggle for environmental and social change has been conflated into one central claim against class and corporate/state exploitation. However, before there was an international cry in defense of the environment, many local, grassroots organizations were already denouncing the effects of capitalist economic rationalization (Leff 1995) on impoverished communities and people around the globe.

Returning specifically to schooling, we have already mentioned how Stevenson (2007) asserts a philosophical and pedagogical conflict between the politically oriented goals of environmental education and the more passive assimilation practices of conventional schooling. Consequently, it has been suggested that interest groups in the civil society become integrated and lend support to state institutions as a way of advocating changes that would not otherwise occur naturally within these institutions. Novo (1996), for example, affirms that today we cannot talk about an environmental education in schools that is not supported by “organized ad hoc resources” and would not be greatly improved by the work of non-governmental organizations (1996:76). This is the case, Novo says, because in order to move the environmental agenda forward, it is crucial to develop a system of knowledges and practices that integrates formal and informal environmental education so that both can better inform and sustain each other (Novo 1996). That multi-sector interaction is what is at the heart of this study: to document the characteristics, and interpret the meanings of the relationship between Conuco and five elementary public schools in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico. Next, I will
briefly provide contextual information in order to ground the methodological framework to the specific circumstances behind conducting this type of research in Puerto Rico. This will lead the reader into the aims of the study, the research questions, and the recollection and analysis of the data.

**Background**

As I explained more thoroughly elsewhere in this document, it took quite an effort to find a group of young people with the characteristics of Conuco. I wanted a group that was initiated and led by young people as opposed to a group of youth working under the umbrella of an already adult-formed organization. This was important to me, because my interest was to look at how and why young people take on the task of voluntarily organizing themselves to address topics of concern to them—especially issues of social and environmental justice. In other words, I purposefully went out and searched for a group of young activists with the characteristics mentioned above that could identify and describe their experiences and thoughts doing this particular type of political work (Bernard 2006).

At the time I returned to Puerto Rico (after finishing my qualifying exams at USF) and began exploring possible sites to conduct my research, I noticed that little to nothing had been written regarding youth organizations in the Island. I was curious to know more about it, since I was aware anecdotally of several initiatives that were taking place locally where young people were playing a significant role in.

Historically, many public and private organizations have had a youth component that has served in one way or the other to contribute to the development of young people’s skills and knowledge, whether through job training, educational and cultural
activities, sport clubs, community development, or political activism. Some of the most well-known examples in Puerto Rico are the YMCA, Sierra Club, Boy Scouts of America, 4-H Clubs, Medical Cadets Corps, and ASPIRA. Notice how all of them are programs and institutions that have been imported from the United States, given the political and economic relationship between the two countries (this will be addressed in detail in a later chapter). However, although the demand for such opportunities has not diminished—i.e., youth still need programs for skill development; unemployment and underemployment rates keep raising; and the quality of public education and vocational training continues to deteriorate everywhere—there has been a decline of institutional (and governmental) support and promotion (Reguillo 2003). This decline accentuates the need for new programs, projects and alternative spaces where youth can improve their living conditions while spending their energy in activities that are socially more productive (e.g. advisory committees, art and service cooperatives, research activities, education and training, social services, and local businesses).

Therefore, I was intentionally interested in documenting the processes of organization, decision-making and networking of Conuco, which are insightfully useful when trying to comprehend how the group thinks about these topics and what their experience has been engaging in advocacy and educational practices. Hence, conducting a case study with Conuco presented me with a great opportunity to document first-hand (LeCompte and Schensul 1999) the internal dynamics and individual stories behind this ensemble of young activists, artists and educators. Additionally, researching Conuco’s activities helped me learn about the strategies developed by them to gain access to and
partner with institutions such as the Department of Education in a model of collaboration that is not always common to either schools or environmental organizations alike.

If it is true that both these sectors—environmental activists and public institutions—recognize the importance of education as a vehicle to foster public awareness about environmental issues and principles, and the need to inculcate these principles onto the new generations, it is also the case that for the most part they have worked separately to achieve these objectives (Novo 1996). On the one hand, many public school systems have designed curricula around environmental topics, and some have even integrated ecological models into public institutions in an effort to transform the school culture as a whole—not only through specialized curricula. However, many of these changes are based on developing a theoretical or abstract appreciation for “nature,” which includes learning scientific facts about non-human species, the geography of “natural places”—usually outside cities and suburban areas— and certain behaviors that are deemed “good” for the environment such as recycling, reusing, and conserving water and energy.

What it is missing from these initiatives, however, are usually the action-oriented goals and practices promoted by the environmental movement. For instance, children are not taken outside schools to interact with or manipulate plants and animals or to experience the benefits and challenges of the outdoors; they are not given the chance to propose their own ideas regarding development projects or ecological regulations; and, accordingly, they are not seen as bonafide “experiencers” of human impact on the environment, even though in many cases they are, and will be, the most affected by these interactions.
On the other hand, environmental groups have for the most part found their niche outside classrooms—in community forums, organized politics, and the mass media. These efforts have been successful in agglutinating people from diverse background, making the issue one of concern for a broader segment of society. In Puerto Rico, for example, environmental activists have had a significant impact in supporting specific community struggles as well as influencing the approval of crucial environmental laws and executive orders geared to protect vast extensions of land and ecological habitats.

Moreover, all these battles have been carefully fought in the media and other educational arenas as their strength has been generated by national consensus-building and strategic political pressure. Having said that, all of these initiatives have specific and, for the most part, short-term goals—whether it is to halt the already destructive impact of human activities in a specific area, or to pass legislation to protect and conserve an endangered ecosystem or species. Therefore, many environmental organizations educate individuals about the specific issues concerning those goals, expecting that to be sufficient for people to internalize the principles and objectives of environmentalism as a whole. Nonetheless, this strategy has proven not to be sufficient, especially within the sector of society that lacks information to support, or are yet to be convinced about, the merits of the environmental agenda. Consequently, this approach has failed to focus on the continuous, long-term educational strategies needed to change people’s understanding of and attitudes toward their surroundings—strategies that public schools are in a much better position to provide, given their wider access to and influential relationship with the younger generations. As this dissertation argues, it is precisely within this gap between
what schools are teaching and activists are doing where Conuco found an important role to carry out its initiative.

**Aims of the Study**

Learning about Conuco’s existence and pedagogical and political approach to environmental education and activism immediately caught my attention, prompting a series of questions that thoroughly informed the research:

1. How does a youth-led activist group concerned with environmental justice engage with public schools to integrate an alternative, experiential curriculum into the school’s educational program?
2. Is it possible to promote change within schools by bringing external resources to teachers and classrooms, and in what ways does it happen and what effects does it have?
3. What does this effort mean for the members of Conuco, and how do they change through this experience?
4. Where does this initiative fit within the larger context of the environmental movement in Puerto Rico?

In order to answer these questions, I conducted an ethnographic case study and followed Conuco for a full school year, from August 2008 to May 2009. I spent enough time with the group members to be able to describe the history and formation of the group, the personal stories of individual members, and the group’s daily activities regarding their work in schools and further collaborations with other social and environmental justice organizations. The specific objectives of this ethnographic design were:
• To describe the history and formation of the group and its relationship with the schools (Q1 & Q3);

• To explore why young people create, develop and sustain voluntary advocacy groups that can result in important social justice work and experiential learning activities (Q1 & Q2);

• To document the strategies and structures developed by the group to implement and sustain this effort (Q2 & Q4);

• To explore the meaning of this initiative for the group itself (Q3), and;

• To analyze ideological, structural and practical barriers to the implementation of environmental curricula in public schools in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico (Q1, Q2 & Q4).

**Methodological Framework: Epistemological Approach and Research Techniques**

As discussed in the previous chapter, important ethnographic work in the 1970s started to describe the complexity of school systems in Western urban societies. Central works in schooling and youth culture have included analyses of: (1) cultural conflict; (2) discourse analysis and bilingual education; (3) youth identity formation and socialization; (3) failing of pedagogical and administrative practices; and (4) modernization and cultural change. Critical Ethnography and Youth Participatory Action Research, in particular, have concentrated not only in unmasking systems of inequality and oppression, but more importantly, in utilizing research methodologies to promote change in the circumstances under study and with the people most affected by them. Issues such as migration, racism, and gender inequalities have been pushed to the forefront of discussions about social justice and the improvement of society through critical educational theories and ethnographies (Gibson and Ogbu 1991; Fordham 1993;
Levinson 1998; Carspecken and Walford 2001; Levinson, Cade and Padawer 2002; Madison 2005). In all of these studies, more importantly, ethnography has played a central role in helping researchers to address the complexities of public school systems through the integration of multi-level analyses that allow for an assemblage of voices and perspectives from diverse actors and sectors in society.

This approach has also permitted the investigation of the interaction between individual behavior and structural influences, and between micro and macro settings where daily routines take place. Like schools, other formal organizations have been studied using an ethnographic approach. Anthropologists and sociologists interested in large, complex societies have conducted research in a number of social institutions “not only to understand how those organizations themselves work, but also to explore larger social and cultural processes that might be played out in microcosm in the organizations” (Persico 2002:85). The importance of looking at these institutions lies in the opportunity to observe multiple phenomena in highly intricate cultural and social systems. Particularly interesting for social scientists researching this topic is to gain an understanding of these institution’s ideal and actual systems, so that the differences and similarities between the organization’s prescribed objectives and values, and the actual, more implicit dynamics in everyday practices can be documented and analyzed. Persico (2002) states, “discovering its informal goals and its actual, functioning arrangement of statuses and roles is more challenging because these factors are typically unwritten, unstated, and not systematically understood, even by participants” (2002:87). Conversely, in this dissertation we will examine how informal organizations such as Conuco also present contradictions between its ideal and actual systems of objectives and
values. This is the case even when the institutionalization of objectives and values has come at a later stage in the formation process, once the actual plans and strategies have been put into place.

Ethnography, thus, represents at the same time a methodology (i.e. the way in which we get to know things) and a set of methods (i.e. specific techniques used to collect information). Contrary to other research methodologies, ethnography starts by observing what people do and listening to the explanations they provide, before interpreting their behavior and thoughts from the researcher’s personal experience or academic background (LeCompte and Schensul 1999). This involves intimate, face-to-face interactions with participants, which ensures access to participants’ actions, perspectives, and meanings. It is mainly inductive, emphasizing the perspectives of the people in the research setting and building local cultural theories for use both locally and elsewhere (LeCompte, Schensul, Weeks, and Singer 1999). Accordingly, ethnography frames all human behaviors and beliefs within a sociopolitical and historical context, while using the concept of culture as the focal lens through which to interpret data (LeCompte and Schensul 1999).

In doing so, ethnography allows the researcher to: (1) document a process in its “natural” setting; (2) map out the multiple contexts where behavior takes place, and the different participants that interact in these contexts, and; (3) refine the research questions when embedded in multiple levels and systems of knowledge (LeCompte and Schensul 1999). Observations and interviews are the most common techniques to collect ethnographic data, but “any means of gleaning information that contributes to a
description of a people and its way of life can be considered appropriate to ethnographic fieldwork” (Angrosino 2002:3).

In view of that, today, ethnography is not practiced solely by anthropologists anymore, and thus in the past decades we have seen a series of important contributions from other disciplines, including, among others, sociology (Herrera and Torres 2006; Torres and Antikainen 2003), education (Carspecken and Walford 2001; Green, Camilli, and Elmore 2006), geography (Cloke, Cook, Crang, Goodwin, Painter, and Philo 2004; Limb and Dwyer 2001), media studies (Asante, Milke, and Yin 2008), organizational theory (Neyland 2008; Smith 2006), and public health (Israel, Eng, Shulz, and Parker 2005). All these disciplines have not only provided a critical dialogue on the conceptualization of field practices—i.e. broadening the contexts and topics of study—but have also enhanced the ethnographer’s toolkit, making it more robust and flexible—for example, with the inclusion of spatial and visual data, participatory and collective methodologies, and self-reflective instrumentation. Therefore, as argued by one influential anthropologist/methodologist, the important thing about research techniques is that “the actual methods for collecting and analyzing data belong to everyone” (Bernard 2006:3).

**Research Plan**

**Elusive multiple research settings**

Although ethnography is well-suited to the study of people in their natural settings, following Conuco around proved not to be an easy task. For instance, all the members were engaged in a multitude of activities and commitments in addition to their
work with the organization. Almost all of them were going to college full-time (one member was still in high school) and also had jobs outside the university. On top of that, they were participating in other social and cultural groups as well as in research projects, recreational activities, “hanging out,” and all the other “chorro de cosas” (“stuff”) that young people do in their daily life. In fact, they were so busy with their individual obligations that it was extremely difficult for them to meet regularly, and when they finally did, they would spend a significant amount of time talking about other things not related to the meeting agenda—things that were, nevertheless, important to the development of relationships and group coherence. Therefore, designing a systematic study to gather information from them was not straightforward and required a high level of flexibility and improvisation on my part to set up appointments to interview them, or jump into my car at a moment’s notice every time I learned of an activity that was about to start. Accordingly, the preferred modes of communication were through emails and phone text messages, which were used constantly to announce events, sometimes months in advance, but also a few hours prior.

To deal with the elusiveness of the group, I moved closer to them, and spent hours working from an office at the College of Education (CoEUPR), lent to me by a closely related professor. This office, in the fifth floor of the CoEUPR building, became my headquarters, where I conducted most of my interviews with Conuco. The office turned out to be in a very strategic place, since not only was it on the main campus of the University of Puerto Rico, where most members took their college classes, but it was also across the hallway from the multiple classrooms used by Conuco to conduct their meetings, whether for planning or training. Although none of the members were
majoring in education, there were specific reasons why they would end up gathering in this building. For instance, the main coordinator’s mother was a professor there, and, hence, played a critical role assisting Conuco with strategic guidance, networking facilitation, and access to other university resources. This professor also allowed some of her students in curriculum and instruction classes to partner with Conuco in the development of lesson plans that were to be added to an environmental education guidebook that Conuco was putting together to offer other teachers around the country, who could not benefit from their workshops or lacked any other environmental curricula. The intention behind this assignment was two-fold. On the one hand, the pre-service teachers would have an opportunity to develop lesson plans with a grassroots organization with the added value of potentially being put into practice—whether by other teachers or eventually themselves. This would give these teachers a real scenario in which to apply the knowledge acquired through the class, and also to develop awareness among them about environmental education and ecological concerns. The central part of the assignment was to work collectively to integrate environmental lessons to level-specific subject matters—e.g. math, language arts, and science. Besides, all the teachers who participated in this small-scale intervention were being trained for the same grade level as the teachers with whom Conuco worked in the schools, making the assignment relevant to all involved.

On a broader level, this partnership was significant for Conuco in at least two ways. First, they had the opportunity to ‘try out’ yet another method of raising ecological awareness with elementary school teachers by challenging them to think through ways of integrating, as Novo suggested before, two as yet dissonant knowledge systems: the
conventional (*formal education*) academic subjects, and the pro-environmental (*informal education*) politically-driven analytical skills. Secondly, as I will discuss in more detail later on, this event represents one crucial aspect of Conuco’s *modus operandi*—that is, their ability to accrue resources from a variety of sources to accomplish particular tasks and objectives. Through this strategic partnership with students at the UPR College of Education, the group recruits extra hands for a project that they otherwise would not be able to complete (i.e. lesson plans), or would have to wait indefinitely for the group’s actual membership to be larger. Therefore, when resources are scarce, the group accesses their network of partners and collaborators in an effort to increase their social capital and continue functioning.

It should be noted that this partnership was presented to the pre-service teachers as a voluntary option, after a formal presentation to the entire class from the group members. In other words, student teachers were not forced to participate, nor were they penalized for choosing a different class project. In fact, only a small group of them decided to take part on it. Originally, I was assigned to be the contact person between Conuco and the pre-service teachers in case they had particular questions about the assignment or needed further assistance to complete the lesson plans. However, my help was not needed, given that the student teachers preferred to communicate directly with their professor. Regardless of this, I participated in the meetings with the pre-service teachers as well as in the design of the assignment.

**Participant observation**

To better understand the dynamics of my observations and participation with Conuco, I refer to Angrosino and Mays de Perez’s (2003) proposition about the relational
character of this particular ethnographic dialogue. They contend that one consequence of the postmodernist critique against research objectivity is the reconceptualization of observation from a mere “method” of data collection to a “context for interaction” between those participating in the research project. For that reason, they argue, “the traditional concern with process and method has therefore been supplemented with (but by no means supplanted by) an interest in the ways in which ethnographic observers interact with or enter into a dialogic relationship with members of the group being studied” (Angrosino and Mays de Perez 2003:115).

Although the focus of most of Conuco’s activities and efforts was the classroom, many other events took place on the streets, away from school desks and chalkboards. These included walkabouts through the neighborhoods to see the ecological conditions surrounding schools, public presentations, meetings with partners and collaborators, improvised lunches to get updates about activities or to tie up last-minute issues, and outings to urban gardens or protests organized as part of Conuco’s educational and political agenda. Interacting with the group in this multiplicity of contexts was vital to be able to lay out a cartography of events, places and people involved in this process, and to develop a supportive relationship between participants and myself.

Most of the field notes were written after the events ended and they centered, for the most part, on very specific matters such as: (1) the people involved in each activity (whether it was Conuco members alone or with partners); (2) the setting of the event; (3) the type of activity (such as the ones mentioned above); (4) the purpose of the activity; and (5) my general impressions regarding the symbolic and material aspects of the members’ experiences, which are not readily available through, or explicitly mentioned
in, interviews or informal conversations (Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte 1999). During the times when I could not participate in a given activity, I would call or email the general coordinator to get updated on the happenings, and even though this would not count as first-hand observation, it helped me to track Conuco’s movements, and gather the coordinator’s perspectives on the activities.

Two things must be clarified about these observations before continuing. First, following the objectives of the research proposal as well as IRB protocol, my interactions with the elementary school children in and outside the classrooms were constrained, impeding me from directly collecting data on them. Consequently, my exchanges with these children were in relation to my involvement with Conuco as a collaborator and not as research subjects. However, I did observe the members of the organization while engaging with the children in order to be able to document their pedagogical strategies, material resources, interaction with teachers and other adults, and the content of the workshops, thus leaving out of my field notes children’s behaviors or comments. As a result, this document neither represents nor attempts to articulate the children’s voices, except for instances in which Conuco’s members bring them to life or the material culture that they have produced as part of the environmental education activities. I will go over these issues in greater detail when discussing the limitations of the research as well as the prospects for further studies.

Secondly, my participation in Conuco’s activities was similar to that of other members who provided aid (i.e., assistants) to the ones leading the workshops or the presentations—e.g. carrying materials, taking pictures of the activities, facilitating small groups of children, helping with mixing compost for gardening, and holding signs while
picketing against government’s development plan for the town of Río Piedras. I never took a leadership role, although I did participate in organizational and decision-making meetings, stating my opinions when queried, as was expected from everyone present at the meetingsxi. Even when at times I might have suggested adaptations to a particular activity—for example, adjustments according to age and skill levels, objectives of the workshop, and constraints given time and physical space—the original ideas always came from the group and where ultimately decided by them and their partners.

In spite of this, I did have conversations with the general coordinator and with other members regarding my participation as a collaborator. Given my previous experience both with other groups of young people, as well as in conducting research with children and adolescents inside and outside schoolsxii, they thought that I could be of assistance in helping them organize and put into motion several long-term projects that have been kept on the back burner (such as the lesson plans, mentioned above). For instance, they were interested in learning more about YPAR, since they believed that that was an approach they were already using to work with the childrenxiii. Another activity they were looking forward to doing was to write articles and disseminate their experiences in order to promote their action-oriented approach and encourage others, especially youth, to take on issues of concern to them. Finally, there was a wealth of information about issues and topics raised by the children in every workshop that Conuco was interested in following up, but did not have the human resources or time to address. All of these assignments not only point to how this group was conceptualizing its work in terms of scale or level of impact amid the scarcity of resources, but it also demonstrates the extent of their self-reflection and analysis as part of their intellectual practice. In
other words, they knew that their work could have broader social repercussions as long as they were able to bring together the appropriate level of resources, and communicate effectively and strategically with others holding similar interests.

**Semi-structured interviews: Building local knowledge with Conuco**

Observations were accompanied by a series of in-depth interviews conducted with all the members of Conuco (there were 7 members at the time of research). The interviews took approximately an hour to an hour-and-a-half, and were designed to learn specifically about individual members. Therefore, at the beginning of the research, the questions centered on the following three areas: (1) member’s background; (2) motivations to join the organization and current role in it, and; (3) coordination and experiences with children and schools. The first subject area included socio-demographic questions geared to finding out biographic information about members. Some of the questions in this section included: (1) members’ name and age; (2) the area where individuals reside; (3) college major; (4) working status; and (5) other activities they carry out in their free time, besides volunteering with Conuco, studying, or working.

The second subject area dealt with how members were recruited into the organization, what motivated them to get involved, and what it means to them to be part of Conuco. In this section I asked members to describe specific activities that they have been involved in, as well as their individual perceptions about the role and objectives of Conuco regarding environmental education and social change. We discussed the challenges of their work and the perceived impact on children and teachers. In order to explore their ideas about social justice and the extent of their understanding of social issues, I also asked them to mention additional societal problems that they would like to
address if given the chance, and why they picked environmental education above all of them. Many of these questions were intended to evoke information about members’ concerns, as well as the meanings of these experiences for each individual. Concurrently, questions also explored members’ development of an environmental consciousness, and expectations for their own future (as students and environmental activists) as well as that of the organization. These themes were addressed through questions such as: “When did you learn about these topics and realize that you needed to take action?” and “What other (environmental or social) issue would you like to address if given the opportunity?”

The third broad area of inquiry related to the actual coordination of the work in the schools and, thus, has a particular interest in documenting processes and strategic actions. The bulk of the interview questions appeared in this section, given the complexity of activities and people involved in coordinating and implementing workshops in each of the schools. It was through the description of these processes that I found out about: (1) the characteristics and needs of the schools and the neighborhoods being served (environmental conditions, amount of students, and grades represented); (2) the multiple steps and pitfalls required to access schools and offer workshops (meeting with principals, conflict with school calendar); (3) individual members’ preparation to teach (gathering materials, recruiting assistants if needed, developing lesson plans, studying the information, etc); and, (4) the negotiation of classroom space and control with individual teachers (some were more involved than others and, on occasion, Conuco members were left alone with the children).

Other topics emerged as well while the interviews progressed. For example, the more I was able to talk with different members, the more I was able to discriminate
individual and collective knowledge concerning environmentalism and education, and their contrasting perspectives in relation to the broader contexts in which their practices took place, such as Puerto Rico’s public educational system, the status of environmental education in the Island, and the specific circumstances of the neighborhood in which these five elementary schools were located. These topics are salient to understanding the group’s objectives and thoughts about these issues, since it is within these discussions that connections between individual actions and social structures are expressed. Here, I added questions that tried to capture, on the one hand, members’ explanations about the ‘problem’ and, on the other, expectations for future change: “Why teach a topic that the Department of Education has shown no interest in teaching children?”; or “What is the most important lesson that you want children to get out of this experience?”; or “In an ideal world, what would be the best way of teaching environmental education?”.

Other important information that emerged from the interviews was the strategies utilized by individual members to balance out the different aspects of their complex life. In many instances, this complexity resulted in feelings of frustration and defeat as other activities and commitments took time and energy away from individual members’ involvement with the organization. Some members were responsible for younger siblings, while others had conflicting schedules with jobs and so forth. Life complexity was significantly important in the process of recruiting new members, since previous and current commitments prevented many interested individuals from participating.

Finally, additional data were gathered about members’ perceptions of Conuco’s partners and collaborators. In particular, I wanted to know: (1) what individual members’ thought about the importance of these relationships for the organization; (2) if they all...
knew about all the individual people and groups in Conuco’s network and the extent of their contributions; and, finally, (3) if they knew of any criteria used to establish these partnerships. Gathering information like this gave me a better sense of the type and amount of knowledge each member had about this aspect of the organization and how involved she or he was in the process of developing these alliances.

On the whole, these narratives were significantly important to understanding the connection between theory and practice, since, as I mentioned before, one particular characteristic of this group was their ability to infuse their actions with complex theoretical explanations about topics such as community engagement, environmental education, social justice and political activism—all concepts learned and reflected upon through academic readings, discussions in classes, and sustained conversations with experienced activists, scholars and educators. Therefore, it was crucial not only to witness their interaction with the school personnel and the children, but also to record their thoughts and perceptions regarding their work.

This method allowed me to collect narratives about their experiences as environmental educators and activists, while providing them with a space to reflect on and share the challenges and advantages of this type of approach to community-led school reform, particularly regarding the integration of ecological topics and philosophies into what they regard as outdated curricula. The reflective aspect of this technique is indeed revealing both for the interviewer and the interviewee, since oftentimes Conuco members (and, indeed, other activists out there) become entangled in the practical, minute aspects of their applied work, leaving no time to fully develop an understanding of the complexity of what they are trying to achieve. Thus, on many occasions during the
study, participants found themselves surprised by a question or concern that they had not
had a chance to reflect upon previously, but nonetheless acknowledged the need for
having more frequent discussions about how things are going and the reaction of the
children to the workshops. Specifically, most of them expressed dissatisfaction and
frustration with not devoting more time for debriefing after each activity or forgetting
about some of the issues and ideas resulting from the classroom activities. This
discomfort was usually expressed as a communication issue and not as an overall
organizational problem that did not allow for these discussions to happen.

Moreover, it should be noted that “putting them on the spot,” so to speak, even if
inadvertently, could have intimidated some participants and made them shy away from
answering the questions directly, especially if they were feeling as if their knowledge was
being tested or their beliefs challenged. However, for the most part, and after having
developed a relationship with them, the members of the group reacted positively to this
interaction, nervously laughing (admitting that they were not expecting the question).
Immediately afterwards, participants would ask me to repeat the question and took the
opportunity to think back and reflect upon my inquiries. As I discussed in the last
chapter, when talking about critical/applied research, these structured dialogues serve to
open the space of research to those more affected by it, allowing them more participation
in the production of scientific knowledge and local cultural theories.

This also requires a particular moral stance on the part of the researcher. For
instance, it is important that the researcher is committed to the people in the study, and
that his or her participation is internalized as a collective effort to better understand the
life and conditions of all involved, including him- or herself. This presents the challenge
of being able to strike a balance between creating a welcoming critical environment for the examination of issues and discussion, and a unilateral conversation where the researcher is the only one getting anything out of it. Privileging the former reduces the chances of the latter. Besides, knowledge is not always power, but it is always about power; therefore it is relational (Yelvington 1995), and it depends on the historic, economic, political and cultural circumstances where it is produced and transformed into action. In that sense, critical applied research, like the study presented here, seeks not only to find answers to abstract disciplinary questions, but more importantly, to propose improvements to the conditions identified in situ, while developing relationships among participants and the local and scientific communities. Hence, the exercise of conducting and producing critical applied research, regardless of scale, is power, and therefore ought to be constructed as openly and democratically as possible. In fact, certain constraints and limitations, such as time or funding, can sometimes be overcome with increases in local participation and ownership of the research project.

**Semi-structured interviews: The broader context**

Through these conversations with the members of Conuco, I was able to construct a better picture of the structure of the group, which at times (especially at the beginning) looked amorphous and disorganized. I quickly understood that the research design needed to include data from several sources other than the active members. Listening to members describe the activities and people involved in this initiative made me realize the importance of designing a research plan that would allow me to get information from those partners and supporters that Conuco regarded as indispensable to conducting its work. I learned, for instance, that Conuco expanded outside its formal members to
include a robust group of allies that would step up to help whenever necessary. This outer circle, which I will discuss in detail in the next chapters, was regarded by Conuco as part of the organization because it provided them with guidance, motivation, knowledge, and, as described above, a pair of extra hands depending on their strategic needs. Similarly, Conuco would reciprocate its allies with their own efforts, developing a network of social activism that was conducive to a more far-reaching movement of resistance.

For that reason, the research design also included semi-structured interviews with two of the closest and arguably the most influential allies of Conuco: (1) the director of the Sierra Club, Puerto Rico Chapter; and (2) the president of AKKA-SEEDS, a student organization housed at the University of Puerto Rico, part of the educational program of the Ecological Society of America. These two individuals have been instrumental in the conceptualization of Conuco as an organization, the training of its members, and the development of its educational and political agenda within public schools and elsewhere. Interviewing them gave me insight on the formative stages and current development of the organization as viewed from the periphery. Additionally, documenting these organizations’ experiences—both successes and struggles—sustaining this type of work is important to connecting Conuco’s objectives and practices with the broader context of the environmental movement in Puerto Rico, and taking a historical view of the continuing effort to promote and integrate environmental education into public schools. Although this is not a comparative study, much can be learned from creating a dialogue between the experiences of the older, more established groups and that of Conuco,
hopefully adding to the collective knowledge about environmentalism, and the individual
growth of the different groups.

Finally, I chose to interview two long-term environmental educators in Puerto Rico who have dedicated a great part of their respective lives to developing and spreading the philosophical and moral underpinnings of environmental education as a fundamental paradigmatic change in public education. The rationale for interviewing these individuals was three-fold. First, I wanted to document other efforts in school reform that have taken place previously on the Island. Secondly, it was important to me to listen to their experiences implementing a state-wide, environmental education initiative and to also hear their opinions about Conuco’s approach to environmental education. Finally, as argued in the research objectives, I wanted to locate Conuco’s efforts within the larger history of environmentalism in Puerto Rico in order to establish a connection with the broader historical and social contexts from which Conuco was emerging as a new group. In other words, this approach would allow me to see a broader picture, while providing me with in-depth knowledge on how others perceive Conuco, as well as the possible implications of the group’s actions and relationships with those two seemingly separate worlds: the public school system and the environmental movement.

Both educators, now college professors, participated in the elaboration of the Department of Education’s K-6th Environmental Education Guidelines (Departamento de Educación 2003), geared to facilitating the implementation of environmental education in every school around the Island. Although none of these educators knew of Conuco before the interview, they both shared the passion and commitment for improving public education and producing a more environmentally responsible citizenship.
Correspondingly, all of them—Conuco, its allies, and the environmental educators—expressed the transformative character of environmental principles and values as well as the need to engage more intensively in activities that promote critical thinking and environmentally conscious practices.

This second set of interviews—with allies and educators—provided me with information about the scope of the group’s structure, the impact they have had on the schools as perceived by their partners and supporters, and the characteristics and meaning of the relationships developed with other environmental activists.

**Documents and audio-visual data**

Collecting documents was a continuous task throughout the project, and continued even as I was putting together this report. Although the original research design contemplated looking at archival data, the inclusion of organizational records, such as emails and photographs, came at a later stage as a result of my interaction with Conuco and a gained understanding of their communicational strategies. This addition to the original plan occurred in part because of the copious amount of written material Conuco was constantly producing, both electronically and in print, and the centrality of these materials to the coordination and implementation of their work. Additionally, I received access to audio-visual materials in the form of DVDs, photographs, audio songs, and multiple web pages designed to disseminate information and reach out to possible new members and interested partners (Facebook, 350.org, ESA SEEDSNet, CiudadesGaia.org, YouTube, and the Jane Goodall Institute: Community for Social Change). Other supporting materials came in the form of public records such as legislature projects and newspaper articles.
Data Analysis Plan

Both interviews and observations were transcribed and then entered into a computerized data management and analysis program—Hyper Research. Through a careful reading of the data, and utilizing a deductive/inductive approach, I examined the material for themes and topics already found in the literature as well as those emerging from the data. This process of analysis combine the eco-critical approach discussed earlier in this chapter with an adaptation of a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; LeCompte and Schensul 1999; Merriam 1998). Conceptual maps (Merriam 1998) and matrices (LeCompte and Schensul 1999) allowed me to triangulate these data to compare the elements of the classification system, which led me to build possible explanations as to how and why young people create, develop and sustain voluntary advocacy groups that can result in important social justice work and experiential learning activities. The coding scheme and the explanatory models were presented to the members of Conuco to gather their input on the way I was approaching the data and the way the findings were emerging.

Correspondingly, some of the domains that emerged immediately were: (1) Conuco’s history, organizational structure, and activities; (2) motivation of its members to participate; (3) perceptions of the different groups of participants about education, in general, and environmental education, in particular (e.g. urgency of the problem); (4) perceptions of the members of Conuco and the participating teachers about individual, collective and institutional change and participation; (5) pedagogical tools utilized to teach environmental education by both school teachers and the members of Conuco; and (6) structural and ideological barriers to implementation.
However, as the analysis developed and I brought back some of my interpretations to be discuss with the group, other unexpected domains emerged from the data. Some of those domains include the history of development and school reform in Puerto Rico and the relevance of the political and economic relationship between the US and Puerto Rico (i.e. colonialism) in the current status of public education. Also, the integral relationship between Conuco and its network became clearer, both in terms of the training and formation of the group itself and the influence of the network in the implementation and conceptualization of Conuco’s agenda.

Similarly, I utilized an “ethnographic content analysis” approach (Altheide 1987) to look not only at the “frequency and variety of messages”—as in traditional quantitative content analysis—but, more importantly, to the process and meanings of producing these documents as a way to “document and understand the communication of meaning” and “verify theoretical relationships” among the different data (Altheide 1987:68). Initially, archival data were sought to offer historic understanding on the development and characteristics of environmentalism and environmental education in Puerto Rico, and to aid the verification of emerging hypothesis and theory-building.

However, with the inclusion of other symbolic artifacts (LeCompte and Preissle 1993) such as Power Point presentations, news articles, bulletins, tee-shirts, maps, and children stories, I was able to “document and understand the communication of meaning” as messages were reflected in “various modes of information exchange, format, rhythm and style, e.g., aural and visual style, as well as in the context of the report itself, and other nuances” (Altheide 1987:68).
Merriam (1998) makes clear yet another aspect of analyzing text in ethnographic studies: “such documents not only provide valuable information about the program itself, but they can also stimulate thinking ‘about important questions to pursue through more direct observations and interviews’ (Patton 1990:233)” (1998:114). By following organizations’ “paper trail” we can document: (1) changes in values, rules, and objectives; (2) correspondence among the organization’s members and networks; and, (3) other nuances that cannot be directly observed otherwise—whether because it has taken place in an electronic medium, or have occurred before the research began, or when the researcher was not present (Merriam 1998).

Conuco’s paper trail included, primarily, more than 200 emails sent out between August 2008 and August 2009. For organizational and identification purposes, these emails were kept and saved in two separate folders named ‘Emails to Network’, and ‘Internal/Organizational Tasks’. It should be stated that these classifications are arbitrary and do not represent any differentiation made by Conuco while sending them. In other words, neither the “subject”, nor the “greeting” in the message indicated that any of the emails belong to any of the folders mentioned above. Hence, the classifications used here were developed for research purposes, according to patterns identified later on as emails kept piling in my accounts. Consequently, the first folder groups messages intended for larger distribution, and included in their bodies such things as invitations to activities, forwards from other organizations within Conuco’s network, and relevant information already published by other parties concerning ecology, environmentalism or social justice. In that sense, these emails constituted sort of a clearinghouse for anyone in the network interested in those issues.
The second folder houses those emails directly related to organizational practices, such as coordination of activities (meeting minutes and agreements, reminders about activities, and calendars of events), data collection (during this research Conuco conducted three on-line surveys and other evaluative exercises), and “working” documents (i.e., drafts of presentations, position papers, educational materials, etc.). For the most part, these emails were addressed to the active members, but not always. A widespread practice was to send some of these emails to everyone, regardless of topic or action required. This behavior, frequently practiced by the general coordinator, became a regular topic of discussion among members who continuously requested her to be more cautious and restrained when sending emails indiscriminately. For example, in one occasion, I sent a copy of a manuscript to the general coordinator to be shared with Conuco alone, and had to explicitly remind her not to forward the document to everyone in the network. The coordinator replied to me by saying, “I’ll start reading what you sent me and give you comments, thanks for the [message in] ‘bold’, I can tell you know me because I was going to ‘forward’ it to [Conuco’s] network! Haha” (“Voy leyendo lo que me enviaste y te comento. Gracia por el ‘bold’, se ve que me conoces por que iba a darle ‘forward’ a la red de [Conuco]! Jiji”).

Triangulating this information with the data gathered through interviews and observations allowed me to better comprehend such things as members’ motivations to focus on specific topics, directions taken for strategies and actions, external influences, and critiques or points of contention they had with others doing similar work (Merriam 1998).
Challenges and Limitations

The process of conducting qualitative, naturalistic research is always fractured and incomplete, since it is impossible for any researcher to observe the totality of the phenomena in the time and space allowed. Therefore, designing a research project involved narrowing down the focus of the project to a manageable size that would still be able to produce important insights about the aspect of reality under study. Given this scenario, every research project confronts particular challenges and limitations. Some of these challenges and limitations are prescriptive—e.g. ethical and sampling considerations—and thus guide the design itself and the goals of the study. Others are inconceivable until after we are in the “field,” as life itself reminds us of the complexity of human behavior and the number of variables that our ethnographic senses are incapable of fully grasping and conceiving.

Some of the challenges and limitations of this study include: (1) access to multiple perspectives; (2) the scope and applicability of the research findings; and (3) the nature of the study itself. Regarding access to multiple perspectives, unfortunately I did not obtain Institutional Review Board approval in time to conduct research inside the schools, which impaired my ability to gather teachers’ and students’ perspectives first-hand. Consequently, as I mentioned elsewhere in this document, the perspectives gathered from the schools’ staff and students came from Conuco’s members’ interpretation of their interactions with the former. The particular views that both children and staff could have provided me had the potential to shed light on the impact of Conuco in these populations as well as possible barriers to and facilitators for the integration of new curricula into the schools.
Moreover, the scale of the study raises questions about the transferability and applicability of the research findings to other settings or to a broader scale. Although this research recognizes the intricate relationship between the study’s findings and interpretations and the context in which it took place, it is still argued that many aspects related to youth socio-political development, community organizing and social activists and schools partnerships could be adapted and replicated in other settings outside Río Piedras with positive results. For instance, this study benefited from my previous experiences working with similar populations of youth in the U.S., Costa Rica, and Cayey, Puerto Rico (see Chapter One). Although these experiences show that this type of work has positive impact in small groups of youth and community residents, the question of institutionalizing these methodologies in order to expand the scale of its impact still remains.

In part, the nature of the research and the activities under study present a challenge in itself, given the elusiveness of the unit of study, the lack of time to follow the development of the group and its members, the complexity of the relationships and the extension of the network that connects the multiple stakeholders involved. In particular, the issue of time had to do with the realization that Conuco as an organization was both a moving target and a living creature. The dynamics of the group, given the flexibility and fragility of the membership, forced the organization to constantly reinvent itself (structurally and conceptually, in some cases) to adapt to the inclusion of new members and the lost or inactivity of older ones. As I write these lines, for example, I am aware that a year and a half after my research, Conuco is today a different organization, although not completely, to that which I have observed. The only reason I know that is
because I have kept in communication with the group and others in the neighborhood and have learned of significant changes that have taken place since I left. Therefore, the idea of time, when researching a grassroots organization in the formative stages, or in more advanced stages of its life, for that matter, has to be taken into account and particular efforts have to be put into place in designing follow-up interviews with the members and additional observations through time.

Many of these challenges and limitations became apparent just as the research started. However, they have been taken into account for further research as it is discussed in the last chapter of this dissertation. But first, in the next chapter I will present the findings of the study and a detailed account of both Conuco’s work and the individual members’ lives.
Chapter Five: Research Findings

Introduction

The findings of this study are organized under two sections, *Historical Antecedents* and *Conuco: The members and the organization*, which in turn integrate the three most critical aspects of this analysis: (1) local context, (2) social structures, and (3) individual development. Each of these categories of analysis represents the multiple levels in which the work of Conuco intersects; first, as a public, environmental advocacy organization and, second, as an intellectual and transformative space for its members. As conceptual categories, they facilitate the interpretation of the data as well as my engagement with other scholarly work on these topics. They are presented to provide clarity and understanding, address the research questions and further theoretical and methodological discussions of the areas of educational anthropology, environmental education and critical ecological theory. As will be evident throughout this chapter and the following one, the information presented here has been further divided into sub-areas or thematic fields according to chronological, theoretical and heuristic considerations. This will hopefully aid the readers to better understand the arguments proposed.

The first section, *Historical Antecedents*, most generally addresses this particular research question: Where does Conuco’s initiative fit within the larger context of the environmental movement in Puerto Rico and the history of school reform? Here, I will discuss the external elements that influenced the formation and characteristics of
Conuco’s project, and present a socio-historical discussion of the broader political, economic and geographical elements influencing the group’s formation, objectives and educational activities. I believe this historical overview is important because, as Solis (1994) argues, “any examination of the development of any part of or of an entire nation under colonialism has to be understood within the context of the colonial reality characterizing it. […] In the case of Puerto Rico, we need to make the case that it is a colony” (Solis 1994, 1). Therefore, when analyzing the development of public schooling in Puerto Rico under the rule of the United States it is imperative for the reader to understand the broader context in which the ethnographic data presented here take place.

In order to comprehend the transformative possibilities of Conuco’s proposed model of educational partnership and community-led school reform, we need to be aware of the institutionalized practices that are being contested by this model as well as the areas being targeted as possible directions for change. More to the point, interrogating the role of the state and its institutions is strongly supported by evidence from the ethnographic data, since one of Conuco’s objectives is to unmask the structural and ideological elements that result from a lack of a governmental long-term plan in favor of the environment. For instance, as will be later discussed, all the members interviewed perceive joining the organization as a political act in favor of improving schooling and raising children’s consciousness about social and environmental justice. Nonetheless, this study is not an ethnography of the school system and thus my interpretations about it are drawn from work done by other Puerto Rican intellectuals who have extensively examined the history and development of schooling since the early 1900s.
The second section, *Conuco: The members and the organization*, expands on the previous one by exploring more in-depth the personal experiences of the individual members while providing answers to the following research questions: (1) What are the different pathways that brought each of the members into the group?; (2) How does a youth-led activist group concerned with environmental justice engage with public schools to integrate an alternative, experiential curriculum into the school's educational program?; and (3) What are the meanings of these experiences for the different members? For example, on the one hand, the research reveals that each individual joined the group under different expectations regarding involvement and outcomes, both at a personal and collective level. In addition, each of the members brought with them particular knowledges, skills and areas of interest, which increased the practical capabilities and pedagogical tools of the group. On the other hand, through the individual interviews it was possible to tease out elements that were also shared by all the members, such as their interest in utilizing the arts as a methodological approach to reaching children and educating them about ecology, a shared empathy for marginalized school children, a critical stance against the Puerto Rican government and the Department of Education (DEPR), and the valorization of collective action as an effective vehicle to bring about change.

In this section, I also intend to map out the various anthropogenic landscapes where Conuco’s members interact, suggesting that collective socio-political behavior and environmental advocacy require structured opportunities and strategic networking. The multiple starting points in the formation of Conuco evidence, for example, the critical role of a supportive infrastructure in the articulation and sustainability of youth-led
voluntary work, whether through traditional social institutions—i.e. public schools and universities, government agencies, funding agencies, family networks, and social justice organizations—or through individuals with specialized knowledge and resources to guide and promote these efforts. A key thematic field included in this portion of the findings attends to the internal structure of the youth-led organization and describes how the members of Conuco are organized to carry out the mission of the group, as well as the ways in which they have gained access to the public elementary schools.

The dynamics and intricacies of the phenomena under study, that is, collective pro-environmental behavior and youth socio-political development are critically understood through the connections suggested in these two sections and the respective sub-domains and thematic fields. Because these complex cultural processes integrate multiple sectors of societal and individuals’ lives, the study of them requires an approach that emphasizes a critical-ecological framework, capable of looking holistically at the historical, social, cultural, and personal elements that give shape to and result from them. Therefore, some of the data presented in each individual section cut across one or more of the suggested domains and sub-areas, just as they will in the everyday life of the participants.

Lastly, Conuco’s complex work in schools and in Río Piedras cannot be understand, however, without looking at the history of schooling and the process of economic development in Puerto Rico under U.S. rule. Therefore, to support these arguments I will start with a brief overview of the history and current state of the educational system and the repercussions of development on the environment while
suggesting several connections to the work of Conuco as a critique to this current model of public education and economic development.

**Historical Overview of the DEPR: Americanization and Colonial Schooling**

In the aftermath of the Spanish-American War in 1898, Puerto Rico became a colony of the United States. Many new agencies were created at that time to administer the new possession and guarantee control over the subjects. In particular, the system of educational instruction, helped, from early on, to secure and promote the interests of colonial development and economic exploitation on the island (Montilla-Negron 1977; Osuna 1975; Quintero-Alfaro 1972; Solís 1994). Whereas under Spanish rule schooling was offered exclusively to the children of the well-to-do, the U.S. model expanded access to public schools exponentially, reaching out to most children and youth across the Caribbean nation. As a result, the public school system was charged with a significant role in the social, cultural, political and economic development of Puerto Rico. More importantly, “the language of development, and more specifically the language advancing the reform of educational policies, [was, and still] is predominantly motivated by the exigencies of foreign control. Such exigencies often impede education’s contributions to the country’s development and instead have as their primary concern the preservation of control” (Solís 1994:18).

Furthermore, both historical accounts and political-economy analyses have concluded that colonial public education, since its inception at the beginning of the 1900s, has been an ideological and material strong-arm of the U.S. in their strategies to Americanize Puerto Rico and, hence, further their economic and political agenda in the Caribbean and Latin American regions (Quintero-Alfaro 1972; Solis 1994; Tirado 2008;
Torres-Gonzalez 2001). Through the control of the schools, the colonial government could reach all of the population swiftly and efficiently, and thus assimilate future generations of Puerto Ricans both culturally and socially. Operationally, Americanizing the island’s population required producing Puerto Ricans that were loyal to U.S. ideals, values, and intentions for the islands, and could be fed to the mechanisms of the industrial capitalist market, providing the necessary labor force with the skills to support subsequent economic plans. Victor Clark, assistant to the first director of the Bureau of Education under the U.S., and intellectual mastermind behind the new public school system, expressed the sentiment of the model in this way:

“The great mass of Porto Ricans [sic] is still passive and plastic... Its ideals are in our hands to be created and molded. If we Americanize the schools and inspire the teachers and students with the American spirit... the island will become in its sympathies, views and attitudes... essentially American” (in Montilla Negrón 1990:250).

To achieve the goal of Americanizing Puerto Rico, several mechanisms were implemented, none of which responded to the needs or interests of the local citizens (Solis 1994). Of most significance, given the cultural clash that it provoked, was the utilization of English as the language of instruction. For instance, in the first years of the plan every city or town with a secondary school was required to hire at least one American teacher to be in charge of developing the new English curricula. Books and materials in Spanish were collected by military authorities and substituted with English ones. Additionally, Puerto Rican teachers were expected to learn and teach in English, while new pre-service candidates were required to present language proficiency tests before being hired to educate. Finally, the newly created Department of Instruction (previously Bureau of Education) was to be directed by an appointee of the U.S.
president, who was also a member of the legislative Executive Counsel. This position centered all the decisions about education in Puerto Rico in one single chair representing the colonial interests and giving rise to what is still today a very hierarchical and, in many respects, inefficient system (Quintero 1996; Quintero-Alfaro 1972; Rey 2008).

These major changes were set in place not without significant resistance and discontent from school communities around the island and the political elites in Puerto Rico (Solis 1994). Many Puerto Ricans expressed disillusionment with the lack of access to decision-making regarding public instruction, as well as their right to self-determination and governance. Others kept resisting the imposition of these policies and demanded more recognition and local participation. At the community level, teachers and parents opposed the use of English in classrooms and other orders from American supervisors, and accused them of not having children’s and parents’ wellbeing in mindxv. In the political arena, the main local parties at the time, Partido Unión (Union Party) and Partido Republicano (Republican Party), maintained a strong battle against each other to gain the favor of the U.S. president and Congress through the scrutiny of insular administrators and their policies. It is important to keep in mind that in 1897, a year before the Spanish-American War, the Spanish Crown had signed the Carta Autonómica granting important governing powers to the people of Puerto Rico and paving the way for its independence. Nonetheless, this was long forgotten after the war, except by the local political elites struggling to decide the future of Puerto Rico’s status.

Following Solis (1994), I argue that the plan to Americanize Puerto Rico through the educational system was based mainly on the production of a discourse of progress and democracy linked, in its initial stages, to the acquisition of the English language and,
later, to the internalization of a rational state of dependency among the population. On the one hand, this process helped to spread the values and ideals of the North American model while, on the other, facilitated the participation of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. labor market and armed conflicts. The promotion and privileging of the English language vis-à-vis Spanish continues to be an important debate and has been a central component concerning the cultural assimilation and identity formation of Puerto Ricans both in the island and the U.S. (Laboy 1968; Rivera-Quiñones 2009; Torres-Gonzalez 2002; Urciuoli 1996; Zentella 1997)

Regarding the hierarchical structure of the educational system, Solis (1994) and others (Tirado 2008) agree that this alignment allows for strict control since all decisions are made from the top-down and external to schools, preventing and disfavoring any developmental initiatives at the local level. Tirado (2008) goes further to suggest that these imperialistic practices have not only precluded the rise of a concerted public education plan that takes into account the needs of the Puerto Rican people, but most significantly it has promoted, in the lower ranks of the educational system, a false perception that they are incapable of assuming leadership on matters of school reform. The repercussions of these practices have created a psychological and material state that constantly frustrate and demoralize those who, while trying to implement and adapt educational policies and practices to the benefit of their students, clash against the vertical, centralized and authoritative structure of the colonial Department of Education.

The DEPR today: Economic and social bankruptcy

Notwithstanding, the history of the DEPR is not all gloomed; after the 1930s with the expansion of the welfare state, the DEPR grew immensely in enrollment and staff.
Although by the early 1980s student enrollment reached the highest in Puerto Rico’s history (712,880 students were enrolled), it was not until 2000 that public and private schools were serving the largest percentage of children and youth across the island—98.9 in elementary school and 91.3 in secondary education. According to Ladd and Rivera-Batiz (2006), this expansion of the educational system was significant in allowing Puerto Rico to currently become one of the countries with the highest records of educational development in the world between the period of 1960 and 2000.

Although Puerto Rico has been able to increase the quantity of education attainment, it is argued that now this growth will start to decline as most children and youth are being reached. This growth in education attainment has been without doubt an important factor in the economic development of the island in the past, as the state positions itself to compete in attracting industries of all sorts. However, the current challenge is to raise the quality of that education, especially for the most disadvantaged populations:

“That almost half of the youth residing in the poorest households in Puerto Rico were experiencing severe school difficulties suggests a cycle of poverty and poor schooling that would need to be broken... The lack of progress in overall student achievement, the movement of students out of the public system, and the education system’s apparent failure to meet the needs of the bulk of Puerto Rico’s poor population are all causes for concern” (Ladd and Rivera-Batiz 2006: 206).

According to standardized tests conducted in 2004, Puerto Rican students are performing below proficiency in all three measured areas: Spanish, Math and English (Ladd and Rivera-Batiz 2006). When looking at the possible reasons for this poor performance, we found some relationships to the history of foreign-driven reform previously discussed, as it is suggested that the apparent deficient outcome of students in
Spanish is consistent with curriculum reforms in the 1990s that emphasized the teaching of English over other subject matters. Paradoxically, nonetheless, “the drop in English achievement from the mid-1990s to the later period suggests that that effort was not successful” (Ladd and Rivera-Batiz 2006: 201).

Overall, these educational researchers seem to concur that, for the most part, government-sponsored educational reforms and budget spending have not produced the expected improvements in the public education system. More critically, these studies suggest that underlying these failures are specific structural causes, instead of, for example, performances at the school level. Some of these structural causes include the imposition of educational reforms from above, the politicized environment that hinders the design and implementation of these reforms, the lack of assistance for schools to be prepared to follow through, generalized practices of corruption across the system and the unmanageable size of the DEPR. As a recent ex-secretary of education describes it, all these factors have rendered the agency’s current model unsustainable and its structure “ungovernable” (Rey 2008).

Consequently, researchers and educators in the island believe that the DEPR has lost touch with students’ reality, losing its ability to respond efficiently and adjust to Puerto Rico’s contemporary social, economic and cultural changes (Quintero 1996). For instance, primary and secondary education no longer represent a viable pathway for marginalized students to succeed, which is evidenced by Puerto Rico’s paradoxical honor of having one of the highest rates of schooling in the world (approximately 86%), next to one of the highest in unemployment (approximately 22%), and school dropouts (approximately 34.4% among students between ninth and twelfth grades) (Rey
2008:141). It should be notice, nonetheless, that according to Ladd and Rivera Batiz (2006) the rate of school dropouts should truly be around 21.3% if we consider the high level of migration to the U.S. and the increasing enrollment of students (up to 24.7% of the total population in 2003) in private schools. Regardless, the authors agree that although the rate is significantly lower than the previous 34.4%, Puerto Rico still has a significant dropout problem.

These structural issues, furthermore, are worsening at the neighborhood level, where many public schools have distanced themselves from surrounding communities, fracturing historical alliances and partnerships with local residents and organizations. In sum, the process of schooling, crucial in the promotion of social change and chief force in the transformative projects of development since the first half of the twentieth century, seems to have reached “its true limits” (Quintero 1996:47). The result is a colonial bureaucratic model that is hierarchical, obsolete and corrupt, unable to represent the needs and interests of those assigned to attend: the majority of Puerto Rican children and youth. This state of dysfunctionality raises questions about the true capacity of this agency to implement strategies to address the concerns and needs of public schools at the local and national levels, especially environmental challenges, which are not a priority for politicians or educational leaders. The centralization of policymaking and authoritative power in the Department of Education, and the formalization of an ideological scaffolding that perpetuates a state of dependency, were and still are the principal features of the colonial relationship, and consequently, the schooling apparatus. This perspective is in direct contradiction with Conuco’s principles and objectives, which concentrate on challenging these conditions—i.e. educational bureaucratization, centralized decision-
making and economic and structural bankruptcy—through the development of a pedagogical project that prioritizes the needs of local neighborhoods, while critically analyzing the political, cultural and environmental situation of the Puerto Rican nation as seen through the lens of its relationship with the United States. Laura, for example, analyzes this relationship when discussing issues of food production and consumption in Puerto Rico and the public school cafeterias:

“[…] Because politicians are the ones controlling the country. I mean, the politicians and the corporations, and they are the ones making [the] decisions that affect the environment the most. I mean, as a human being you could say: ‘OK, I will try to be less consumerist’ […] But if there is not public policy that helps you reach that, then […] you will achieve minimal change. If, for example, there was public policy [that says] that what is consumed in public school cafeterias has to be grown in the schools, then that could be a great improvement in terms of issues of sustainability in the country. And that is a project completely feasible that is already taking place in Orocovis. […] They grow the food there and use it in their cafeteria, which I think makes the most sense in the world [laughter]. Because, first of all, the food that they send from cafeterias [in the U.S.] is awful, stinks […]. Let me invite you to the cafeteria so you can try it! [Laughter] So […] the bad food from the cafeteria is a product of the system we [live in]. In fact, there were initiatives here […] to grow more local products and I don’t remember what happened, but the companies that bring food from [abroad] started to protest, because, you know, it is like you have these franchises that, basically, live off of selling [food] to the schools. They sell you a low quality product and send it to you, and that is what you get and you have to prepare. For me, that is awful because sometimes they give you things that… I mean, it is supposed to be healthy food, and sometimes they give you hot dogs on white bread, which is not healthy at all. On top of that, the few vegetables available, seriously, you don’t want to eat them. I have eaten carrots that taste like meat!”

Regarding environmental education specifically, since 2001, there have been at least three attempts by local legislators to amend the Organic Act of the DEPR, which would authorize the development of environmental curricula for all grade levels. Yet, none of these attempts have been considered in the House of Representatives or the
Senate. In fact, during the most recent public hearings on this matter (in 2006), the previous Secretary of Education, the President of the Teachers Association and the President of the General Board of Education, all stated that environmental education was already included in the science curriculum and therefore there was no need to change public policy. Additionally, in all three occasions, the sub-committee chairs brought up the shortage of funds available to implement the changes suggested by the bills and the precarious status of other academic disciplines and electives that are not being offered currently to illustrate the critical financial state of the DEPR. However, Laura offered me a different explanation that moves away from practical and economic justifications and brings to the fore political and ideological reasons,

“The same way that other inconvenient things are not taught [like the ‘real history’, or ‘evolution’], well, environmentalism is an inconvenient thing […]. In other words, any thing that could change the belief system. […] And it is also that education today is designed to supply labor to the industry, so, [what is taught] is science and mathematics, science and mathematics. The point is that if you don’t give students a good baseline, integrated, regardless of how much emphasis you give to science and mathematics, [the student] won’t even learn that. Because how could someone learn about science if [s/he] doesn’t have good reading and comprehension techniques and all of that […]. There is also a notion that [education] is almost mechanical—let’s do this now because the test is coming. And things are not valued because of knowledge alone, or knowledge because of its applicability. It’s only to get an A in the test. And, maybe, because of that, things that are important but are not part of that scheme, just remain outside”

In actuality, the DEPR has published few guidelines in the last decade to provide teachers with activities to incorporate into their science courses (see for example, Departamento de Educación, 2001, 2003). Nevertheless, when I interviewed two of the consultants who worked on the guidelines’ development, both stated the need to go beyond these guidelines to create public policy regarding environmental education. They
agreed with Conuco that this topic has not been a priority for the DEPR. One of them confessed to me that in many cases the DEPR did not provide training and follow-ups to teachers on how to integrate the additional activities into the curriculum, and that the guidelines have not been distributed extensively enough to have any significant effect. Moreover, the other consultant questioned a deeper philosophical and pedagogical issue when she clarified the difference between environmental sciences and environmental education, stating that while the former is a sub-discipline of the natural sciences, the latter is a long-term “transformative experience” that develops from “an interdisciplinary vision that integrates science with educational, social and cultural processes.” Thus, adding activities to the science curriculum is nothing more than a partial solution to the problem and does not address concerns of systemic/structural change, curricula integration and societal transformation through the education of younger generations. The publication of these guidelines, therefore, precludes the development of a long-term plan intended toward achieving such transformations. Although it could be argued that Conuco does not have a comprehensive plan to address the structural changes needed to transform the current “ungovernable” and inefficient system of education, their work exemplifies the different dimensions of the problems that indeed need to be target. As it will be shown below, the conceptualization of Conuco’s objectives and goals address the historical top-down and foreign-driven approach to school reform. For once, their work is grounded on issues that are relevant to the people most affected by them, who are for the most part never included, or even heard, when decisions get made in the DEPR. More importantly, their incursion in these schools makes visible the permeability of what is otherwise a close system, pointing out its possible spaces for transformation. By the
selecting the subject of environmental education, which given the accounts above I believe is wrongly perceived as an innocuous subject, this group of young people devised an entrance to examine and act upon issues of social justice, marginalization, health disparity and others that otherwise might never be discussed inside the classroom.

**Government’s Perspective on Economic Development and the Environment**

In conjunction with the public system of instruction, the majority of the geographical spaces in the Island have served foreign interests and investment capital throughout the decades (Berman-Santana, 1996; Muriente-Perez, 2007). Particularly since the late 1940s, as part of the “export-led industrialization process” (Dietz, 2003; Pantojas-Garcia, 1990) known as *Operation Bootstraps*, the natural environment has suffered irreparable transformations due primarily to extensive processes of edification, contamination and urbanization of what used to be mostly agrarian zones. Estimations of environmental impact and degradation have become second priority to the fast-pace process of modernization still happening today. The utilization of land and water supplies to provide resources to commercial and residential centers has led to the desertification of vegetative areas, the excavation of beach sand for construction, the contamination of the air and the degradation, and often the destruction of surface and underground aquifers (Muriente-Perez, 2007). These activities have been supported by other neoliberal practices geared to privatizing governmental assets, eliminating local laws and regulations in favor of foreign capital, and promoting the exploitation of natural resources for mass tourism (see examples below).

Nonetheless, this pattern of unsustainable development that has privatized the natural environment and rented its environmental “services” for the profit of the few
(Leff, 2008) has found strong critiques from an array of social sectors in Puerto Rico and abroad. Similar to other countries around the world, environmental struggles in Puerto Rico began at the community level. These initial efforts were concerned predominantly with safekeeping collective rights—threatened by the state or the private sector—through reclaiming of misappropriated access to vital natural resources such as clean water and land. On other occasions, the social justice struggles have concentrated on unmasking and condemning the abusive behavior of companies and public agencies that have resulted in the contamination or destruction of the natural environment.

For example, in 1995 the grassroots organization Casa Pueblo won an unprecedented fifteen-year struggle against the government of Puerto Rico, who had wanted to develop open-air mining in the mountainous region of Adjuntas. Casa Pueblo’s organizing strategies and political mobilization put a halt to the excavation process and transformed the testing areas into a national forest, now administered by the local community. Its continuous efforts to preserve the environment has also resulted in the passing, more recently, of a legislative bill that creates the first biological corridor in the central mountain region of the island, which includes 29,398.4 acres of land in 10 different municipalities, and the unification of five state forests (Casa Pueblo, 2010).

A similar struggle has taken place in the other side of the island with opposite outcomes, when the current administration revoked an executive order signed by the previous administration designating the Corredor Ecológico del Noreste (CEN) as a Natural Reserve (Sosa 2010). The CEN is a vast ecological area in the northeast of Puerto Rico that covers more than 3,000 acres of forests, wetlands, beaches, coral communities, and a bioluminescent bay. The CEN is also home to more than 50 endemic
and threatened species including the Snowy Plover, the Brown Pelican, the Puerto Rican Boa, the Hawksbill Sea Turtle, and the West Indian Manatee. Nevertheless, as mentioned above this area is probably best known for being one of the most important nesting grounds in the U.S. for the Leatherback Sea Turtle—the largest sea turtle in the world.

The CEN’s ecological splendor not only brings together environmentalists and scientists interested in learning about the biodiversity of the region, but it also attracts the seeds of its possible demise, as suburban areas continue to grow, mass tourism increases and indiscriminate economic development places bids on the land. Although pressure from environmental organizations and community-based groups resulted in the designation of the CEN as a natural reserve, the current administration has revoked the order, siding with the developers of two mega-projects brought to a halt after the 2008 designation took place. However, currently the struggle has moved to the local supreme court, which has to decide on the constitutional merits of the governor’s decision, while the pressure from environmental groups still continue to target legislators and other influential politicians both in Puerto Rico and the U.S. In an island with limited natural resources and physical space, the colonial government has consistently prioritized economic initiatives that benefit external capital—such as mass tourism, manufacture and most recently biotechnologies—to the demise of the natural and social landscapes (Berman-Santana, 1996; Muriente-Perez, 2007).

Conuco’s reformist approach addresses many of the micro concerns discussed in previous sections regarding accessing public schools, negotiating classroom time with teachers and administrators, eliciting children’s perspectives about their surroundings and
interacting with the students inside and outside the classroom. Yet, Conuco’s model also presents a structural and ideological critique against the government of Puerto Rico and particularly the Department of Education (DEPR) for not giving environmental education the attention it necessitates, in particular, and neglecting the natural environment, more generally. Part of this macro critique comes from an understanding of the historical role that the state and its institutions have had as safe keepers and promoters of foreign interests and unsustainable development strategies. Therefore, the work of Conuco also represents this critique against the colonial economic rationalization that has guided developmental plans in the island. Through its networks, Conuco taps into this tradition of community organizing and environmental protection and contributes its educational work to the broader environmental movement in Puerto Rico and, in some extent, in the U.S. and the world (cf. Princen and Finger 1994). Following the historical development of the environmental movement in Puerto Rico, Conuco also represents an oppositional proposal to the state that while examining and challenging the political and economic system at the structural level, grounds itself at the community and interpersonal level.

To illustrate how Conuco attempts to achieve these changes, the next section will present information on the individual members and describe the dynamic character of Conuco as an oppositional public interest group, a space for learning and explore the self, a vehicle to access children and improve their education and, finally, as an experiment in leadership and advocacy.
Individual Development and ‘Sense Making’

This research argues that in order to understand youth-led organizations it is important to study both the individuals that form the organization and the synergistic relationships that come out of the interactions between each other and with the people outside of the group. To illustrate this point further, this section will present, first, Conuco’s origins and history from the perspective of its founder and initial members, and second, the meanings that the organization holds for those who participated in this study. Although Conuco represents the collective effort of many people through time, it also embodies the dreams and expectations of a very particular young woman, Julia, who relentlessly seeks out ways in which to advance the pro-environmental cause, encourage youth and adults to action, develop a community of activists and grow as an individual. Therefore, as the following section progresses, I will attempt to start weaving the stories of Conuco’s members into the structural elements presented before.

Conuco’s early development: Cross-fertilization and experimentation

The story of Conuco is one of cross-fertilization and experimentation, and as one of its members declared, “Conuco existed even before we came up with the name!” Central to this experimentation is the parallel development of Julia as an environmental leader and advocate. While still in 11th grade in high school, Julia came up with the idea of Mate Leaf, a high school student organization created to fill a gap regarding ecological concerns within the Chamomile High School (CHS) student body. Giving the stated objectives of CHS as an “educational center for experimentation”, constituting Mate Leaf as an additional student organization was not difficult, but rather encouraged as an example of students “owning” their individual development and initiatives. Mate Leaf,
thus, came to life as a student-centered action to respond to the perceived lack of attention paid by the CHS’s community to environmental issues affecting the school and its surroundings, such as recycling, deforestation and lack of environmental education. This is how Julia describes her intentions,

“The idea was to create an environmental group that could respond to concerns we had in the school. It was us upset with things around the school that we wanted to change, especially environmental stuff. And so, in Mate Leaf, we did a school garden and a lot of things... field trips, things regarding waste management in the school.”

Mate Leaf served as a platform for Julia and her peers to put into practice the skills and knowledge they were informally acquiring—through family, teachers and individual research—and to expand their advocacy role already germinating within the microcosm of CHS. Since early in the process, even when the goals and objectives of the organization were not completely clear, the members of Mate Leaf decided to coordinate their efforts around three main areas: education, research and action. They knew that they wanted to teach others about the environment, but they also thought that it was important to integrate social and ecological research into this task in order to advance behaviors in favor of the environment. For instance, to deal with issues of garbage and waste management in school, the group developed a school-wide recycling program that still is in use today. The issue of urban deforestation was attended to through the creation of a school urban garden, which required the members of Mate Leaf to research and learn about the best species to plant according to the specific conditions of the school and the better ways of taking care of these plants so that the garden could continue for a long time. Moreover, they also realized that the earlier a person experiences the environment and learns about it, the earlier s/he will engage in protecting and conserving
it. Accordingly, they looked at their neighboring elementary school, JES, and discovered that they did not have any environmental education program, which quickly prompted them to act. As a result, Mate Leaf invited a group of elementary students from JES to visit their school garden and received talks about nature and ecology—this group later became Conuco’s first elementary school group and the “model” for all the other school groups.

Impressed by what their elders were doing, the youngsters at JES rallied together and demanded from their teachers to have their own environmental group. Soon after, the elementary school children found an interested teacher-supporter who would take on the challenge of forming the Retoños and help them organize after-school activities facilitated by the members of Mate Leaf. Following this successful experience—this was Julia’s first experiment with education—Mate Leaf sat in a meeting and bounced around the idea of replicating this model in other elementary schools around the neighborhood of Río Piedras: “Hey, if the Retoños are going so well, why don’t we continue with other schools? Other schools should also get involved!”

As suggested before, this first group was selected by Mate Leaf based on proximity and previously established relationships between the schools’ staff and students. Both of these schools share some of the same students at different point in their life, since many of them move from JES to CHS after graduating from 6th grade. In fact, it could be argued that these schools shared the same physical space, which makes environmental issues in the area similar for both groups of students. For Julia and the others in Mate Leaf, experimenting with the JES was not only convenient but also encouraged given, as we mentioned before, that both public schools are considered
educational “centers for experimentation and research” under Puerto Rico’s school system. What is more, that was the first time that the idea of Conuco came about. In fact, Conuco’s real name represents this idea plainly, suggesting something comparable to *Association of Children Collectives in Favor of the Environment*. However, this is only part of the story, since it took them a few more years before Conuco got on its feet.

The experience of Mate Leaf, stimulated Julia’s process of intellectual development and socio-political formation as she continued to search for new opportunities. One such opportunity came soon in the form of the Sierra Club’s Summer Leadership Program (SPROG), where she and others were trained in grassroots organizing, campaign strategy and planning, and communication skills to effectively advocate for environmental causes. These summer, and sometimes winter, programs are designed to develop new environmental leaders, especially among young people (*Sierra Club, www.sc.org/sprog, 2010*). As part of the student coalition of the Sierra Club, the SPROG trainings are organized by each regional chapter to connect local issues with others at the national and international levels. For the last few years, SPROG activities in Puerto Rico have been centered primarily on the protection of the CEN (see above). For Julia, nonetheless, this opportunity provided her with new advocacy skills, knowledge about environmental struggles beyond Río Piedras, connections to the environmental movement in the U.S. and the possibility of extending her network of peers interested in similar issues.

One of the results of that SPROG was the creation of a collective of young people, the Colectivo Cundeamor (CoCun), that short-lived in between Mate Leaf and Conuco. The CoCun is important to this story because it was an attempt by several
individuals and youth-led organizations to develop a coalition of youth environmentalists interested in strengthening the voice and the reach of young people regarding ecological issues and environmental education. Only some of the initial members came out of the Sierra Club’s summer programs, while others represented schools and communities around San Juan, Puerto Rico’s capital city. One of the main goals of the CoCun was to bring together people and groups working disjointedly toward a common agenda. As part of that effort, Mate Leaf, which was a component of the CoCun through Julia, proposed the adoption and development of the idea of Conuco as one of their central projects. Laura, who helped Julia in the conceptualization of the original idea and was at the time a member of Mate Leaf, describes what the role of Conuco was intended to be within the CoCun:

“When Julia and I were writing the proposal—usually when we sit down to write the proposals is when we get the ideas on what to do—we decided to do a separate group within the Colectivo Cundeamor, to dedicate itself to that which was going to be Conuco.”

However, the coalition did not last long, and for some of the members, now in Conuco, this alliance never really got off the ground. Violeta remembers how things “went down” with the coalition, leaving Conuco alone with its new goal:

“Well, one of the things that the Colectivo Cundeamor had as a goal was to take these workshops [Conuco] to elementary schools... But because the Colectivo Cundeamor went down, uh, it has remained, more like Conuco.”

Although it would be easy to discard this effort as a failure given its short life and limited accomplishments, I argue that experimenting with new ways of organizing and conducting social justice work is a critical part of the learning path and socialization
process of activists and citizens with a particular interest in critical participation and
social change. As Violeta explained to me,

“The idea behind the Colectivo Cundeamor was super, from the beginning. However, I
also thought that we were not ready, the individual groups, the different schools
individually. Maybe we were not ready for a commitment, sort of, of being able to
commit to attend to that many meetings or carrying out such big things.”

Participation in this coalition not only offered its members the space to discuss, plan and
implement ideas, but also the opportunity to develop and expand their individual
networks for future collaborative work. Evidence of that is the fact that some of the
CoCun’s members have moved on to continue working with Conuco, and others are still
involved in environmental advocacy elsewhere. Violeta describes this development by
tying together the Sierra Club, the Colectivo Cundeamor and Conuco,

“There are summer programs, workshops on environmental leadership [SPROG]. They
are for high school students and even middle school. That, more or less, is where the idea
for the Colectivo Cundeamor came about. There are workshops on communication, the
[planning] matrix, how to organize [a media] campaign, lobbying, different workshops
with the purpose of achieving what one wants, sort of speak—obviously focusing on the
environment. And from that, there have been three. Yes, this is the third time. Last
summer was [the Sierra Club’s] third workshop. The workshops are one-week long with
different students across the island that learned about it, […] apply and get in. I like to
think that they have done something, and I have seen that they have. Because since the
first camp we have, students came out to study environmental sciences or participating in
the [Sierra Club’s] Apprenticeship Program. One of the students who participated in the
first program is now in an Apprenticeship Program and he will now start working in
something related to environmental protection. From the second one, some students
came out who were some of the most active members of the Colectivo Cundeamor, and
still go to activities like the Festival of the Tinglar in Luquillo, [or] they still organize
field trips on their own. They organize themselves on their own and then keep us inform,
but they get the buses, write their grants and talk to the major and things like that. I like
to think that Conuco will work, not in the same way, because these are young children
and they need their parents [for some of the activities].”

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Furthermore, understanding the challenges and limitations of these formative processes gave those involved an advantageous point-of-view regarding future attempts and possible courses of action. Notice how Violeta rationalizes the disappearance of the Colectivo Cundeamor and justifies the birth of Conuco:

“I thought that the Colectivo Cundeamor should have stopped for a while, or that we were not prepared for it. Yet, I thought Conuco was a more do-able idea because [after all] we are student groups. The majority is from the university—from here, from the UPR—or from CHS, which is nearby. Thus I thought it was more possible for us to meet to do these things and… you know… there were already some contacts, we had already talked with the schools we were working with, I don’t know, I thought it was a better idea.”

Finally, a couple of years later, after Julia and many of Mate Leaf’s members moved on to college at the UPR and the Colectivo Cundeamor was a thing of the past, the idea of forming Conuco emerged once more, this time at the right juncture for it to sprout and become what it is today. On this occasion, Julia was conducting focus groups in two neighboring elementary schools as part of a course on Medical Geography. Through the group-interviews, the children began describing their neighborhoods, the things that they didn’t like about them, what worried them and their daily activities. They talked, for instance, about used syringes on the streets, and not being able to play in parks and basketball courts—now utilized to sell and consume different types of drugs. According to Julia, these conversations with the children truly impacted her, in part because she was not expecting these young children to be this aware about their physical surroundings, specially those things that can seriously harm them:

“The children from La Perla [an impoverished neighborhood in Old San Juan] talk to you about the ‘syringe’ a lot, because they are so close to the syringes. There’s a syringe on the [basketball] court, there is a syringe everywhere. The [basketball] courts are not for playing anymore, they’re more like areas to sell drugs and, […] well, all those things
worried us and are themes that it is important that the children begin to tackle. And, finally, which is the other thing, very important for Conuco, is the issue of not only tackling it, but rather that they start to take action about it, and that they analyze it; it is not that we tell them: ‘listen, this is right and this is wrong’, but it is rather [about] how they perceive it.”

To Julia, it was clear at the time that the focus group questions had raised many environmental and health concerns that needed to be addressed; thus she asked herself, “What about if we create another group in this school, like the Retoños?” And with the help of old friends from Mate Leaf and new fellow college students, she formally started Conuco. Apart from the Retoños at Jasmine Elementary School, Julia recruited Juan Antonio Corretjer Elementary School, Kafka Elementary School and Washington Elementary School all elementary schools and, with the exception of Washington, in the neighborhood of Río Piedras. By the time I contacted Julia to work with them in my dissertation, Corretjer Elementary School was no longer with them although the teacher in charge had kept introducing environmental topics to her students. Instead, Conuco was in the process of starting at Lorca Elementary School and considering recruiting Thelma Fiallo, a high school also in Río Piedras.

In summary, this narration shows the intricacies of the process of formation and cross-fertilization that eventually resulted in Conuco and sheds light on topics related to networking, collective action and the significance of experimentation for Julia and the others involved in these experiences. Even though it started as the idea of an individual youth, it took time, opportunity, structure, perseverance and collective efforts to finally found the correct circumstances to put everything together. On the one hand, the experiment of Mate Leaf at the CHS represents the creation and conceptualization of Conuco’s model and Julia’s first attempt at teaching elementary school children.
Similarly, SPROG and Collectivo Cundeamor illustrate the importance of developing relationships and continue one’s formation in order to experiment with new possibilities while enhancing one’s skills. On the other hand, the experience of La Perla, brings to the surface the importance of developing a critical perspective when *practicing* environmental education with children in an impoverished urban neighborhood. The ecological concerns affecting residents in disempowered communities have more to do with unmasking and transforming relationships of social inequality and processes of economic marginalization (as discussed above), than with philosophical and naturalistic orientations regarding the conservation of biodiversity. In relation to this, it is important to keep in mind María Novos’ (1996) assertion, “We are not only worried about the resources anymore, we have learnt to worry about the models that decide the utilization of those resources. […] Poverty is the first great environmental problem” (1996: 86).

Below I will introduce the rest of the members of Conuco in an effort to present the relationship between the individual’s personality and their desire to carry out this voluntary social justice work.

**Conuco as a space to explore the self**

Conuco’s social persona is intimately related to the particular interests that have brought its members together. For instance, as it was described above, Julia, Laura and Violeta had been actively involved in the environmental movement prior to forming Conuco, not only within the school organizations mentioned before, but also as part of other groups like the Sierra Club—both Julia and Violeta have lead SPROG trainings for the Sierra Club’s Student Section in different years after the Colectivo Cundeamor.
Also, when 19 year-old Julia is not coordinating Conuco or assisting the Sierra Club, she is collaborating with community and academic organizations such as ENLACE and AKKA-SEEDS. ENLACE is a grassroots organization in the neighborhood of Caño Martín Peña interested in community-led development through strategic partnerships between residents, academics, private corporations and the government. AKKA-SEEDS is a UPR-based student organization sponsored by the Strategies for Ecology Education, Diversity and Sustainability (SEEDS) program of the Ecological Society of America. Additionally, at the UPR, Julia is currently enrolled in an interdisciplinary baccalaureate program that has allowed her to design her own curriculum, combining her interests in ecology, humanities and social sciences. This multidisciplinary approach has supported her exploration of new pedagogical theories and techniques to incorporate into Conuco’s program. In fact, Julia confessed to me that it was mostly because of her experience with Conuco that she got attracted to study urban ecology in the first place. In addition, these involvements with different groups and individuals seem to symbiotically open new venues and opportunities to amass people and resources to her network. As a result, she has contributed articles to the UPR newspaper, Diálogo, and has been interviewed by the university’s radio station, Radio Universidad de Puerto Rico, in number of occasions. She has presented academic papers at national and international conferences and is a member of academic associations in the areas of environmental studies and ecology. Finally, Julia is currently engaged in an ecological research project in Chiapas, Mexico, that she finds time to carry out during her summer and winter breaks.

Julia is full of energy and hence it is not unusual to see her walking around all flustered, carrying three or four bags together while running from one appointment to the
next. Nonetheless, her mind is always clear when it comes to being inclusive of others and she always find ways to incorporate new ideas into what she is proposing, which is not always efficient when the rest of the team is trying to reach a consensus or finalize a task after a four-hour meeting. However, this approach to inclusion is what gives Julia the capacity to distinguish the “big picture” from the more quotidian details, and to understand the role of collaborations and networking in developing a multifaceted social justice agenda.

Akin to Julia’s development in the field of environmentalism, Violeta also shares an interest in ecology and environmental leadership. At the age of 23, Violeta is a senior in college, majoring in General Studies, and a member of the Sierra Club and AKKA-SEEDS. For the last couple of years, she has been collaborating as a research assistant in a National Science Foundation project, measuring the quality of the air and the amount of aerosols across different areas of Puerto Rico. At the time of the interview, Violeta was assigned the coordination of Lorca Elementary School, the last school to join Conuco’s workshops, while taking classes toward her teacher certification. Soft-spoken but with strong beliefs and opinions, Violeta is always concerned with matters of communication and organization. For the most part, when she interrupts in a meeting it is to ask for clarification, define concepts, or provide others with a clearer way of transmitting a message or an idea. Accordingly, she has been responsible for helping the group with their media campaigns and other communicative strategies. Previous to joining Conuco, Violeta was also a member of the Medical Cadets Corps, a program under the administration of the Youth Department of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. This program offers youth over 16 years of age training on preventive health and care and
advance rescue techniques to assist communities in need. Started in 1945 after the Second World War, this program is still geared to the development of religious and civil leadership skills and the promotion of peaceful conflict resolution.

At 17, Laura is the only member of Conuco still in high school. As I mentioned before, she was in charge of the Retoños and served as a member of Mate Leaf. Throughout high school she had been involved in several clubs and interest groups, including the Model UN high school program, the drama production club and mathematics club. She has co-written several grants and paper presentations with Julia for Conuco. Contrary to Violeta, Laura talks fast and vigorously. She likes heated arguments and is very capable of articulating her position until her points get across. Her analytical skills caught my attention in the first meeting I attended, as she dissected the poor state of public education in Puerto Rico and uncovered complex relationships between political and economic forces and the priorities of the DEPR. This next quote illustrates Laura’s analysis of the relationship between Puerto Rico’s colonial status and the environmental movement:

“The state does whatever it wants, and so, basically, we don’t have the freedom to take action over [environmental] issues. So, then, I think that those three things are linked to each other, because without the power you cannot determine anything […] Someone from the Sierra Club, who’s from the U.S., told me once: ‘Oh, but why do you want to be independent, if you could be a state and then change with the U.S.?’ Well, in the first place, I am sure that the people from the U.S. would love to have a ‘cool’ and tropical colony [laughter], but I don’t want to be that colony. So they can go and find a different one! Or not, it’s better if they don’t look for another one. […] Anyway, I believe that if we could separate from that system [U.S.], then the [political-environmental] change would be more effective than trying to change it [U.S.]. Besides, that is not our system, I would argue, although sometimes it is, but, I mean, normally it is not.”
Manolo was the last person to join Conuco while I was working with them in Río Piedras. He is a 22-year-old college student whose mother migrated to Puerto Rico 25 years ago from the Caribbean islands of Saint Kitts and Nevis in the West Indies. Although he attended a military academy in Bayamón from K-9, he attributes his interest in nature to his family upbringing, his personal experiences with the environment, and his high school education at the Career Science High School, a specialized public school in sciences and mathematics.

“The reason I entered the [Department of Natural Sciences], truly, was because of my education. That is what boosted my academic career, […] I want to do a Masters in ecology and one in environmental anthropology. And it was because I had a good environmental education. My school was specialized on science and mathematics, and it was compulsory to take two sciences and two mathematics every semester, and they were different, like at the university. And I had the fortune of taking environmental sciences. I took ecology [for example], I took a bunch of classes that I know a lot of other high schools do not offered. And that is part of what made me. And that is the importance of [environmental] education. And that was because I started in that school in [10th grade], imagine if I would have that education from third or fourth [grade], I would be great now!.

“[Interviewer] What other things have influenced you?

“First, my family, my background. My mother is not from Puerto Rico. My mother is from an island in the West Indies, Nevis, and my mother was raised on the coast. […] The type of upbringing that I received was a coastal upbringing, in the middle of Bayamón, in cement, in the middle of an urban enclave, you know. Also, the rush I got when I was in middle school of going surfing everywhere, for real. I would go from one beach to the next, every weekend, that was my hangout all the time. That was my addiction, go looking for beaches. And so I started to see how they were eroding the coast, the constructions that were taking place. And the closing of the beaches that has been going on, has, personally, affected me. Because all the beaches that I went to when I was in 9th grade, chilling, by 12th grade they weren’t [public] beaches anymore. I am seeing how these processes in Puerto Rico are changing. There is not an environmental consciousness, there is not an ecological consciousness. Truly, that’s what it was: my concerns for the country, my formal education and my family.”
Throughout his high school years, Manolo participated in the Career Opportunities in Research (COR) program, a NIMH-sponsored high school training program designed to inspire ethnic/racial minority youth to continue in research careers in biomedical and behavioral sciences. As part of this training, students like Manolo attend seminars in different academic areas as well as professional skills development—e.g. public speaking, college application, research methods and preparing presentations for diverse audiences. Today, Manolo is a very charismatic young man, adept at facing new challenges, even if that means taking over a school the week after joining the group or trusting Julia’s “sink or swim” strategy for the new members. When he is not volunteering with Conuco or working part-time at a smoke shop on the weekends, Manolo assists in the Anthropology Student Association and collaborates on a few research projects out of the Department of Natural Sciences’ laboratories at the UPR.

After meeting Julia in an anthropology course in Urban Ecology, Manolo felt intrigued by the project and joined the organization the next day. Now majoring in Environmental Sciences with two minors in anthropology and photography, Manolo remembers that first encounter with Julia and his decision to get involved with Conuco,

“The first two years at the UPR I was dedicated full-time to environmental sciences and didn’t have the interdisciplinary [element], since I was more into the ecological aspect—I was in two science labs, everything that was natural sciences, integrated sciences at the research level, from parasites to epidemics, everything. But I was never involved in an environmental education program per se. Thus, I would look at the flyers and say: ‘Oh, how interesting’, because they are adding a different aspect to science. But, at the end, whatever, I knew they existed [and that was all]. Later, by chance, I took an anthropology class, Urban Ecology, with Julia and I said to her: ‘You are the girl from Conuco’. And she responded: ‘Oh, yes’. And we started talking. And out of nowhere, we talked on Monday and by Tuesday I joined the group. I think that it had to happen. […] I believe that I was one of a minority that had a heavy-duty environmental education. And, man, I have seen the world from a different perspective that has helped me. […]
Because that’s what people don’t know, being conscious of a topic, whether it is ecology, humanizes you more, you know. It makes you a good person as well. [...] You know, the way of interacting with other people, you see it differently because you are more conscious of what’s happening in the world, and you are worrying about other things that is not you—it’s your surrounding per se. And given that I owe my way of being to my education, then I would like to the same for others. [...] Because, what about the other schools?xxx"

The other members of Conuco interviewed for this study had not participated in environmental activism before joining the organization. However, their participation in other associations and activities provides evidence of their commitment to personal and professional development as well as their preoccupation with social issues, whether environmental, political, economic, or cultural. For these members, participation in Conuco has less to do with a pro-environmental interest in itself, and more with other personal concerns such as “improving public education,” “teaching art to children,” “exploring the self,” and “contributing to society.” Raúl, for example, connects his involvement in the organization with his “admiration” for Julia and the value she gives to the arts as a vehicle for teaching and learning:

“Being honest, I have to say that I would’ve not invented a project like Conuco, because, probably, I would’ve not thought of a proposal like that. But I have this friend, Julia, that is a genius and she does come up with this things. And truly, what I have to do with Conuco is my friendship with Julia. She has always invited me to work and, since she always take into account the artistic aspect [...] in her work, then I could be useful to her in that sense. She has invited me to work and I love it, because it is a good proposalxxx.”

While majoring in drama and photography, Raúl, 19, works outside the university as a costumes designer for theatrical and visual art productions. He is also an amateur photographer with great talent working with children. Between him and Lola, they have put together Conuco’s artistic curriculum, which incorporates dance, music, plastic arts,
and Puerto Rican folkloric traditions. A great observer, Raúl’s participation in the meetings is not plentiful, although his rebelliousness against formality and institutionalization is always accompanied with a sincere smile and dramatic gesticulations. For him, meeting regularly is an inconvenience, especially if the meetings are in the evenings when he is usually working on the wardrobes. More importantly, though, his sensibility toward the children and his eagerness to bring them a smile through these workshops and activities is commendable. According to other members and my observations in the classroom, the elementary children at Kafka Elementary love him as well and get very excited when he comes to the school with his “bag of tricks.”

The special bond that he has developed with these children transcends his membership in Conuco:

“Everything started because I was taking Rosa Luisa Márquez’s course, ‘Brincos y Saltos’, which is about dramatic activities, and so, one of the class projects and the final project was to take the workshops that we were taking with her and the other professor to the public schools in Puerto Rico and see how would that work. It was like an exercise on community work with schools. So, we—I worked with [another student]—picked Kafka because it was the closest to us, since we both live in Río Piedras. And that is how we learnt that Julia was also working [in Kafka Elementary School] and, thus, sometimes the three of us would go together… Some days we would go to Julia’s workshop to help her and then we would stay for our and things like that. So, from that, we realized that we could work together on that, and this semester was when I joined Conuco per se.

“[Interviewer] What interested you at the beginning?

“About the project? Well, originally, I was interested in staying with the kids from the workshops, because I got interested in that group a lot. […] It was, you know, a two workshops thing, [that’s] what we needed to do for Rosa Luisa, but I liked the group a lot, also as a subject of study. For example, the children […], almost all the kids in the group are… live in the Santa Rita neighborhood and the majority are Dominicans. Thus, it is a very specific social group and for me it was very interesting to see that perspective that I [did not know]. Because in Río Piedras there are many social groups in one same neighborhood, sharing the same space, but each group does not pay attention to the
other’s point of view necessarily. I’m being sort of vague here, I’m digressing, but anyway [...] it was an experiment.

“[Interviewer] And what about that perspective did you learn while working with [the Dominican students]?

“Well, it is very difficult for them because, I mean, with the… well, no racism, let’s say with the xenophobia here in Puerto Rico against the Dominicans. I mean, they already live everyday with that mentality, with that prejudice. And it is really horrible, I think. So, there are kids in the group who are Puerto Ricans and others who are Dominicans, and you see how each discriminates against each other.”

By the same token, Serena also demonstrates a keen interest in working with children. After a trip to India with a family friend, she hurried back to find Julia and asked her “when” she could start volunteering for Conuco:

“It was too much, really I don’t know how to explain it to you briefly. It was wonderful, so many kids. I mean, throughout the trip to [India] [...] what my eye [...] would always capture was the images of the children. I would always see children. My pictures, the majority is about children. So, when I came back, I called Julia in a hurry and told her: ‘Hey, I really want to work with you’, because I knew it was with children.”

At 19 years of age, Serena is certified as a prenatal yoga instructor and, during her spare time, she enjoys painting, meditation and volunteering with Nuestra Escuela, a not-for-profit organization that assist young students outside the school system to obtain their graduate diploma while attending to their psychological and emotional needs. Nuestra Escuela currently has two educational centers in Caguas and Loíza, respectively, and is opening a third one in the island of Culebra where Serena was born and, eventually, would be working.

Even though Serena is new to Conuco and her main motivation to join the group was to spend time with the children, for her every new experience provides an opportunity for the exploration of the self and Conuco is not different. Serena presents
herself as a profoundly introspective person, sensitive to her surroundings and constantly reflecting about the psychological relationship between humanity and the natural environment. This is how she describes her expectations as part of Conuco,

“Truly, I am doing it for me. […] I know that my duty is to bring my message to others, but it’s really about how I grow from this experience and how [the children] would also help me to grow.

‘[Interviewer] What other things are you looking to discover or think that you will learn while working with Conuco?

‘While working with Conuco, since it is an organization that is growing, I [want] to see how the process of creating and organization works, and to be part of it, but active—how all this process is. [Also] getting to know more about this community [Río Piedras], which, really, I don’t know the streets, nothing—and so I have to learn them. And additionally, I have felt that I like community work. Community-based, in the sense that the community participates and in some way, the ideas have to come from them. And I think that is what Conuco is doing. So, it is about seeing if this works and me contributing to it.”

Although Conuco attracts individuals of all ages and walks of life, the majority of its active members and the school coordinators (with the exception of Laura) are college students between the ages of 19 and 21. All the members were born in Puerto Rico although some lived temporarily in the United States when they were children.

Interestingly, five of the six members interviewed grew up in a single-parent household, mainly with the mother and with little or no contact with the father. All of the participants share middle-class backgrounds where the parent(s) works in the educational, service or media sectors. However, all of them graduated from “specialized” and “laboratory” public high schools that do not represent necessarily the state of regular public schooling throughout Puerto Rico. As we saw with some of the descriptions above, these alternative schools provide their students with a distinct educational program that usually goes beyond the general curricula by emphasizing particular subject or
disciplinary areas such as performing and visual arts, science and mathematics, communication and others. Access to these schools is open for everyone and acceptance is measured through tests or auditions, instead of by economic status, as it is the case with religious and secular private schools in Puerto Rico. Lastly, the interviewees of college age were all enrolled as undergraduates at UPR and were recruited by Julia who is also a student at that institution and the one primarily in charge of finding new members.

I should point out as well that although the data above show that individual members have joined the organization following different interests and pathways, the interviews also revealed certain commonalities among them, such as a desire to effect change through classroom education and the challenges of partnering with teachers. As a corollary, the opportunity to teach in a classroom for the first time allowed each individual to gain a new understanding of the realities of public schooling and experience some of the structural and personal challenges that both teachers and students face on a daily basis. Acquiring a fresh perspective on the schools’ environmental circumstances helped many in the group to challenge or, sometimes, to reaffirm a generalized negative sentiment toward the educational system, more generally, and teachers, in particular.

By the end of the research, only Serena and Violeta had shown interest in the possibility of studying education and becoming certified teachers. Serena emphasizes her desire to understand the public system in order to change it:

“I want to combine the arts, I [also] like psychology a lot, and then, education. But not to become a teacher, but to know the educational system better, how it works. [...] Because I feel like the educational system needs a change. [...] I don’t know if this what I would spent the rest of my life doing, but it is an experience that I think everyone should have, don’t you think. It feels really good when you teach someone and suddenly s/he really learnt it and can use it. It’s like a good feeling"xxxv"."
Violeta as well is interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the system, but through immersing herself in the daily dynamics of teachers:

“I started to take the courses for the Teacher Certification to become a science teacher. [I want] to have it as one of my options […]. I want to have the experience of teaching in a classroom and see how it works and maybe even go through the frustrations that I know [the teachers] are going through. Because I have teachers [in my] family, or a teacher. So, you know, I know. But being able to go through [the experiences] myself, to see, maybe, how it could be changed.”

Moreover, all participants expressed the belief that each individual has a social responsibility to their country. Accordingly, Conuco has given them the space to contribute to that society. In relation to this point, Laura stated:

“I believe that ‘environmentalism’ is something that, in the first place, you cannot make future plans to have a good environment, I mean, a healthy environment. […] I believe we are now in a critical state regarding the country, the environment, where it would either get spoiled, or start getting better. […] Also, it’s upsetting that the majority of people do not care; thus, the importance of environmental education. […] It is not only what one can do, but to get others to do something as well.”

Violeta also commented about the role of Conuco in promoting social change:

“I think that it is that we don’t feel like neither part of the problem, nor part of the solution. And that is very worrying. […] maybe that is why is so difficult to [achieve] a complete change in mentality, a complete change on how to look at things, a complete change on how to feel about what is happening. And I don’t think that Conuco could do all of this, but it is like those little thorns that contribute. […] I like to say: ‘I do these workshops because they force me’. Not really force me, but I feel with the responsibility of applying all these things to myself.

“[Interviewer] In other words, you think that through teaching it to others, you are putting into practice your own commitment.

“Exactly.”

The process of teaching, learning and reflecting about the social and ecological issues affecting the school community has made these young people more conscious
about their behavior in other aspects of their lives. Hence, developing an environmental identity means, for instance, learning to view themselves as part of all that is around them, which has led Serena and Manolo to conclude that a better psychological relationship with the surroundings would help decrease other social malaises. For Serena, the development of a critical ecological consciousness or an environmental identity thus translates into a stronger will to improve personal and societal circumstances:

“I think that through environmental education one starts to appreciate this world, which we are all part of as well. [...] Once you learn to love it, to take care of it, then you take care of yourself. Then you see everything as part of the cycle of life. For me, that will cut off violence. [...] It also could be seen as a resource, as a way of seeing what’s around you, but also within you. You feel good when you plant a tree, all of those things, all the psychological benefits that come from being integrated and well with nature. [...] There has been proof that being in an office give you, or living in front of a tree, give you psychological, emotional positive benefits versus if you are in an environment where you are seeing buildings and cement, you will be ‘down’, prone to depression, drugs, violence. All that, I think, should be enough information for you to say: ‘you know, let’s plant more trees, let’s build more parks’, you know, ‘let’s focus on environmental education’. [...] That’s why I think environmental education is so important. [...] For me, everything is connected to everything else. Everything, everything!”

For many members, becoming active in the organization means increasing their own pro-environmental behaviors, such as participating in workshops, seminars, and outdoor activities, joining other advocacy and educational campaigns, reducing personal and household waste, trying out composting and house gardens, or simply spending more free time reading about ecological and environmental topics. For those new to the movement, these activities are regarded as transformative experiences that have provided them with alternative conduits for expressing themselves while reducing their ecological footprint.
Having said that, when I asked those new to environmentalism if they consider themselves environmentalists, all quickly clarify that they would not call themselves that, because they were still learning about it and not all their actions were in favor of the environment. Regardless of this self-criticism and their reservations about being labeled as an environmentalist, they all recognized that they are now more conscious about the way their actions affect their physical surroundings and, therefore, try their best to improve them. Raúl, who describes himself as not being an environmentalist, shared with me this humorous story that depicts his transformation:

“Well, apart from living in Río Piedras, because it is a little bit difficult to live in a place that is sometimes so dirty. Since I live here, I tell people to not pee on the street because that really offends me. I could be hanging-out, yes, at a bar, yes, drunk and I’m with a friend who is about to pee on the street and I tell him not to pee on the street. Actually, I convinced someone not to pee on the street. Because, man, it’s fucked-up! You know, it stinks! [Laughter] Your coming back to your house from the university and you smell all the pee and the shit that is on the street and that is not pleasant [Laughter]. […] So, apart from personal experience, there is Julia’s motivation who is always reminding us these things.”

Conversely, for those already involved in the environmental movement, Conuco represents continuity in their personal growth as environmental advocates and leaders and, thus, they perceive their role as providing others with opportunities to get involved and inspiring them to care for the environment. Violeta stated it in this way, “Being a participant of Conuco, I see it as an opportunity to give opportunities.” Julia, similarly, talked about the possibilities that this work brings to other people and to herself:

“[Interviewer] What do you love [about this work]?

“To see people doing things that they like. I think that is and to see… not hope, because hope sounds too “Hallmark”, but that there is like a possibility of something different than what we live everyday and like a possibility that a lot of people take action together to do thing prettier and different and refreshing than what we live everyday in this
country. [...] So, I love the topic, yes, I have to admit it, a lot. I love the idea of the city as an ecosystem and that people interact with that ecosystem and figure out how it can be better. So, it’s just that, the silly hope that they might do things that are cooler and better. [...] In fact, I get interested in studying Urban Ecology because of my experience with Conuco last year."
Local Context and Social Structures

Río Piedras: “Ciudad Universitaria”

Before moving on to describe Conuco’s work as a grassroots organization, it is important to understand the environmental and social settings in which these practices take place. Río Piedras sits in the heart of San Juan, Puerto Rico’s capital city. To the north, Río Piedras borders the barrio (“neighborhood”) of Santurce and, to the south, the municipalities of Aguas Buenas, Caguas and Gurabo. Carolina and Trujillo Alto are to the east and Guaynabo lies to the west. The original town was established in 1714 by the name of El Roble (“the Oak”), but it was later changed to Río Piedras in honor of the river that still runs through it today. Initially, this town was home to agrarian families dedicated to growing small crops and raising cattle to supply the city of San Juan. However, after the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) was founded in 1903, Río Piedras became more popular with visitors and students from around the island, eventually growing into an important urban center.

Its popularity and central location attracted the eyes of San Juan’s mayors for several decades, culminating in 1951 when the legislature passed a bill to annex Río Piedras to the capital, henceforth becoming a barrio of San Juan. Its indivisible relationship with the UPR—the most important and largest public institution of higher education in Puerto Rico—has earned Río Piedras the name of Ciudad Universitaria (“University City”), always welcoming people from around the country and abroad. According to Census data, its population in 2000 was 332,344, 77% of the population in all of San Juan (Census 2000).
Today, the barrio of Río Piedras is an urban mixed-income neighborhood confronting a number of environmental issues ranging from deforestation and climate pollution, to high population density, poverty and social inequality. These environmental and social problems have a greater impact on low-income children in particular, given that they are more vulnerable and greatly exposed to these risks. For instance, many of these children walk to school, circumventing piles of garbage, drug paraphernalia and other hazardous materials. They also share their playgrounds with drug users and dealers, and inhale the air that has been contaminated by construction sites and vehicles, among other pollutants. When it rains, most streets get flooded because the ravines have been dried out, channelized, or fill with rubbish. Moreover, young children in Río Piedras are vulnerable to other social malaises found in urban centers across the world, such as economic marginalization and exclusion, violent behavior, racism, xenophobia and an ideology that views them as a “minority subculture” (cf. Barlett 2002:4), treating them with suspicion and hostility.

In 1995, Puerto Rico’s legislature approved Law 75, Ley Especial para la Rehabilitación de Río Piedras (“Special Law for the Rehabilitation of Río Piedras”), which ordered the Urban Planning Committee to design the Plan de Desarrollo Integral y Rehabilitación para la Zona de Planificación Especial de Río Piedras (“Plan for the Integral Development and Rehabilitation of the Special Planning Zone of Río Piedras”). In 1999, the legislature granted the UPR the implementation of this plan, which in turn resulted in two interrelated initiatives: the project ENLACE and the Centro de Acción Urbana, Comunitaria y Empresarial (CAUCE).
ENLACE is a federally-funded training and skill development program created to provide residents in Río Piedras with the necessary skills to increase their participation in the labor force and in private and public decision-making processes. ENLACE also attempts to serve as a space for the exchange of ideas between the community and the different government agencies with the objective of strengthening the development and rehabilitation of local housing, commercial and community projects. In order to promote an integral process, ENLACE (through CAUCE) acts as coordinator and liaison between Río Piedras’ residents and business owners, and the state and municipal governments.

CAUCE, on the other hand, provides the necessary infrastructure for all of these activities to happen, as it also promotes the physical and cultural revitalization of Río Piedras’ urban center. For example, with the assistance of the Escuela Graduada de Ciencias y Tecnologías de la Información (EGCTI) (“Graduate School for Informational Technologies and Sciences”), CAUCE offers access to informational and communicational services and free training to the residents of the area, who in turn organize their own political, cultural and economic activities. The work of ENLACE and CAUCE, moreover, supports the development of grassroots leadership across the neighborhood while supporting the UPR’s commitment to serve the residents of the area. The work of ENLACE and CAUCE represents one aspect of the role of the UPR in this neighborhood. Other professors carry out numerous projects in the community and assign their students course projects intended to help develop social awareness and responsibility among them. As mentioned elsewhere in this document, it was through one of these classroom assignments that Raúl started working at Kafka Elementary School, where he eventually met Julia for the first time and initiated his relationship with
Conuco. Course projects and other service learning activities promoted by professors at UPR point to the importance of engaged campuses in the formation of possible activists and leaders, as well as in the encouragement and support of groups like Conuco. The fact that Conuco has been able to recruit members from the UPR main campus almost consistently and the shared political values among the members evidence this hypothesis. In the case of Conuco, its relationship with this university and its faculty has been critical, first, in facilitating the group’s formation and, second, in supporting its activities through the access of community networks and other resources—e.g. strategic guidance, information, materials, classrooms and laboratories.

**Conuco as an organization: Guiding principles and objectives**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, I began working with Conuco in August of 2008, just as public schools and universities were getting ready to initiate their respective academic years. Especially during the first meetings, but also throughout the year, the members of Conuco were particularly concerned with recruiting new members and strengthening the commitment of those already in the group. Therefore, Conuco’s first order of business was to regroup, to send out a call to all its members—who had been only modestly in-touch with each other during the summer break—and to others interested in joining. As I went to these meetings, for example, I noticed that a few of the members were always absent while the rest would complain about it, arguing that without everyone present it was not possible to get organized and ready for the schools.

For this organization, thus, regrouping meant, on the one hand, assessing the outcomes of the previous year, determining who will continue and who will join and, finally, estimating any resources left to continue with the work in the new semester. This
process was central to them before being able to organize a new calendar of events and plan accordingly with teachers and administrators in the participating schools. To an organization with an undersized membership and limited resources, every bit of planning seems essential if they want to continue to exist.

At this point in the semester, the general coordinator knew that she could count with last year school coordinators (3) and herself to organize activities in the four participating schools. There were also approximately five other people interested in joining the organization and a list of over twenty individuals whom had approached the general coordinator in the past year and have shown different degrees of interest in collaborating with the organization. For the general coordinator having this pool of people was important because beside the work in the schools, they also have a number of ideas that they want to put in place but do not have the extra membership. One example of these postponed projects came from a lawyer who, after learning of Conuco’s work, suggested sitting down with the group to write environmental education policy that could be presented to local legislators and the DEPR. This idea was presented at least a year before I got involved in this project but it never got off the ground since there was no one in the organization with the time to work on it.

Other examples of ideas that has been put on-hold include the development of an environmental curriculum to be openly distributed to anyone interested. This curriculum was to replicate the activities done in the classrooms as a way to illustrating the experiences of Conuco and stimulating other teachers and schools to incorporate these exercises into their classrooms. Even the idea of expanding their work to other elementary schools outside Río Piedras, or even to high schools in that same
neighborhood, has been shelved, at the expense of having to turn down invitations from schools around the city and other municipalities. Likewise, other grassroots organizations and community groups that are not directly linked to any particular school, but do work with children and youth, have asked Conuco to partner with them to share their environmental and art-based program with their youth. In addition, two other graduate students in Puerto Rico—one in education and another in urban planning—have shown an academic interest in Conuco and have had conversations with the general coordinator to include them as part of their graduate research.

On the other hand, regrouping also represented an opportunity for Conuco to reflect upon the group’s collective perception, revisit objectives and principles and continue to elaborate their vision as a community-based environmental education organization. The following quote, although lengthy, illustrates this process of reflection and self-critique. It comes from one of the initial organizational meetings. Here, Laura, Julia, Rosa and Violeta discuss the relationship between public schools and communities and the role of education in promoting participatory citizenship. The Retoños is one of the elementary school groups that Conuco teaches and it is housed at the JES, which is the primary school that feeds the Chamomile High School (CHS) where Laura is still a junior. Julia and Rosa and a few others in Conuco also graduated from CHS. Moreover, Laura is the school coordinator and facilitator of the Retoños.

“[Laura] [...] Education as an integral part of the community [that is what we are talking about]. [...] Because something that I notice a lot with the Retoños is that, since it is a school that receives children from different communities, [the children] don’t have a sense of belonging toward their communities, even if they have a sense of belonging to the school community. But because they are all from different communities…

“[Julia] That is, also, a community.
“[Laura] I know that that is also a community, but remember that there are environmental things [in Río Piedras] that they don’t address in the school because the school community is completely isolated from the community of Río Piedras […] since they come in their parents’ cars and leave in their parents’ cars, and Río Piedras is at the other side of the wall. […] In order for children to develop to the fullest as members of a community, the school cannot isolate itself.

“[Julia] Then that could be part [of our goal], if you have a school withdrawn from the community, then you cannot achieve participation.

“[Rosa] But, the emphasis that we could give it is a particular one. I think that working the issues of Río Piedras with students that know about that community, that live in that community, is not problematic.

“[Laura] It is not problematic, but the school structure doesn’t facilitate those children’s inclusion in that community, because it is a school with a closed structure: ‘we are here, isolated.’

“[Violeta] But, maybe that’s why we have the other schools that are from Río Piedras and that are part of that scenario.

“[Laura] That’s why I say that for the rest of the schools, inclusion in the community could work. Maybe with this school [JES] we need to make a bigger effort to achieve that.

“[Julia] And maybe not even. I mean, maybe the community participation and citizen [participation] don’t have to happen just…

“[Laura] … with one community.

“[Julia] Exactly.

“[Laura] Yes, but it’s easier.

“[Julia] It could be that the children will also learn about citizen participation and community participation through experiences with the community adjacent to their school and from that, then, [they] will start wanting to work with their own communities. They don’t have to be the same communities.

“[Rosa] Yes.

“[Laura] Yes, but they have to establish a relationship with the neighboring communities that doesn’t exist right now.

“[Julia] And, that the neighboring communities are also used as classrooms. Meaning, that they could also become an integral part of the child’s learning. It is like, if a child is isolated, inside his [or her] school alone, then it is like taking away a part of what the real life is.

“[Laura] … of that sense of community, of the real life.
“[Rosa] Laura, but, why do you say that there is no link between the students and the community?

“[Julia] […] Because the fact that a child studies in a community doesn’t mean that [s/he’s] part of it.

“[Violeta] I understand what she means.

“[Julia] I do too.

“[Violeta] Because the majority of the kids don’t live there. Then, maybe if they see a syringe on the floor, but it is outside their [school garden—referring to the Retoños] […] then is not part of them.

“[Rosa] That, to me, is not problematic. What is all about is to develop that environmental consciousness and any other type of consciousness. It is about you reacting to problems near and far from you. And I have to contribute at any of those two levels.

“[Laura] That is why I think that the children have to develop certain sensibility—that you ‘see’ a problem that, even if it doesn’t affect you, you understand that it will affect someone else and, therefore, you have to behave properly. Because if you have a foundation that you are living in a community and that the people of your same community share problems and they also share a greater interest in solving them, then it is a departing point to a greater involvement in the education that is being offered.

“[Julia] And something else is teaching children about solidarity—how to be ‘solidario’ with other communities and with those they are part as well. […] Because that idea of: ‘Ah, no, I cannot get involved there because that is not my problem, that is not my space’. But if you teach children that we are all shared spaces [‘espacios compartidos’] and that those are also everyone’s problems, even if they are not being affected by them at that moment, then that will also help them to develop.

“[Rosa] Undoubtedly, there will be times when an individual—boy or girl—[will be] external agents in a community, but I think that the attitude that they should develop is a collaborative attitude. For example, right now I am working in a project where I am an external agent, but I am collaborating. And we’ll develop, and we’ll carry out meetings, and we’ll integrate [to that community]. And that, I think, should also be one of the focus points of Conuco. […] Especially when talking about this problem and the structure of the Retoños.

“[Laura] For example, when I got the calendar for this year, some of the activities were more difficult for me—the thing about the city, ‘Observe Your City’. Given that all the children were from different places…, it is not like […] the students in la Perla [the neighborhood adjacent to one of the other schools in the program] that they all live in the same place, they confront the same problems and thus can develop an activity in
accordance with what was suggested on the calendar. But if I try to develop that same activity,..., I had children who told me that they did not have environmental problems! Obviously, that is not true, but since they are not from the same community, I could not say: ‘Well, but look, in that community there is this and that’. And, of course I help them reflect about it and they found them...

“[Violeta] I mean, who says that there are not environmental problems in Guaynabo [a neighboring city of San Juan known for their wealthy residents]?

“[Julia] Obviously, there are environmental problems everywhere.

“[Violeta] They need to be aware that, yes, what’s happening here is happening around the world”

Reflections like the one above occurred on several occasions while I was conducting the research, most of the times as an improvised, unstructured progression when discussing new ideas and partnerships or writing down a description for a grant proposal, a news article or an academic presentation. Two main reasons compelled me to share this description with the readers: on the one hand, it allows the members of Conuco to “introduce” their organization in their own words and, on the other, it summarizes, right from the start, the complex thoughts that have gone into handcrafting the model of school/community partnership and social and ecological change proposed by this group of young environmental leaders—i.e. to bring learning at the heart of community life, schools as the intersection of children’s multiple communities and the environment as a critical concern to all. Throughout the rest of the chapter, I will discuss more in detail some of the most relevant elements brought up in this discussion.

**Conuco: Implementation of the model**

As mentioned in previous chapters, Conuco is an action research-oriented organization geared to exploring urban ecological issues with elementary school teachers and students in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico. Conuco’s main objective is to increase
elementary school teachers’ and students’ ecological awareness through the integration of visual arts and media activities targeted at strengthening children’s critical thinking and advocacy skills regarding ecological and social justice concerns.

Inspired by the work that the faculty of the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) are carrying out in the neighborhood of Río Piedras and the advocacy work of local and international environmental organizations, Conuco has developed a series of ecological workshops to promote awareness and participation among children regarding social and environmental concerns at the local and national levels. Organizationally, Conuco consists of one general coordinator, Julia, in charge of overseeing the implementation of school activities and developing relationships with collaborators. Additionally, each school has one coordinator/facilitator who is responsible for planning, adapting, and implementing the curriculum, as well as disseminating information through academic channels, community meetings, and the mass media. Each of the facilitators has at least one assistant that helps them throughout the semester. However, depending on the task at hand, other volunteers come to the aid with material resources or an extra pair of hands.

Through partnerships with school administrators and teachers, Conuco’s members visit classrooms almost weekly to voluntarily offer these workshops or to take the children outside the schools for activities around the neighborhood. Although the bulk of Conuco’s work is in the schools, the organization also has a significant present in the community through its involvement with CAUCE, a …, and other businesses and resident organizations that have come together in recent years to contest the major’s redevelopment plan for Río Piedras, Río 2012. With CAUCE, Conuco has carried out educational campaigns and discussion groups about the proposed plan. And with the
residents and the business owners they have helped to organize entertainment events and protests to voice concerns about what they believe is an unjust plan to get rid of the poor in Río Piedras.

Both to plan these events and decide on the activities that will take place in the schools the members of Conuco meet frequently each semester, although not regularly. The ideas for the different activities come from a number of sources, including members’ personal experiences and the experience of others close and far from them. These ideas are gathered through reading, Internet surfing and conversations with community activists and environmental advocates. However, not all the exercises and activities come from environmental resources; many of them have to be adapted in order to include relevant environmental topics. For instance, Raúl and Lola are majoring in drama and photography at the UPR where they have learned many theatrical and artistic exercises that they have tailored to use with the children—mask construction, movement exercises, t-shirt printing, song-writing, origami, and others.

Similarly, Violeta went to a public high school specializing in communication and technology and, hence, she has helped the group to put together video recordings, websites, and some of the communication campaigns in which the children have been involved. Julia and Laura have all participated in university courses and environmental trainings that address more directly ecological issues and, from those, they have generated a list of possible workshops and activities to offer the different schools, taking always into consideration teachers’ and students’ interests. Manolo, on the other hand, went to another specialized public high school with a strong environmental sciences and mathematics program while Rosa was currently active in a nation-wide political
organization. All these different connections and backgrounds fed the organization and influenced each other of the members. Lastly, as we will see below, the members also brought ideas that emerged from their relationships with collaborators and supporters.

In every school, Conuco works directly with a teacher or librarian, and one group of children. The number of students in each group ranges from 10 to 40 at any given time, depending on students’ attendance, interest on the topic and conflicting schedules. Moreover, in some schools these workshops have been included in the regular activities of the school’s environmental groups (“clubs”), which tend to include children from different ages and grade levels. Differently, in the other schools arrangements have been made with regular teachers whom, out of personal interest, have allowed Conuco to teach in the classrooms. Therefore, only these teachers’ students receive the information provided by the group of youth. Not surprisingly, this issue of scale and school integration is one of Conuco’s main concerns for which, this year, they are putting additional attention to formalize a lesson plan and strengthen their position within the schools and the community. After all, Julia cannot help but to partially blame the educational system for the teachers’ and administrators’ slovenliness, which points back to what was discussed previously regarding public school teachers’ sense of impotence when it comes to challenging the system or getting involved in new initiatives:

“The other challenge] is that of the integration, yes. It is very difficult to get everyone in a school to work together—it sucks. In Kafka Elementary School, the principal had not organized anything when it was already the day of the workshop and we had asked the principal long time ago to let [the students] know. You know, there’s always certain slovenliness. Some times the Department [of Education] causes it, and the system itself, and so the teachers […], you know, yes, there is certain slovenliness. Some times there is this idea that ‘teachers cannot do anything’, ‘there are only teachers’, ‘you cannot influence community stuff, you cannot influence school stuff’. I mean, it’s like they are teachers and that’s it. So that has been difficult but it is important that teachers feel like
they are part of it and that they feel like they are important in the school and the community and in the life of their students and in everything! There are teachers who have lost all hope and are there like... That is something important that has to be work with as well and, some times, it’s not addressed. The coordinators should not be the only ones [doing this work], but rather that it gets integrated [across the school]."

In an effort to entice teachers to buy into the program, this year Julia and the others attempted to formalize a central document that would include all the workshops and activities suggested by the various school coordinators. This approach was different to previous years when each of the school coordinators had to put together their own schedules and activity plans. To achieve this goal, Julia asked each school coordinator to come to a meeting with an outline of the activities that they have done in the past and a brief description on how to complete it. The idea behind this schedule was to keep everyone on track and to ensure that all the schools receive similar information. In addition, this document would help them to document their work and would serve as a showcase for others interested in collaborating. However, concerned with losing personal initiative and “academic” freedom, they agreed to allow school coordinators the flexibility to make changes and adaptations according to their needs and that of their schools. In this way, they would prevent “institutionalizing” the process, which they regard as a negative outcome. This sentiment was made evident in a note written at the bottom of the “school proposal” presented by Lola for Washington Elementary School:

“Note: These projects are ideas. They could change and are open to suggestions or sudden, or situational, proposals depending on things that the children are concerned about, things that they like to do, time availability at the school and from the facilitators, etc. It is not a plan or rigid agenda, but an outline of things that we will like to do in Conuco. The workshops or sessions will be accompanied by audiovisual media, theatrical games to catalyze [sic] their imagination, etc.” [Highlighted in yellow and underlined in original]
After the facilitators met to present the different suggestions, the plan for each school was presented to and discussed with each teacher, in case the later had any suggestion or particular proposal that s/he would wish to include in the program and to schedule the time of the visits.

From my observations of the process, this strategy seemed to work for the most part, in that it allows the school coordinators to improvise and adapt their activities to conflicting interests and schedules found in the schools, just as Lola’s wisdom had anticipated in the note above. However, from an organizational and evaluative perspective this *laissez-faire* made difficult the possibility of assessing the real impact on students and teachers, since it was never clear what each school was doing. I will come back to this point, later in this chapter.

The utilization of a master plan was also effective in making sure that some of the central activities for the group had taken place—e.g. the workshops on the history of Río Piedras and the Corredor Ecológico del Noreste (CEN) (“Northeast Ecological Corridor”). As relationships got strengthened, larger projects came to life, requiring long-term coordination between Conuco and particular schools. Some of these projects included the painting of murals on school walls, the construction of school gardens and the production of video-documentaries and songs with local hip-hop artists. One activity that Conuco regarded as crucial and truly meaningful for both the members and the children was the creation of the school name and, eventually, the printing of that name on a t-shirt that the children wore proudly. This had actually caused some trouble in the schools, given that students would constantly asked the teacher to let them wear the t-shirt instead of the required school uniform. The process of creating a name, moreover,
represents the incorporation of the school group into the alliance of children groups across the neighborhood. It is believed to give the children a sense of belonging, as they are “re-born” into environmental advocates. It is also the children first pro-environmental collective action and a way to differentiate themselves from their peers at school and outside in the community.

Another classroom activity that took priority this year was the development of a media campaign to persuade the current governor not to revoke the executive order signed by the previous administration designating the Corredor Ecológico del Noreste (CEN) as a Natural Reserve. The campaign consisted of having the elementary school children write a message to the governor stating the reasons why the CEN should be protected. The front of the “postcard” was decorated with a drawing of a tinglar, which the children also colored. The tinglar, or Leatherback Turtle, has become the symbol of this struggle, given that this zone serves as one of the three most important nesting areas in the United States for this species. Consequently, during this workshop, the students learn about the ecology of this coastal region while engaging in positive actions to protect and preserve the environment. After completing these workshops in different schools, a selected group of children took the postcards with their youth coordinators to the governor’s house, attracting the attention of the local media. This workshop was put together with the assistance of the Sierra Club and the Coalición Pro Corredor Ecológico del Noreste, which are leading the campaign. [TABLE 1: List of workshops] Table 1 shows a sample of other activities and workshops carried out in the classrooms while I was conducting this research.
In schools where teachers had their own agendas and environmental groups—Jasmine Elementary School and Lorca Elementary School—the work of Conuco complements these efforts and brings resources to them, mostly in the form of environmental knowledge, creative exercises and school supplies, a high commodity in most of these urban public schools. In the case of the schools where teachers were not particularly involved or interested in these topics, Conuco’s workshops are still welcomed as out-of-the-ordinary events, distracting teachers and students from the school routine. For these teachers, the workshops alleviated their schedules and allowed them to carry out other activities, like decorating their classrooms, or attending to other responsibilities. For the students, on the other hand, having outside visitors, doing hands-on activities and being in a classroom with “less” disciplinary controls, are regarded as “fun” and the workshops are an expected distraction, contrary to more academic activities during the day. These disruptions also made students feel unique since no one else in the school received these “classes”. It should be notice, however, that these activities did not take place during other subject’s teaching time, but rather at “homeroom” or “special” periods or after school.

Referring particularly to how children perceive the workshops at Kafka Elementary, Raúl points out,

“\textquote{It’s like they need to be taken away from that routine of teachers screaming at them and they only yell at them, because they are used to that system of control, you know. So, yes, they are very happy with the workshops. [...] The \textquote{exercises} that were working the best were those in which we would integrate musicality, because they come from a culture that, regardless of all the problems, has a lot of folklore, it’s something that is close to them, so I think that music is something that they understand very well. Thus, when we would integrate musicality to the theatrical games that we were doing with them, they would work well}^{\text{dahl}}\textquote{.}“
Violeta observed a similar attitude in the children at Lorca Elementary:

“Obviously, our workshops don’t have the same objective that any of the other classes you take in the classroom, you know, with [report] cards and let’s evaluate you. But, obviously, just by virtue of being in that same space, where you have to sit from 8 to 3 to listen to: ‘blah, blah, blah’, is detrimental. Because they could see it either as a relief—because they broke the routine—or maybe, as part of the same routine. Because it is still the same space and it’s related to your school. [Additionally,] I think that what we are doing lends itself for that students in the future could say: ‘oh, I remember that and that workshops’. I trust that they will be able to remember them and they be like little thorns, sort of speak. Just like I feel the obligation, and I don’t like to say obligation, but I have to say it because it’s like that, I can see myself obligated to say: “I am giving these workshops, I had these opportunities, I have to take advantage of and share them”. Similarly, maybe they would also see it in the same way. Not in a bothering way, but that they could keep it in their mind or apply it or, yes, be aware of all these things.”

For other members, engaging children in these activities brings to the surface notions of “innocence,” “playfulness” (fun/creativity), and “enthusiasm” or “impulsiveness,” which they believe are positive aspects of life that get pruned away as people age. This view was presented clearly in one of the meetings, when Lola said: “It’s like a game but we put information in their heads. [The children have to have fun] because if not, then they become boring adults!”. For Laura, the children’s enthusiasm is “contagious,” while for Julia, working with them is “more fun,” since they are younger and have “other ideas, completely different [to those of adults]. They are on a different wavelength and still get excited about these things.”

But not all schools are the same. According to all the members, variations across schools are considerable, especially between the JES and the rest. JES is an experimental elementary school and therefore receives more resources than regular public schools, especially in the form of up-to-date pedagogical theories and methodologies, teaching aids and educational materials. Additionally, according to Conuco, the teachers and
administrators of this school have been more welcoming and supportive of Conuco’s proposals and activities—for the reasons exposed before. As a consequence, various teachers at JES have owned the project since the beginning and continued to collaborate with Conuco in developing environmental projects around the school—e.g. painting a mural and planting a bromeliad garden.

Although this situation allows Conuco to experiment with a broader number of workshops and activities, this opportunity seems to come with a price, since these students are described as being more sheltered from and unaware of Río Piedras’ ecological conditions and social problems—refer to the lengthy quote above. Violeta explains the disparity among schools in this way:

“I think it is more the mentality, or the style, the way [of doing things]. And, it is not that is bad, we also don’t want the other schools to adjust to the style of JES just because it has been convenient for them, it’s just an element that is present here. […] There is a certain openness to recognize: ‘Hey, look, this is a good…, this is a good idea’. […] I say that because my sister studies at JES and I can see that they receive a different education and that there are different learning methods, you know.”

Julia, on a separate occasion, also commented about the difference between JES and the other schools:

“I was just looking for the focus group that we did at the beginning at Washington and… but I have them in the pen drive […] but anyway, the point is that from that investigation it came out that the concerns of the [children] at Washington were very different than those from the [JES], you know, without generalizing, that’s what came out. At Washington, the concerns were the issue of the syringes dumped on the street, at recreational places, and at the [JES] the concerns, which are still very valid although there are not the same, were like [types of] food—like if you were vegetarian or not [and other things].”
On the other hand, Laura, the school coordinator for JES, describes proudly how this school’s teachers are more involved in integrating environmental activities into the school community:

“Other teachers get coordinated through the contact teacher, also through the principal, because the principal also cooperates with what we are doing. […] Oh, and the English teacher who’s interested in the school’s waste project, but that is also through the other teachers. […] I think they like the project idea a lot. [Although,] maybe I would like that [Conuco] is seen less like one of the clubs that the other kids go to, and more like a [whole-school] project. For example, when they celebrated Earth Day, last year, the Retoños were not the only ones who went, it was almost the whole school, well, not the whole school, but many more kids went than just the Retoños. Thus, they did different assignments, which I think that would be ideal, that the project could be integrated to more classes and more activities in the school. Like, for example, the science class.”

Laura’s comments are illustrative of the important role that teachers play in the success and implementation of Conuco’s program. When the school community buys into a project collectively, this increases the opportunity for the program to effect change and it shows the students, regardless of age, that institutional reform is possible and expected. Compare this situation with what happened one time when I accompanied few of the members to Kafka Elementary to give a workshop on social mapping. In this instance, the group recruited the help of an undergraduate student majoring in geography to help them with a workshop on social mapping. The geography student brought tracing papers and other resources to use with the younger children. Minutes before walking toward the elementary school where the workshop was taking place, the facilitators and I met with the collaborator to finalize the plan for the activity. We met in the lobby of the Communication Department building at UPR, spread the papers on top of several tables and traced the contour of a number of landmarks in Río Piedras so that the elementary students could use them as references for the exercise.
Once at the workshop, children were asked to answer several questions posted on the board and to identify on the map the places where they live, spend time with their families, where they do not feel safe and those where they like to play. To complete the task, students were divided into four small groups, each with their own map, set of color markers and assistant facilitator (including myself). Taking turns, each child would select a marker, find her or his bearings in the two-dimensional sketch of Río Piedras and make a drawing to answer one of the corresponding questions written on the board. Waiting for everyone’s turn was the most difficult task for the children and required lots of improvisation, patience and humor on the part of the novice facilitators to not lose the attention of the anxious children. No amount of humor was enough, however, to console those students who were unable to completely understand the exercise—i.e. perceiving Río Piedras two-dimensionally—and would walk away in frustration. Remarkably though, the young activists never got discouraged as they learned quickly how to handle the crowd of tiny fingers fighting for their favorite color marker and spot on the map. At the same time, Julia would reach out to those discouraged and brought them back to the tables to participate in the exercise.

It is important to note that during the entire time of the workshop no teacher was present in the classroom. The children were alone when we arrived at the classroom and stayed that way when we went to the main office to inform them that we were leaving. Raúl, who had been the coordinator/facilitator for this school for over a year when this happened, interprets the situation as one resulting from the combination of several factors: lack of resources, bad administration, teachers’ disregard for their profession and,
a generalized xenophobic sentiment against the Dominican communities in Puerto Rico—most of the students in this school are Dominicans:

“The teachers, they are on their own trip [laughter], [it’s] a mess. [...] There are some that don’t like [the workshops], you know, the ones that are stricter, that have a specific order in their classrooms. Others take the opportunity to decorate their rooms, things like that; they might mention something at the end. They don’t get really involved, it’s like: ‘Ah, that’s some people who came to entertain the kids.’ [...] Of course, the policy at that school is ‘the less you work, the better’. The last time I went to meet with the principal, she kept me there for an hour, talking to me about the [rotary club], I don’t know what. Because, apparently she was looking around her office for the document she needed to answer me about when we should come to give the workshops. That was the whole point [of my visit], but I never thought it would be that complicated [laughter]. And, actually, they do have a plan for the school with the schedule of all the groups and everything, and that’s what she was looking for and couldn’t find. And finally, she told me a story about her vacations—that she was out for two weeks and when she got back she missed school for five days. She came back from vacations, came to school one day to see how things were going and then was absent for five days. And then, after telling me that entire story, she did not find the paper and told me to call her later, but she never answered me back. Awgh, it was horrible! The thing is that there is not any order. You could go inside that school and do whatever you want, truly.

‘[Interviewer] What does that tell you about public education in Puerto Rico?

“That they don’t have resources, it’s fucked up [laughter]. Really, it makes me feel very bad because I am not sure if it’s that they don’t have enough resources or that they don’t know how to administrate what they have—the administration is bad. Or, it’s simply that the teachers don’t care about their profession—there is a combination of factors there. But what is true is that it’s fucked up [laughter]. Specially for these communities, because I think that there are [public] schools in Puerto Rico that are very good, so why this one has to be a mediocre school, because it is for the Dominicans that live in Río Piedras”.

Although this critical stance against teachers was only occasionally recognized in the meetings, it repeatedly emerged during the interviews and informal conversations with the members, often after a difficult day in school or when discussing structural matters concerning the DEPR.
Learning about Río Piedras: Understanding children’s difficult lives

While not all the members of Conuco joined the organization expecting to address issues of social justice and discrimination, through the facilitation of the environmental workshops they became increasingly aware of the children’s precarious realities and, at the same time, lack of knowledge and experience regarding the natural environment. Nonetheless, instead of discouraging the group’s actions, this increased awareness presented them with a raison d’entre to continue with their efforts. Raúl explains how children’s needs and preoccupations motivated him to get engaged in the project:

“I got interested in working with them because I felt that no one was paying attention to them. […] So I felt that it was my responsibility in part. Actually, I felt really bad at the beginning of this semester because we couldn’t coordinate the [school] visits, yet, every time we would walk by [the students] would say ‘hi’ to us. Sometimes, when we see them in the community, [they ask us:] ‘When are you guys going to the school?’: […] Something very nice, very cool.”

He also offered an assessment of how he perceives the children’s surroundings and complicated lives:

“I think that they are growing up in a very difficult environment that includes problems with economic and social situations, discrimination, violence, so many things at the same time.”

Although one of the central goals of the workshops is to elicit descriptions of neighborhood problems from the children’s perspectives, not all of the subjects are addressed evenly in the classroom. Issues related to gender, racism, xenophobia, or community safety receive only partial attention during the sessions, as facilitators find themselves unprepared to deal with some of these sensitive topics.
Especially surrounding the topic of xenophobia against the Dominican community in Río Piedras and the internalization of discrimination by some of the children, Julia narrates her encounter with a Dominican student who openly expressed his prejudice against homeless people living on the streets surrounding his school and the country of the Dominican Republic as a dumpster for those same homeless people:

“We were watching the videos that they were doing about Río Piedras and they did one where [embarrassing laughter] a kid asks: ‘And what do you want for Río Piedras?’ And the other says: ‘That there are no more addicts and to put all the bums in a …’

[Julia interrupts herself to think how to continue.] I think that this is super important and it’s important to talk about and analyze it, because it’s very fucked-up that a kid says these things. He said: ‘I would like (this is a Dominican kid saying it, on top of it), I would like to put all the bums in a bus and, inside a boat, and take them all to the Dominican Republic—so that they could live in the Dominican Republic, instead of here’.

This is a kid from Lorca. So, I don’t know, it worries me. How can a child say that? And those are the things, [for example,] that if we could work with ‘Iniciativa Communitaria’ [a non-for-profit social organization that works with homeless people and drug users], we could do work with [drug] users and could work on these issues—and they [Iniciativa Communitaria] are always [telling me] to[br],”

Julia’s constant interruptions and clarifications evidence the sensitive character of this issue in Puerto Rico. In fact, we had a conversation after the interview ended about whether she wanted me to use this quote in the study, given the nature of the subject and the possible inflammatory connotation against the Dominican community. Even though there is no identifier that could connect these words with the child referenced in the quote, the situation of discrimination against this group granted Julia some degree of fear and concern. After discussing these concerns, she realized that this was too important of an issue to leave out and deserved further attention and understanding, hence, allowing me to present it.
It is then important to this discussion to understand the racialization of ethnicities in Puerto Rico and the relationship of migration movements among subordinate populations in the international labor system, principally Dominicans to Puerto Rico, and Puerto Ricans to the U.S. Grasmuck (1983) describes this system as an “international stair-step migration,” in which “a labor force imported from a peripheral society occupies positions in a developed society which apparently are undesirable to the native working class, whereas the same peripheral society in turn imports part of its labor force from another peripheral society further down in the international economic hierarchy” (Duany 2010: 240). Following this argument, Duany concludes that Dominicans’ stigmatized identity and the social discrimination directed at them are above all a consequence of their racialization (perception as blacks) by Puerto Ricans. Therefore, this negative racialized perception against this particular group of Others “dehumanize[s] them, deprive[s] them of their citizenship rights, and marginalize[s] them socially, economically, and culturally” (Duany 2010: 244). Julia’s and Raúl’s inability to effectively confront this situation in the classrooms evidences the complexity of this situation. Even though they seemed to be aware of this generalized discrimination toward Dominicans and hence raised their critiques and concerns against it, they still fall victim to and participate in the dominant cultural domains of racial classification in Puerto Rico. Unfortunately, as in this case, silence and avoidance are the result of such encounters. Similar arguments have been made about the racialization of social class among Puerto Ricans in the island and the resulting economic, cultural and social marginalization of darker skinned Puerto Ricans (Godreau 2008; Gravlee, Dressler, and Bernard 2005).
Apart from racial and xenophobic discrimination, other topics that emerged during the workshops include violent behavior, economic distress and gender relations. In one instance, the residents of Río Piedras and the students and staff of the UPR were on alert after a series of sexual assaults had taken place in broad daylight. For almost two months the news of the attacks was on everyone’s minds, including those of the elementary school children:

“The last time we were there it was really hard, because the news about the rapist in Río Piedras was everywhere. So, a kid, out of nowhere, came out talking about it: ‘oh, the rapist this and that’ and the girl who was sitting next to him, which is incredible because that girl is like an old-lady [laughter] […] She is like an old-lady, her personality and everything. She lives with her grandmother or something like that [laughter]. Anyway, she comes and says: ‘oh, boy, now that we have forgotten it and you came and brought it up again!’ . But the kid continues to talk about the rapist, so she says: ‘You say that because the rapist rape girls and not boys! . She said that… I did not know how to respond. I [said:] ‘Yes, let’s stop talking about that, now’. […]

“[Interviewer] And, what other issues have [came out]?

“[Raúl] [Racial discrimination. Economic problems.] But also a topic that is not one that they have talked about, but that I have observed among them, is the violence. If you watch the dynamics among themselves, they are always fighting, always hitting each other […] They attack each other, I mean, they attack each other at their level, at that age, but I think that in the future it could become a problem. And I think it is because of their environment. Because sometimes I run into those kids. I ran into one of them at 11 at night, while walking through Río Piedras. I don’t think that [the street] is an appropriate place to raise children.

“[Interviewer] Do you discuss these things as part of the workshops?”

“[Raúl] No, no, no. No, this are just my observations, but we haven’t [discussed it] … Well, maybe we have, partially, from the perspective of ecology and that of spaces, we have talked to them about the things we don’t like about Río Piedras, the problems. Well, now that I think about it, yes [we have talked about it].

“Talking” about these difficult issues from an “ecological perspective” is one way in which Conuco keeps the focus of their intervention within the confinement of
environmental education and advocacy. However, not all of the discussions center on social inequity; indeed, many of the activities are designed to teach the children about less complicated matters such as biology and recycling. These activities draw greatly on hands-on assignments that the students find especially fun. “To observe a tadpole,” or “to feel the cool breeze under a tree,” or “getting your hands dirty with mud,” or “studying a leaf under a microscope” are all experiences that the members regard as transformative, as they allow children to “experience nature first-hand.” Serena provided me with a warm description of how she felt after participating in a field-trip with the elementary school children:

“I said it in the other meeting, that I fell in love with a boy. How he was expressing that… that excitement of seeing an earthworm […] it wasn’t an earthworm, it was like a little tadpole in the water and he [was saying:] ‘Look, look, it’s moving, look! What it’s the name of that?’ And it was [about] how he himself [was realizing…], how that [curiosity] gets born, that need of knowing. […] And, it is that I have a conflict, you know, because I believe that [learning] is something that comes from within. You see a tree and you say: ‘that gives me oxygen, that gives me shade and you feel it—physically, you feel it, that breeze that run under the tree is cool. [On the contrary] if you are on cement, you know, under a building, and it is a different breeze, it’s sticky, hot. So, to educate for that is sometimes, you know, needed, but I think that it should be included in a way that is less […] like: ‘Let’s teach about the environment’. […] It should not be forced, […] but rather something that you internalize, like going shopping [laughter]. That is normal. Well, planting a tree, […] going to the organic market and buying those products, and supporting agriculture in Puerto Rico [as well]. You see, that it comes naturally, that it comes out from the student or from whomever.”

**On assessment and other organizational characteristics**

As I mentioned above, the impact of the workshops on children’s and teachers’ ecological awareness is difficult to assess, given that Conuco did not have in place a structured method for evaluation and assessment. Rather, anecdotal impressions gathered
from teachers and children as the semester progressed, and the fact that they were invited back to the schools every semester for the last three years, indicates that their work was at the very least well-received and expected to continue.

During my involvement throughout this research, I approached the general coordinator with several suggestions and strategies to assess the impact of their efforts—e.g. asking the school coordinators to fill out journals at the end of each activity, conducting a pre- and post-test with the children, interviewing the school teachers at the end of the semester, and others. I received a lot of enthusiastic and excited replies, especially from the general coordinator who had a broader perspective regarding the future development of Conuco and thought of this opportunity as a way to integrate more research activities into their efforts. Yet, none of the suggestions materialized. This could be explained in a number of ways, but I will offer the three explanations that make the most sense to me according to the data. First, everyone in the group was already doing what they could to volunteer their time for the implementation of school activities; hence, they did not have additional time or energy to make this happen. Secondly, most of the school coordinators believed that they were being “successful” and, therefore, did not necessarily understand the advantages of conducting a more structured assessment. Finally, as a corollary, the facilitators were more interested and invested in experimenting with multiple ways of delivering their message and information than in seeing the possible cognitive effects on the children.

These explanations go hand-in-hand with another aspect that is characteristic of this group, that is, their uneasiness with anything that could be interpreted as “formalizing” or “institutionalizing” this experience. On several occasions, at the
meetings, this point was brought up by few of the members through humorous comments, even when Julia was trying to get them to agree on meeting regularly—every one or two weeks. This apprehension regarding formalization was important in keeping their work “spontaneous,” “flexible” and “youthful” and thus different from the “adult-world” and what other organizations and institutions were already doing, especially the DEPR. It is important, however, to contrast this apparent rejection of institutionalization with the commitment and passion that moves these young people to partake in this labor-intensive, voluntary work. While the later might suggest “chaotic,” “rebellious” and “dysfunctional” youth behavior—as early psychological and sociological research on youth would have argued—I contend that Conuco’s interpretation of the adult-world and collective organization and action represent the active political and cultural participation of young people in the life of their communities and the negotiation, on their own terms, of cultural norms and expectations concerning their positionality and fields of action in society.

One aspect of this negotiation happens at the interpersonal level, as relationships among the members get built and matured. While few of the members knew each other from high school and shared a friendship that preceded Conuco, others met Julia in courses at UPR, where they first learned about Conuco. These relationships allowed the members to invade each other’s personal spaces with activities from Conuco and vice versa. Therefore, this “border crossing” between life inside and outside Conuco makes possible other arrangements not common in more structured organizational settings—for example, Conuco members meet in between classes, at lunch time or on a Sunday afternoon when most of the members are free of other obligations. Also, the actual
starting and ending time of the meetings is more of an approximation and depends more on stamina than on covering a set agenda.

Another aspect of the open organizational structure that Conuco represents has to do with the use of new technologies on a daily basis, whether to remain connected and move information across time and space, or to build networks and add supporters to their causes. Outstanding in this effort is the use of emails as their main communication tool. Over the course of eight months in the field, I received more than 145 emails to one of my accounts and approximately half of that number to my secondary account. These emails were sent exclusively from Conuco to either its members, its network or, in the majority of the cases, both. By the time I finished writing my dissertation I had received over 350 emails from Conuco.

Cell phones were another way in which the members stayed in communication, especially on days when activities were scheduled. It was not uncommon for me to receive at least one text message the day before an activity and an additional one the morning of the activity. In fact, had it not been for these “telegraphic” and oftentimes undecipherable messages, I would have missed a number of activities that I had not been informed of in advance or changes that had been made at the last minute. Yet, I also benefited from this untraditional method of conducting ethnographic research, since at times this was the only approach I could use to reach the general coordinator for quick clarifications or reminders. Among the members, nonetheless, there was some disagreement about which method—email or text message—was the most effective to get in touch with them and others interested in Conuco. Raúl, for instance, preferred text messages to emails, while Violeta “hated” the text messages. Rosa, on the other hand,
insisted that they were both needed, since they fulfill different functions and reach
different people.

The use of the cell phone also brings to the analysis other contemporary elements
that were not part of ethnographic research two decades ago, before the spread of mobile
telephone technologies across the Western world. For example, cell phones shorten the
time of information transmission exponentially, allowing people to know what is
happening in different places in real time. This means that decisions can be made faster
and with more information than before. In the case of Conuco, for example, the general
coordinator and other members used their cell phones to call each other while in a
meeting if they were absent or as they headed to a school and others were missing. When
logistical questions were raised at a meeting, the members also used their cell phones to
contact someone who could provide an answer. On one occasion, while we were
meeting, Julia called one of the schoolteachers to confirm the following visit, and Arturo
(who came with Lola) called his grandfather to see if he could train Conuco on how to
prepare compost for the schools. Although none of the calls were answered at that point,
the idea of being able to get the needed information immediately is an important element
in the organization and performance of Conuco.

**Development of skills and integration of knowledges**

Conuco provides an educational space for its members through the coordination
of workshops and lectures on topics related to urban ecology, environmentalism,
research, public speaking, audiovisual techniques, advocacy and education. These
informal meetings usually include a guest speaker that they pull from their network—e.g.
professors, graduate students, other activists and each other. The specific topics for these
workshops come out of discussions at the meetings and directly relate to areas that the members want more information about or practice before teaching them to the children. For example, one of the workshops in which I participated with the other members combined information on sustainable development, urban gardens and botany and was facilitated by Rocío, a graduate student in ecological sciences and the president and founder of a student ecological organization, AKKA-SEEDS, at UPR. The idea of this workshop came up after various members complained that they were ill-prepared to teach children about these topics since they were not natural sciences students. In response to that, Julia suggested bringing Rocío to discuss any doubts and get everyone ready for the school activities. The facilitators for the four schools came to this workshop even though some of them already knew this information through their college classes. Other people interested in joining the organization were also invited by Julia and came. Some of the guests attended the meeting for a while and then left, although at one moment there were approximately eight people in the room.

In the first part of this meeting, which started at 7:25 PM and lasted over two hours, Rocío went through some of the theories behind sustainable development and their application to the case of Puerto Rico and Río Piedras, more specifically. She provided specific examples from her personal experiences and (botanical) experimentations and elicited others from Conuco’s work. This part resembled a seminar in which the facilitator presented information to the audience and then opened the floor for discussion. The members took each of these opportunities to bring other issues to the table such as the role of the university in community development, the difference between “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches to social change, the role of the members as a “type” of
mentors for the children, current environmental initiatives taking place around the neighborhood, the international environmental movement and its relationship with Puerto Rico, the effects of social stratification and injustice on the environment, and the current state of environmental education in public schools across Puerto Rico.

The second half of this extensive meeting was more similar to a workshop and the activities that the members would eventually carry out with the children. Accordingly, the members had the opportunity to observe and examine the samples presented to them while identifying their parts and characteristics. Rocío came well-prepared for both sections with a power-point presentation that guided the seminar, and an assortment of flowers, leaves, seeds and plants to illustrate the second half and carry out the hands-on activities with the members. Throughout the workshop, the members of Conuco who also study ecology or environmental sciences contributed to the discussion and the teaching of the others not trained in these disciplines. It was particularly interesting to hear them sharing stories about their own experiments producing “good” compost—with minimum bugs and unwanted smells—or planting home gardens as they would validate each other’s discoveries, exchange “tricks” and, overall, encourage all in the room to “try this or that thing out.”

As mentioned before, these informal meetings are explicitly effective in providing the members with additional information on the topics that they will then pass on to the children and allowing the members to practice any exercise or activity before doing it in the classroom for the first time. Yet, these workshops have additional implicit gains for the organization. For once, these structured activities assist Conuco in building its network of collaborators by inviting “experts” to present to them and, also, to offer the
members space to learn from each other and brainstorm new ideas to implement in the schools. Other workshops and presentations included training from the Coalición Pro Corredor Ecológico del Noreste on how to educate children about the natural reserve and the political and economic forces threatening it, or how to develop an advocacy media campaign presented by one of their own facilitators who also worked closely with the Sierra Club.

All of these activities are supported through an intricate social network that includes professionals in different fields, fellow college students, community residents and environmental activists. These are all individuals deeply concerned and committed to education and the preservation of the environment. Nevertheless, this group of collaborators is not exclusive to the areas of ecology, natural sciences or education but rather covers a wide range of related interests from legal and policy issues, to community development, urban planning, humanities, geography, architecture and communication and media. Materials for the workshops are provided through the network, channeling resources to schools either from organizations or particular individuals. Additional funding has been received through small grants that the members collectively write, securing more sophisticated equipment such as digital cameras.

Although evaluating the group’s performance was not one of the objectives of this study, at the end of the observed year, one question still remains: How do the intended outcomes proposed by the group at the beginning of the school year compare with those observed at the end of the year? In an effort to answer this question, I returned to my initial fieldnotes and looked specifically at those areas Conuco had expressed an interest in developing during that particular school year and compared it to what they had
achieved by the end of the year (Table 1). Some of the items in Table 1 correspond to Conuco’s own concerns like sustainability and recruitment. Others emerged from discussions with the members about their perceived impact in the schools and their relationship with their partners and collaborators. Yet, some of the areas noted in the table reflect my own (“etic”) interpretation of their work as I move towards understanding the complex articulation of stakeholders and practices influencing Conuco’s work and the possibilities for affecting change.

Table 1. Assessment of Conuco at the End of the School Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASSESSMENT OF CONUCO AT THE TIME OF RESEARCH</th>
<th>VERY EFFECTIVE</th>
<th>SOMEWHAT EFFECTIVE</th>
<th>LITTLE ATTENTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gaining Access to Public Schools</td>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>Assessing School/Community Impact</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linking the Environmental Movement with Public Institutions</td>
<td>Strengthening School Relationships</td>
<td>Developing a Coherent/Concrete Proposal for School Reform</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disseminating Environmental Information to Schools/Community</td>
<td>Formalizing Organizational Procedures</td>
<td>Taking Steps for Organizational/Programmatic Sustainability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating Local Networks</td>
<td>Developing Environmental Curricula</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing a Presence as a Grassroots Organization</td>
<td>Reciprocating Partners</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producing an Alternative Space for Members’ Learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generating an Interdisciplinary Dialogue</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Under the *Very Effective* column, it is worth mentioning Conuco’s ability in gaining access to these four public schools, given their action-oriented approach and
somewhat open critique of the DEPR. One possible explanation for this tension is that the schools’ teachers and administrators failed to perceived Conuco’s members and proposal as antagonistic to the DEPR’s agenda and hence did not identify the group as a threat against the institution. Moreover, Conuco was also effective in linking the broader environmental and social justice movement in Puerto Rico to public institutions. This strategic positioning allowed these movements to gain access to younger generations as well as exert political and cultural influence at the local and national level through the dissemination of environmental and social justice information, the development of advocacy networks and the generation of a positive multi-sector dialogue among academics, residents, community leaders, and college students.

As a corollary, Conuco became a productive space for its members to learn new subjects and develop new skills. In fact, apart from important communication and organizational proficiencies, such as effective reading and writing, academic and community public presentation, organizing and conducting meetings, grant-writing and budgeting, and pedagogical skills, Conuco’s members also developed important advocacy and leadership proficiencies that included, among many other things, community organizing, strategic networking and campaign planning, political and social analysis, research methods, educational and community-based interventions, and intergenerational and multidisciplinary team-building and coordination.

Additionally, this group was *Somewhat Effective* in recruiting new members, although as the data presented above suggest, the group had barely the minimum number of members necessary to cover the workshops at the four elementary schools. Other projects had to be kept on hold until more hands were recruited. Consequently, some of
the areas that were advancing were curriculum development and school integration. The size of the organization also affected their ability to reciprocate their larger partners in ways other than facilitating connections between them, forwarding information across the network and voicing their support for them, individually, and as part of broader movements. Another area that presented Conuco with critical organizational challenges was the inability to formalize procedures within the organization in such a way as to guarantee that the quality and quantity of the information was consistent across schools.

Finally, after engaging with this group for the entire school year, I observed that there were three main areas that Conuco had not paid but little attention, even though they figure predominantly in their narratives about what the group has set out to do. These are: (1) the development of procedures conducive to systematically assessing the impact of their work in the schools and the neighborhood of Río Piedras; (2) development of specific strategies for the long-term sustainability of their work as their volunteer members move out of college and on to other life projects; and (3) Conuco’s concrete proposal for public school reform, whether through the integration of their curriculum across schools (*bottom-up approach*) or the creation and implementation of public policy concerning environmental education (*top-down approach*). It should be noted, however, that this assessment of the work of Conuco only takes into account the period when this research was conducted and therefore does not reflect Conuco’s performance in previous years or currently.

So far, I have introduced Conuco to the reader by describing some of the internal dynamics of the organization and their partnership with the schools. In the next section, I will provide information about Río Piedras as a way to examine additional geographical
and social aspects that intersect with the young people’s work and the lives of children in the participating schools.
Chapter Six: Articulating Social Change in Puerto Rico: Understanding Youth Development and Community-led school reform

Introduction: Youth Participation in Social Change

According to Conuco, people around the world, and certainly in the communities in which they work, have been alienated from nature by structural forces beyond individual control—i.e. colonialism, an export-led economy, neo-liberal policies, and the social and material bankruptcy of the educational system. This has caused numerous cognitive, physical and social malaises that have resulted in the continuous degradation of the environment in the neighborhood of Río Piedras and the sustained relationship of subordination of particularly disempowered groups. In the case of public primary schools, these forces include the state and its educational institutions, whose priorities differ greatly from those of residents in these marginalized neighborhoods and the interest of environmental advocates.

In order to change these oppressive circumstances, Conuco presents a liberatory project that seeks to enhance children’s cognitive and experiential knowledge about themselves and their surroundings—a process that the group claims is similar to their own personal and collective organizational one. Hence, both Conuco and the elementary school children engage in the analysis of social issues as a central component of the examination of their multiple selves, social capabilities, and competencies. The group also experiments with actions at multiple levels that they believe will bring change to the
current circumstances. Analyzing the situation from a critical social ecological framework allows the group to identify multiple sites of action and influence, and accordingly, broaden their efforts to include activities at the classroom, community and national levels.

Furthermore, they recognize the importance of developing networks with key individuals and organizations in order to maximize resources, disseminate information quickly and effectively, and strengthen public opinion around the matter. Although the impact of Conuco’s project on the elementary school children is outside the scope of this particular study, I argue that the sentiments of empathy and solidarity toward these children and their communities, as well as this group’s socio-political awareness, are crucial driving forces behind individual members’ pro-environmental actions and their conceptualization of social and ecological change. Conuco’s work has not only resulted in the members’ growth as individuals, but has also demonstrated the possible benefits of “opening” public institutional practices to external groups with shared interests and commitment to change.

As the data presented above demonstrate, individual pro-environmental behavior can occur as a consequence of collective action and sociopolitical development. In this case, Conuco’s members enact their “green” identities through the transformative and collaborative process of teaching others. By caring for and working with elementary school children, these individuals learn to behave in ways that are ecologically conscious while, at the same time, fulfilling their perceived social responsibility as mentors and environmental activists. As Conuco develops their rapport with teachers and students, they also act as role models for the children to look up to. In an environment where
many children do not see formal schooling as a real option for social advancement, the relationships built with Conuco’s members—some of whom share similar backgrounds—could serve as exemplars and motivation to stay in school.

Finally, the data presented in the previous chapter show how Conuco’s structure overlaps in meaningful ways as a public, environmental advocacy organization and as an intellectual and transformative space for its members. Additionally, the analysis of the data sheds light on the dynamics and complexities of collective pro-environmental behavior and youth socio-political development through the examination of the various cultural processes and individual meanings that get produced.

**Implications for Environmental Education: Experimentation on Community-led school reform**

Although this research is exploratory, we can certainly draw important lessons and implications from it. Maria Novo (1996) argues that environmental education provides us with both an incredible challenge for the future and a possibility for change. On the one hand, the environmental crisis is challenging humans to be creative and to experiment with practices and ideas that have never been implemented before. On the other hand, as long as research concerning pro-environmental behavior focuses on application and justice, there will be new possibilities for innovation and social transformation. These changes must include all aspects of the human experience such as culture, economy, and politics. To accomplish that, researchers and advocates need to expand the scope of approaches that center almost exclusively on individuals’ behavior, values and attitudes regarding the environment, thus bringing to the fore the historical, cultural and socio-political contexts in which they take place.
On experimentation and participation

This notion of challenge and possibility also emerged from the work of Conuco. First and foremost, Conuco represents a space for personal growth in which its members have felt attracted to the challenge of teaching elementary school children within a system that they describe as obsolete, undemocratic, broke, and with little commitment to the environment. As a consequence, this challenge allows them to investigate topics they knew little about prior to joining the organization, thus exposing them to new knowledge and transferable skills. This process, which Leff (1995) calls “dialogue of knowledges,” not only requires an exchange among different disciplines and social actors, but more importantly, it generates new knowledges, values and behaviors/practices. Because these changes happen at the social level as well, they also produce new cultural elements—e.g. youth collective participation in community-led school reform and activism—within the pro-environmental movement in Puerto Rico. It is precisely these changes in behaviors and meanings what offers novel possibilities for the development of original models of social justice and environmental participation at the personal and collective levels.

For Conuco, this challenge becomes then the stimulus to engage in voluntary work, and the possibility to bring about change is adopted as a personal ethical commitment and one of the group’s central goals. This is very important, because the focus of these transformative actions, at least at this point in time, is to provoke possibilities for change, through a collective process of reflection and experimentation. What is more, for this group of young people, who have been socialized into environmental activism and social justice work, this process means both a concrete contribution to actual, relevant problems, and also a rehearsal or preparation for future
engagements in these areas. This includes: (1) the development of skills and knowledges in professional and academic areas of interest; (2) the exploration of new relationships, topics and concerns; and (3) the confrontation and/or reaffirmation of values, perceptions and attitudes regarding the practices discussed throughout this dissertation. As mentioned before, experimenting with social organizing and conducting social justice work is critical in the socialization process of concerned citizens. Hence, participation in this organization not only offered its members the space to discuss, plan and implement ideas, but also the opportunity to develop and expand their individual networks for future collaborative work. This is possible in part because the organization provides its members with the opportunity to pursue different individual objectives while still addressing organizational goals and promoting environmental principles.

This process of experimentation and reflection parallels considerably with others discussed in previous chapters (see Chapters Two and Three), particularly under the traditions of YPAR and service-learning. However, Conuco also differs from these approaches in significant ways. For instance, although Conuco’s efforts are clearly influenced by participatory principles in the tradition of Freire’s popular education, their lack of systematic data collection and assessment procedures limit their ability to advance their work through research. Moreover, contrary to more recent service-learning approaches that look at expanding students’ educational experiences outside of the classroom and into neighboring communities, Conuco does not respond to curricular goals, course scheduling or projects and relationships established beforehand between their professors and the community partners. In fact, it could be argued that Conuco’s model takes the concept of service-learning a step further as students develop their own
relationships and agenda with their partner in the community. This allows participants more control over the design and implementation process as well as over their learning and services. Yet, it also presents serious challenges concerning sustainability, recruitment and possible harm to the community and its residents, giving the inexperience of some students. In short, this tension between service-learning and youth-led organization underscores the need for more research in this area, specifically around the relationship between socially and politically “engaged” campuses and their role in the formation of social activists (see for example Brodkin 2009).

**On community-led school reform and community development**

In some cases, the debate in the literature about the integration of environmental education into the school curricula is framed in oppositional terms, contrasting the politically-oriented goals of environmental education with the more passive practices of uncritical assimilation and reproduction found in public schools today (Stevenson 2007). One problem with this argument is that, as I argue in this study, not all public schools are the same. Some share the goals and orientations of the environmental movement and have the resources to implement innovative projects with the assistance of outside groups, while others, with less resources, still count on individual teachers or librarians who are committed to these principles and willing to do what they can to provide their students with these knowledges and skills. Secondly, at the individual level, as with the members of Conuco, the pathways that bring individual people closer to pro-environmental behavior are various and, hence, influenced by different events and relationships in the lives of individuals, not only their experiences in school.
However, at the systems level, the data suggest that even though this positive attitude toward environmental education is not generalized across the educational system, public schools have the potential to influence a significant part of the student population, thus facilitating long-term and nationwide initiatives for social change. The opportunity for promoting an environmental reform is, however, greatly diminished by the evidence that shows that historically—since the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898—the DEPR’s colonial apparatus has served to support a political, cultural, social and economic development plan that has been more devastating to the environment than protective of it. Paradoxically, by allowing the participation and collaboration of external groups with particular schools, the state implicitly recognizes its inability to take care of all the needs of its constituents, and therefore, consents—or tolerates—a more horizontal implementation of public instruction. This process disrupts the “business-as-usual” model of hierarchical decision-making and proposes a more inclusive and participatory one. Consequently, as in the case of the schools in which Conuco offers its workshops, innovative projects and interventions are left for interested teachers to carry out independently in their classrooms. For these teachers, Conuco’s work suggests the possibility of opening up state institutions to collaborate with interest groups in society through the integration of new information and resources into their schools.

At the neighborhood level, Conuco’s model promotes and strengthens the links among different sectors of society concerned with the improvement of education and the environment. Conuco serves to channel and develop relationships and resources between all stakeholders including teachers, students, environmental organizations, the University of Puerto Rico, community leaders and service providers. Disseminating information
among these diverse sectors and creating opportunities to denounce discrimination and injustices—e.g. via media campaigns—positions this group as an influential and trustworthy element in the community, granting them access to more schools, organizations and individual advocates. This is critically important given that government assistance for educational reform continues to shrink and public funding gets dispersed to attend to other priorities.

**Implications for Applied Anthropology and Future Research in Puerto Rico**

Until recently, anthropology had little to contribute to the vast multidisciplinary literature on youth culture (Bucholtz 2002:525). For the best part of the last century, psychological approaches to adolescence dominated the work of scholars and practitioners alike. Biopsychology and developmental studies explained young people as incomplete and transitional forms moving from childhood to adulthood. Sociology, also, developed a strong set of approaches that, although retaining the idea of adolescence as a transitional period, incorporated a more structural analysis of youth. Researchers in this area looked at youth associations as impositions from the adult sector of society that were designed implicitly or explicitly to control the “deviant” behavior of young people. Both disciplines exerted a significant influence on the work of early anthropologists.

However, recent developments in anthropology, and the particular findings of this study, suggest that this discipline is “particularly well situated to offer an account of how young people around the world produce and negotiate cultural forms” (Bucholtz 2002:526). Contemporary anthropology, thus, is now more concerned with the practices through which culture is produced in association with “age-based” groups, and also the way that young people are perceived as another “type” (Hacking 1999) of cultural and
political actor. As such, young people’s experiences are best understood from their own point of view.

Ethnographic methods are appropriate to describing and analyzing how young people interact, individually and in association, with different institutions in society in their efforts to produce cultural meanings that are relevant to them and their interests. Looking holistically across different levels, anthropologists can describe the complexity of young people’s lives and the multiple sites where they interact. In this way, anthropologists are able to collaborate as partners in youth-centered projects and assist them in their socio-political development and conscious participation in society. Regarding youth-led organizations specifically, applied anthropologists can assist by helping the organization to allocate resources, introduce them to new social networks, “amplify” their voices by writing about their work and promoting their causes, supporting the negotiation of meanings with the adult world, and generating theoretical and methodological discussions that result in the improvement of their practices.

Applied anthropology needs to be at the forefront of this effort. The principles that motivate practitioners to engage in transformative anthropological practices are consonant with those of equality and justice promulgated by critical theories and participatory approaches to research. Moreover, as is happening in many parts of the world, more researchers and activists ought to reclaim spaces for a more democratic and diverse science. The work of grassroots organizations, NGOs and intergovernmental agencies are leading the way (though not without criticism) to more innovative techniques for generating and using local knowledge for social change.
As a result, a more critical anthropology of youth needs to involve the youth themselves in research and therefore in social change. Even though the role of adults in the process of youth socialization is unquestionably a central one, it usually neglects the more informal ways in which young people socialize. It is important to bear in mind that youth are as often the agents and the “experiencers” of cultural change (Bucholtz 2002: 530). It is in this sense that youth’s socially transgressive actions may be understood not simply as culture-specific manifestations of psychological distress, but more importantly as critical cultural practices through which young people display agency. Both the individual and social aspects of the youth experience interact analytically in the study of young people. Historically specific, socio-economic processes and cultural practices shape particular cultural contexts. Hence, the youth experience involves its own distinctive identities and practices, which are neither a rehearsal for the adult “real thing” nor even necessarily oriented to adults at all (Bucholtz 2002: 532). Consequently, this study addresses new developments in youth studies by focusing primarily on young people’s potentials and desire to succeed. This dissertation, in particular, looks at multiple sites where culture is produced and negotiated by youth—whether in parks, street corners, university hallways, cafes, or households.

Furthermore, although these kinds of behavioral and attitudinal changes can take place in many settings, it is still believed that social institutions and schools, in particular, maintain a significant advantage in effecting change at a larger scale. Therefore, educational institutions and environmental organizations make excellent cases for the ethnographic study of youth pro-environmental behavior, mainly because there has been a growing interest in promoting ecological principles and values to new generations.
through schooling, and because their broad reach across diverse populations. Therefore, schools and environmental organizations can benefit from the important advancements that the discipline of anthropology has made to the study of school systems. For instance, applied anthropologists are well equipped to help as liaisons, critics and allies in the planning, implementation and assessment of environmental education interventions.

Below I present the study limitations and provide some suggestions for future research.

**Future research**

Therefore, additional research is critically needed to understand the group’s potential to effect structural change (for example at the city level), the impact they have on local stakeholders and the transferability of the model to other settings and contexts. More specifically, I have identified several areas of interest that would benefit from further research. First, as was mentioned before, my understanding of the teachers’ and children’s perspectives stemmed mainly from the interpretations of the members of Conuco; therefore, I would like to expand my research by including these perspectives. Addressing the perspectives of the teachers and the children will give me insight into the effects of the workshops, school barriers to implementation and curricula integration, teachers’ perceptions of the workshops and environmental education, and variations across participating schools. Understanding these perspectives might help further the relationship between Conuco and the schools and develop new approaches to advancing environmental education.

Another area that both Conuco and I are interested in exploring is the residents and families of the children in Río Piedras. Although Conuco has timidly interacted with the residents while conducting activities outside the schools, they have barely met the
families of the children. However, the members of the group recognize the importance of integrating these two sectors into their cause, especially when discussing issues related to the municipality redevelopment plan, which will affect everyone in that neighborhood.

Finally, in an effort to better understand the position of the UPR in this community and its role in training and supporting young people like Conuco to take upon these efforts, I am interested in, first, following up with current and past members and, second, mapping out other initiatives that the UPR might have in Río Piedras. These are all ideas that have arisen in conversations with Conuco and its partners and, hence, have their support.

**Final Thoughts**

At the beginning of this document I argued that the overarching goal of this ethnographic case study was to understand the multiple aspects of youth participation in their communities, focusing primarily on issues concerning collective behavior, access to resources, socio-political development, identity formation and historical positioning within their own social and cultural context—i.e. the intersection between public schools and communities. Accordingly, this ethnographic case study showcases an environmental education organization led by young people in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico, and attempts to provide answers to how and why young people engage in voluntary work with the conscious intention of confronting issues of social and environmental justice.

By looking beyond the individualistic elements of youth development, this research concludes that young people have as much the right to participate in the public arena as their adult counterparts. The inclusion of young people as historical actors can only be beneficial to the creation of a more just and democratic society. Moreover, I
argue that a better understanding of the youth experience can be reached through the ecocritical analysis of the multiple levels where young people’s actions take place. By investigating the local contexts, social structures, individual development and cultural aspects of particular youth practices we can further our knowledge of young people while advancing their causes, and promoting spaces for more inclusive dialogue and participation.

The work of Conuco parallels the efforts of many people around the world who continue to look for ways to unmask social injustices and propose new ways of taking action, in the hope of bringing about change. By proposing a new model of school and community partnership in which content-specific groups assist educational institutions in the preparation of students, Conuco’s work represents an example of how young people interact in social and cultural processes as active agents of society. This urge for mobilization and organization, both vertically and horizontally, has provoked many questions concerning the role of the nation-state in distributing justice and wealth as well as that of citizens in participating more actively in the political processes of everyday life. Yet, attempting to address some of these structural issues requires organization and collective participation by multiple stakeholders in the social, political and cultural arenas. It remains to be seen if the action-oriented goals of environmental education will motivate the government and the civil society to come together in an effort to alleviate both social and environmental malaises. This positive transformation can only be made possible if the political circumstances allow for those most affected by these changes to control—or at least to genuinely share—decision-making about needs, objectives and implementation of public education plans and praxis.
Notes

i The concept of youth, and that of childhood for that matters, varies across cultures, societies and institutions. For example, the United Nations’ World Youth Report 2007 defines young people as those between the ages of 15-24. However, in Puerto Rico, the Office for Youth Affairs defines them as people between the ages of 13-29. In the case of this study, such differentiations are not significant since the participating youth are between 17-24.

ii According to some researchers, it is estimated that 16.8 million km² of the world’s land and 4.7 million km² of the world’s marine areas are under some type of legal protection (West, Igoe and Brockington 2006).

iii Carrier and Macleod (2005) notice that ecotourism is probably the fastest growing sector of the tourist industry to date, generating approximately from $30 billion to $1.2 trillion (USD) annually.

iv The same cannot be said about educational practices, which are still dominated by psychological theories and approaches to individual development.

v The “decolonization of applied social science” refers to the questioning of the basic assumptions upon which social sciences in the West seems to stand (Stavenhagen 1971:334). The “democratization of research” refers to the importance of giving everyone access to the tools of research and therefore to the production of knowledge (Schensul 2002, 2006).

vi “Conscientization” or “consciousness-raising” is used here in reference to its development in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Brazil. It represents a process geared to democratic participation, in which political, economic, cultural and social problems are confronted resulting in a new reformulation of reality. Through this process, participants are expected to achieve “transformed” or ‘heightened” consciousness (Cariola 1980; La Belle 1986).

vii Similar to the stages proposed by Lewin (1946) above, the processes of exploration, knowledge construction, and action in PAR happen at different moments throughout the research.

viii The word “vivencia” in Spanish was coined by Ortega y Gaset at the beginning of the 20th century to refer to the discovering of the essence of things through the experiencing of them (Fals-Borda 1991:11).
In an effort to secure the protection and conservation of these ecological areas for the future, grassroots organizations such as Casa Pueblo are working to get the UN to designate them as “patrimony of humanity,” adding yet another layer of protection that would not be threatened by local politics and developmental plans.

Accordingly, the document resulting from this inquiry-based process is also known as ethnography.

As I will describe later in this document, every meeting was held as an open forum for anyone to participate and share their opinions on all topics discussed. Because of the scarce human resources, the group was always inviting new people to the meetings as a recruitment strategy, consistently emphasizing their inclusive and participative character.

In the Introduction section, I go over this in more detail.

Although the coordinator and I scheduled a presentation and a workshop on two different occasions to go over YPAR, none of them ever happened. The first time, only one person showed up, and the second one was canceled due to schedule conflicts after it was organized. Cancellations and postponements of meetings and workshops were common for this group, making it very difficult to follow any schedule or action plan. Conversely, many improvised meetings and encounters were also customary among members, which at the end seemed to compensate and kept the ball rolling.

Given the open-ended nature of Conuco’s participation, the total number of members at any given time was different. For instance, when I started the research in August 2008 there were five active members working in the schools. But when I finished interviewing them in March 2009, two had left the group, one had stepping down from being a school coordinator to participate only when needed, and two new members have been recruited and were taking over the coordination of two of the schools. Others were in the process of joining the group—going to the meetings, but not working directly with the schools or any other activity.

The struggles at the community level have been brilliantly described by Puerto Rican writers such as René Marquez (1976) and Abelardo Díaz Alfaro (1974), among others. The importance of these depictions is not only that they clearly show the clash between Puerto Rican and North American cultural elements, but more significantly, they helped to construct an imagery of resistance against the colonizer.

It is estimated that 18,000 Puerto Ricans served in WWI, 17,000 in WWII, 61,000 in the Korean War, 48,000 in the Vietnam War and an unknown number in the conflicts of Iraq and Afghanistan. The controversy around Puerto Ricans participating in U.S.-armed conflicts came up again recently after an anti-recruitment campaign in Puerto Rico impacted the number of people who enlisted in the Armed Forces. According to a news report on the Washington Post (2007) the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Personnel Policy, Bill Carr, recognized that the campaign against recruitments
was having an effect in Puerto Rico: "We're not taking more than our share from Puerto Rico [...] We're taking less than our share, because that's what they'll give us." In the same article, Lewis (2007) depicts the dramatic scene of a soldier's mother whom, while burying her 22-years-old son killed in the war, removed the U.S. flag from the coffin and dropped it to the floor as she pleaded to other parents not to allow their children to go to war.

xvii “[...] Porque los políticos son quienes controlan en el país. Digo los políticos y las corporaciones, y son los que toman [las] decisiones [que] más afectan el ambiente. O sea, uno como ser humano puede decir: "Ah pues yo voy a tratar de ser menos consumista” [...] Pero si no hay una política pública que te ayude a lograr eso, pues [...] vas a logra un cambio mínimo. Si, por ejemplo, hubiese una política pública [que dijese] que lo que se come en los comedores [escolares] se siembra en las escuelas, pues eso podría ser un adelanto gigante en término de asuntos de sostenibilidad del país. Y es un proyecto completamente factible [que] se está haciendo en Orocovis. [...] Ellos siembran ahí la comida y la usan en el comedor. Que yo creo que hace el más sentido del mundo [risa]. Porque en primer lugar la comida que mandan, de los comedores [de EE.UU.], apuesta, es malísima [...] ¡Déjame invitarte al comedor a probarla! [risas] Entonces, [...] la comida mala del comedor es un producto del sistema económico en que [vivimos]. De hecho, aquí se hicieron iniciativas [...] para tener más productos locales y yo no me acuerdo, qué pasó, que empezaron a protestar las compañías que traían la comida [de afuera], porque entonces, es como que tú tienes estas franquicias que, básicamente ellos viven de venderle a las escuelas, te venden un producto de baja calidad y te lo mandan y eso es lo que te llega y eso es lo que tienes [para] hacer. Y digo, para mi eso es malísimo porque a veces te dan cosas que... O sea, se supone que sea comida saludable y a veces te dan coca sin que “hot dog” en pan blanco y eso de saludable no tiene nada. Entonces, los pocos vegetales que hay, sinceramente, no te dan ganas de comértelos. ¡Yo he comido zanahorias que saben a carne!”

xviii “Igual que no se enseñan muchas otras cosas inconvenientes [como ‘la verdadera historia’, o ‘la evolución’], pues el ambientalismo es una cosa inconveniente [...] O sea, toda cosa que cambie el sistema de creencias. [...] Y también es que la educación ahora mismo está diseñada para suplir manos a la industria entonces es como que ciencias y matemáticas, ciencias y matemáticas. El punto es que si tú no le das una buena base al estudiante, integral, por más énfasis que tú le des a ciencias y matemáticas, ni eso va a aprender. Porque cómo alguien va aprender ciencias si no tiene buenas técnicas de lectura y comprensión y todo eso [...] También se tiene una concepción de que [la educación] es medio mecánica, de que vamos a hacer esto y vamos a hacer esto [otro] ahora porque viene el examen. Y no se valorizan las cosas por [...] el conocimiento puro, o el conocimiento, por su utilidad. Es como que para sacar A en el examen. Y, tal vez por eso, cosas que son importantes, pero no entran dentro de ese esquema pues simplemente se quedan a fuera.”

xix In 2002, Casa Pueblo received the Goldman Environmental Prize for its defense of the environment.
“La idea era tener un grupo ambiental que contestaría inquietudes que tuviéramos en la escuela. Era nosotros molestos con cosas de la escuela que queríamos cambiar, especialmente en cuestiones ambientales. Y pues, en Mate Leaf hicimos un huerto en la escuela y un montón de cosas… excursiones, cosas con el manejo de desperdicios en la escuela”.

“Oye, si los Retoños va también, ¿por qué no hacer esto también en otras escuelas? ¡Como que otras escuelas deberían también involucrarse!”

“Cuando Julia y yo estábamos haciendo la propuesta—usualmente cuando hacemos las propuestas es que se nos dan las ideas de qué vamos a hacer—pues entonces decidimos ponerle, o sea, hacer un grupo aparte, dentro de la Colectivo Cundeamor, que se dedicara a eso que iba a ser Conuco”.

“Pues una de las cosas que la Colectivo Cundeamor tenía como meta era llevar estos talleres [Conuco] a las escuelas elementales…, pero como la Colectivo Cundeamor cayó un poco, este, se ha quedado más bien en Conuco”.

“La idea de la Colectivo Cundeamor era súper buena desde el principio. Pero a la vez pensaba que no estábamos listos los grupos individuales, las distintas escuelas a nivel individual. Quizás no estaban preparadas para un "commitment", como quien dice, de no poder comprometerse a asistir a tantas reuniones o llevar a cabo cosas tan grande”.

“Esos son programas de verano. Talleres de liderazgo ambiental [SPROG]. Esos son dirigidos a estudiantes de escuela superior y hasta intermedia. Que de ahí, más o menos, fue que surgió la idea de la Colectivo Cundeamor. Son estos talleres de comunicación, la matriz [de planificación], cómo organizar [una] campaña [de medios], cabildeo, distintos talleres con el propósito de que se cumpla lo que uno quiere, por decirlo así—obviamente enfocando en el medio ambiente. Y de ahí se han hecho tres. Sí, esta es la tercera vez. El verano pasado fue su tercer taller. Son talleres de una semana, [con] distintos estudiantes de la isla que se entran, […] solicitan y entran. Y a mí me gusta pensar que ha hecho algo y yo he visto que sí, que ha hecho. Porque desde el primer campamento que tuvimos, de ahí salieron estudiantes estudiando ciencias ambientales o participando en el mismo Apprenticeship Program [del Sierra Club]. Uno de los estudiantes que participó en el primer programa esta ahora en un Apprenticeship Program y ahora empieza a trabajar en algo que tenga que ver con la protección ambiental. Del segundo salieron estudiantes que eran de los pocos participantes activos de la Colectivo Cundeamor, que todavía van a actividades, como el Festival de Tinglar en Luquillo, [o] que todavía hacen jiras por su cuenta. Como que ellos mismos se organizan, nos mantienen al tanto, pero ellos piden las guaguas, hacen sus propuestas y van al alcalde y cosas así. A mí me gusta pensar que con Conuco va a funcionar, no necesariamente igual, porque también son niños que necesitan de los padres.”

“La Colectivo Cundeamor a mí me pareció que debía quizás cesar un rato, o que quizás no estábamos preparados para esto. Entonces Conuco me pareció una idea mucho
más “doable” porque somos grupos estudiantiles. La mayoría de la universidad—de aquí de la UPR Río Piedras—o si no pues de la CHS que está cerca. Me pareció que era más posible nosotros reunirnos para poder hacer estas cosas y… tu sabes… ya estaban unos contactos, ya se había hablado con las escuelas que estamos trabajando, no sé, me pareció una mejor idea”.

xxvii “Los [niños y niñas] de La Perla te hablan un montón de ‘la jeringuilla’, porque están al lado de las jeringuillas. En la cancha hay una jeringuilla, en el otro lado hay una jeringuilla. Las canchas ya no son para jugar, son más como áreas [para] tirar drogas y […], pues todas esas cosas nos preocupaban y son temas que es bien importante que los niños vayan abordando. Y por último, que es lo otro de Conuco, así bien importante, es la cuestión de que no solo lo aborden sino que ellos ya empiecen a tomar acciones sobre ello, y que lo analicen ellos, que no es que nosotros les decimos: ‘mira, esto esta bien, esto esta mal’, sino cómo es que ellos lo ven.”

xxviii “El estado hace lo que le venga en gana, y pues básicamente […] nosotros no tenemos soberanía para tomar acción sobre el asunto [ambiental]. Entonces yo pienso que esas tres cosas están ligada una a la otra, porque sin tener el poder tú no puedes determinar nada […] A mí una del Sierra Club que es americana me dijo: “Ah no pero por qué ustedes quieren ser independientes si pueden ser estado y cambiar junto con Estados Unidos.” Bueno, en primer lugar yo estoy segura que los americanos les encanta tener una colonia chévere, tropical [risas], pero a mí no me gusta ser esa colonia. Así que pues se busquen otra! O no, que no busquen ninguna, mejor. […] O sea, yo pienso que sí uno pudiera desprenderse de ese sistema [EE.UU.] pues sería más efectivo el cambio [político-ambiental] que tratar uno de cambiarlo [a EE.UU.]. Además, que no es el sistema de uno, diría yo, aunque a veces sí lo es, pero, o sea, normalmente no lo es”.

xxix “La razón por que yo entré [al Departamento de Ciencias] Naturales, en verdad fue por la educación que tuve. Eso fue lo que impulsó mi carrera de estudiar. […] quiero hacer una maestría en ecología, otra en antropología ambiental. Y fue porque tuve una buena educación ambiental, como mi escuela era especializada en ciencias y matemáticas, obligado teníamos que coger dos ciencias y dos matemáticas cada semestre, y eran diferentes, como en la universidad. Y yo tuve la suerte de que cogí ciencias ambientales, cogí ecología, cogí un montón de clases que yo sé que un montón de otras escuelas superiores no las brindan. Y eso es parte de lo que me hizo a mí. Y esa es la importancia de la educación. Y eso fue porque yo entre a esa escuela en [décimo grado], que yo me imagino que si yo hubiese tenido esa educación desde tercero o cuarto [grado], yo sería un monstruo ahora.

“[Entrevistador] ¿Qué otras cosas te han influenciado?

“Primero mi familia, mi ‘background’. Mi mamá no es de PR. Mi mamá es de una isla que pertenece a los West Indies, a Nevis, y mami se crió en la costa siempre. […] La forma de crianza que yo recibió es una crianza costera, en el medio de Bayamón, en cemento, en el medio de una urbanización, entiendes. También, la fiebre que me dio cuando yo estaba en intermedia de estar surfando por ahí, en verdad. Yo iba de playa en playa, todos los ‘weekends’, ese era mi ‘jangueo’ todo el tiempo. Ese era mi vicio, ir a
buscar playas. Y vi poco a poco como estaban erosionando las costas, las construcciones que estaban haciendo. Y a mí, personalmente, sí me a afectado los cierres de playas que han estado haciendo. Porque todas las playas que yo me acuerdo en noveno yo fui, ‘chilling’, ya para doce no podían ser más playas [públicas]. Que yo estoy viendo que los mismos procesos en PR están cambiando. No hay una conciencia ambiental, no hay una conciencia ecológica. En verdad fue eso, la preocupación que tengo del país, mi educación formal como tal, y mi familia.”

“Los primeros dos años [en la UPR] yo estaba dedicado full [time] a [ciencias] ambientales y no tenía el [interés] interdisciplinario, pues yo estaba más en el aspecto ecológico—estaba como en dos laboratorios [de ciencias] metido, todo lo que fuera de ciencias naturales, de ciencias integradas a nivel de investigación, desde parasititos hasta epidemias, todo. Pero, nunca había estado en un programa de educación como tal. Entonces, yo veía los flyers por la universidad y [decía]: ‘Ah, que interesante, porque le están dando un aspecto diferente a las ciencias’. Pero, pues, en verdad, pichaera, sabía que existían [y nada más]. Después, dio la casualidad, que cogí una clase de antropología con Julia, Ecología Urbana, y yo [me dije]: ‘Oye contra, tú eres la muchacha esa de Conuco’. Y ella: ‘Ah, sí’. Y empezamos a hablar. Y de la nada, hablamos [un] lunes y ya el martes me metí en el grupo. Yo creo que tuvo que pasar. […] Yo creo que yo fui uno de [una] minoría que tuve una educación ambiental ‘heavy duty’ y, mano, yo he visto el mundo desde una perspectiva diferente que me ha ayudado. […] Porque eso es lo que la gente no sabe, tú tener conciencia sobre un tema, ya sea ecología, te humaniza más, entiendes. Te hace una buena persona también. […] Tu sabes, la manera de interactuar con otras personas, tú lo ves diferente porque tienes mas consciencia de lo que está pasando en el mundo, y te estás preocupando en otra cosa que no eres tú solamente—es tu entorno como tal. Y ya que mi forma de ser [se la debo] a mi educación, pues me gustaría hacer lo mismo por los demás. […] Pero eso es limitante, porque y ¿las otras escuelas?

“Siendo honesto, tengo que decir que yo no me hubiese inventado un proyecto como Conuco, porque quizás no hubiese pensado en esa posibilidad de propuesta. Pero tengo a esta amiga, Julia, que, es genial, y pues a ella se le ocurren esas cosas. Y en realidad, yo lo tengo que ver en con Conuco es mi amistad con Julia. Ella me ha invitado siempre a trabajar y como ella siempre toma en cuenta la parte artística […] en su trabajo, pues yo le puedo ser útil en ese sentido. Me han invitado a trabajar y yo con gusto, porque entiendo que es una buena propuesta.”

“Todo comenzó porque yo estaba tomando el curso de Brincos y Saltos de Rosa Luisa Márquez, que es de actividades dramáticas y, entonces, uno de los proyectos de la clase y el proyecto final, era llevar los talleres que nosotros tomábamos con ella y con la otra profesora a las escuelas públicas de Puerto Rico y a ver cómo resultaba eso. Era como un ejercicio de trabajo comunitario con las escuelas. Y nosotros—yo trabajé con [otra estudiante]—pues escogimos la escuela Kafka porque era la más cerca que nos quedaba, ya que [ambos] vivimos aquí en Río Piedras. Y así fue que nos enteramos que Julia también estaba trabajando [en la Kafka Elementary School] y pues a veces íbamos
juntos los tres… Habían días que íbamos al taller de Julia para ayudarla y después nos quedábamos en el de nosotros y cosas así. Y pues de ahí fue que vimos que podíamos trabajar juntos en eso y este semestre fue que yo me integré a Conuco como tal.

“[Entrevistador] ¿Qué te interesó originalmente?
“¿En el proyecto? Pues realmente me interesó que me podría quedar con los nenes de los talleres porque me interesó mucho ese grupo. […] Que era, verdad, una cosa de dos talleres, [eso] era lo que teníamos que dar con Rosa Luisa, pero me gustó mucho el grupo, también, como modo de estudio. Por ejemplo, los niños […], casi todos los nenes del grupo son … viven en la comunidad de Santa Rita y la mayoría son dominicanos. Entonces es un grupo social como bien específico y para mí fue como que bien interesante ver ese punto de vista que yo [no conocía.] Pues porque en Río Piedras hay muchos grupos sociales en un mismo [vecindario], compartiendo un mismo espacio, pero no necesariamente uno esta pendiente a los puntos de vista del otro. Estoy hablando medio abstracto aquí, estoy divagando, pero en realidad […] nada, fue un experimento.

“[Entrevistador] ¿Y qué cosas particulares de esa perspectiva aprendiste cuando estabas trabajando con ellos?
“Bueno para ellos es bien difícil porque, o sea, con el … bueno, no racismo, xenofobia digamos que hay aquí en Puerto Rico en contra de los dominicanos. O sea, ya ellos viven todos los días con esa mentalidad, con ese prejuicio. Y es bastante horrible, yo pienso. Entonces hay niños en el grupo que son puertorriqueños y otros son dominicanos y tú ves como discriminan unos en contra del otro”.

xxxiii “Fue mucho, es que en verdad no sé cómo explicarte en breve. Era bien rico, muchos niños. Eso sí, en el viaje [a India] […] lo que siempre mi ojo […] capturaba eran las imágenes de los niños. Siempre veía nenes. Las fotos más, la mayoría es de niños. Y cuando regresé pues llamé a Julia corriendo y le dije: ‘Mira, quiero en verdad trabajar contigo’, porque pues sabía que era con niños.”

xxxiv “De verdad que yo lo estoy cogiendo para mi. […] Sé que mi deber es llevar mi mensaje a otros, pero mayormente es cómo yo crezco de esa experiencia y cómo [los niños] me van a ayudar también a crecer.

“[Entrevistador] ¿Qué otras cosas estas buscando descubrir o crees que vas a aprender al trabajar con Conuco?
“Al trabajar con Conuco, como es una organización que esta creciendo, pues [quiero] ver cómo funciona ese proceso de crear una organización, de ser partícipe, pero activa—cómo es todo ese proceso. [Además] conocer más de esta comunidad [Río Piedras], que en verdad uno no conoce las calles, ni nada—y pues tengo que aprenderlas. Y, también, yo he sentido que a mí me gusta mucho el trabajo comunitario. Comunitario en el sentido de que la comunidad es partícipe y que de ellos tienen que salir, de alguna manera, las ideas. Y pues esto me parece que es lo que se está haciendo con Conuco. Y es como ver si esto funciona y, entonces, pues yo misma aportar a ello”.

xxxv “Pues quiero combinar las artes, me gusta mucho la psicología [también] y, entonces, educación. Pero no tanto para ser maestra si no para conocer más del sistema educativo, cómo funciona. […] Porque yo siento que el sistema educativo de verdad necesita un
cambio. [...] No sé si es a lo que me dedicaría el resto de mi vida, pero es una experiencia que yo pienso que todo el mundo debe tener, ¿no? Es que se siente bien chévere cuando tú le enseñas a alguien y de momento lo aprendió de verdad y lo puede usar. Es como una buena sensación”.

xxxvi “Empecé a tomar los cursos de Certificación de Maestra para poder ser maestra de ciencia. [Quiero] tenerlo como una de mis opciones [...]. Porque me gustaría tener la experiencia de dar clase en un salón y ver cómo funciona y quizás pasar por las frustraciones que conozco que están [pasando las maestras]. Porque tengo maestras [en mi] familia, o maestra. Tú sabes, que conozco. Pero poder pasar las [experiencias] yo, a ver, quizás, cómo se puede cambiar.

xxxvii “Creo que el ‘ambientalismo’ es algo que, en primer lugar, uno no pude hacer planes posteriores en tener un buen ambiente; o sea un ambiente saludable. [...] Creo que ahora estamos en estado crítico del país, del ambiente, que es como que o se echa a perder o se empieza arreglar”. … “Y entonces, este, también es desesperante que a la mayoría de la gente no le importa. Entonces por eso es la educación ambiental”. … “Yo creo que con educación, o sea no es sólo lo que haga uno, es conseguir que otros hagan también”.

xxxviii “Yo creo que es que no nos sentimos ni como parte del problema, ni como parte de la solución. Y eso es algo bien ‘worrying’. [...] Por eso, quizás es que es bien difícil lograr] un cambio completo de mentalidad, un cambio completo de cómo ver las cosas, un cambio completo de cómo sentirse ante lo que pasa. Y yo no creo que Conuco pueda realmente hacer todo esto, pero yo creo que Conuco es como una de esas pullitas que aportan. [...] Me gusta poder decir: ‘Yo doy estos talleres porque a mí misma me obliga’. No me obliga, pero me siento como que con la responsabilidad de yo aplicarme todas estas cosas. “[Entrevistador] O sea, que tú piensas que al enseñárselo a otros estás poniendo en práctica tu propio compromiso”.

“Exacto”.

xxxix “Yo pienso que a través de la educación ambiental uno empieza pues a apreciar ese mundo que nos ... ese mundo que somos nosotros también”. … “pues una vez uno aprende ha pues a quererlo, a cuidarlo, uno se cuida uno . Entonces uno ve a todos parte de este ciclo de esta vida , verdad”. “para mi eso cortaría la violencia. […] También se puede ver como un recurso como de una manera de ver lo que esta alrededor tuyo pero también contigo. Tú te sientes bien cuando siembras un árbol, todas esas otras cosas todo lo psicológico, no sé si se dice así, que trae tu estar a fin y bien con la naturaleza. […] ‘there has been proof’ que estar en una oficina te da, o vivir con un árbol al frente, te da beneficios sicológicos, emocionales positivos, versus que si estás en un ambiente donde estas viendo edificios y concreto vas a estar ‘down’, [propenso] a depresión, droga, violencia. Ya con eso yo creo que es suficiente información para tú decir: ‘contra pues vamos a sembrar más árboles, vamos a hacer más parques’, verdad, enfocarnos en la educación ambiental. […]Por eso yo pienso que la educación ambiental es tan importante”. […] “Para mi todo está conectado entre sí. ¡Todo, todo!”.
“Bueno a parte de viviendo en Río Piedras y que en verdad es un poco difícil uno vivir en un sitio que está tan asqueroso, a veces. Yo desde que viví aquí le digo a la gente que no me en la calle porque de verdad eso me ofende. Yo puedo estar jangueando, sí, en una barra, sí, ebrio y estoy con un pana que va a mear en la calle y le digo que no me en la calle. De hecho, convencí a alguien de que no meara en la calle. Porque es que ¡está cabrón! Tú sabes, ¡apesta! [risas] Entonces uno esta llegando de la universidad a la casa y te hueles todo el meau y toda la mierda que hay en la calle y de verdad que no es placentero [risa]. […] Aparte de la experiencia personal, está la motivación de Julia, que siempre está recordándonos, verdad, esas cosas”.

“Yo siendo participante de Conuco, lo veo como una oportunidad de yo poder dar oportunidades”.

“[Entrevistador] ¿Qué te apasiona [de este trabajo]?
“Como que ver a la gente haciendo cosas que le gustan. Yo creo que es eso y ver que… no una esperanza, porque esperanza suena como tan “Hallmark”, pero que hay como una posibilidad de algo distinto como que a lo que uno vive cotidianamente y como que una posibilidad de que mucha gente tome acción junta para hacer cosas más bonitas y distintas y refrescantes a lo que uno como que vive todo los días aquí en este país. […] Entonces, me emociona el tema, sí, lo tengo que admitir, un montón, que me encanta el tema de la ciudad como un ecosistema y que la gente bregue con ese ecosistema y vea como puede ser mejor. Y en verdad todo es eso como que la esperanza estúpida de que quizás hagan cosa como más nítidas y mejores. […]De hecho, a mí me da con estudiar Ecología Urbana un poco por la experiencia en Conuco el año pasado.”

To the best of my knowledge, only the graduate student in education included aspects of the work of Conuco in her Masters thesis. She was already working as a substitute teacher in charge of one of the children groups taught by Conuco and was interested in experimenting with different techniques to improve the children’s reading and writing skills. This presented some conflict between her and the group’s coordinator at the beginning of the year as they were both trying to negotiate their individual agendas.

“[Laura] La educación como forma integral en de la comunidad. […] Porque […] algo que me doy cuenta mucho con los Retoños es que como es una escuela que vienen niños de distintas comunidades ellos no tienen un sentido de pertenencias a sus comunidades y pueden tener un sentido de pertenencia a la comunidad escolar, pero como todos son de distintas comunidades…
[Julia] Es que también eso es una comunidad.
[Laura] Yo sé que eso también es una comunidad, pero acuérdate que hay cosas de ambientalismo que ellos por ejemplo no trabajan en la escuela porque la comunidad escolar esta completamente aislada de la comunidad de Río Piedras. […] Como ellos llegan en los carros de sus papás y se van en los carros de sus papás y Río Piedras esta al otro lado de la pared. […] Para que los niños se desarrollen plenamente como miembros de una comunidad pues la escuela no puede encerrarse.
“[Julia] Pues eso puede ser como parte, o sea, si tú tienes una escuela alejada de la comunidad no puedes lograr entonces participación.

“[Rosa] Pero es que el enfoque que le podemos dar es algo particular. Yo creo que trabajar los problemas de Río Piedras con estudiantes que saben de esa comunidad, que vienen a esa comunidad, no es problemático.

“[Laura] No es problemático, pero la estructura de la escuela no facilita que esos niños se incluyan en esa comunidad, porque es una escuela con una estructura cerrada, nosotros aquí a dentro.

“[Violeta] Pero quizás por eso es que entran otras escuelas que sí son de Río Piedras y que participan de ese escenario.

“[Laura] Por eso digo que las otras escuelas eso la inclusión a la comunidad si puede funcionar. Tal vez con esta escuela, pues habría que hacer como un esfuerzo más grande para lograr eso.

“[Julia] Y que también quizás no. O sea igual como que la participación comunitaria y ciudadana no se tiene que dar solamente…

“[Laura] … con una comunidad

“[Julia] Exacto.

“[Laura] Sí, pero se facilita.

“[Julia] Puede ser que los niños aprendan también sobre la participación ciudadana y no participación comunitaria a través de esas experiencias con la comunidad aledaña a su escuela y que de ahí entonces partan a que ellos quieran también a trabajar con sus comunidades. No tienen que ser comunidades.

“[Rosa] Claro.

“[Laura] Sí, pero tienen que establecer un vínculo con las comunidades aledañas que en este momento no existe.

“[Julia] Y que las comunidades aledañas también se utilicen como aulas. O sea que también sean parte integral del aprendizaje del niño. O sea como que sí un niño está aislado solamente en su escuela, pues como que le quita un poco de lo es la vida real.

“[Laura] De sentido de comunidad, de la vida real.

“[Rosa] Laura, pero ¿por qué tú dices que no existe un vínculo entre los estudiantes y la comunidad?

“[Julia] […] Porque no nada más el hecho de que un niño estudie en una comunidad dice que ya sea [parte de ella].

“[Violeta] Yo entiendo lo que ella quiere decir.

“[Julia] Yo también.

“[Violeta] Porque los nenes en su mayoría no viven ahí. Entonces pues quizás sí ven una jeringuilla tirada en el piso, pero es fuera de su ‘Jardín de las Sombras’ [Retoños’ school garden] […] es que no es parte de ellos.

“[Rosa] Es que eso para mí no es problemático. De lo que se trata es de desarrollar esa conciencia ambiental y cualquier otro tipo de conciencia. Es que tú reacciones ante problemas cerca y lejos de ti. Y yo tengo que aportar en cualquiera de las dos escalas.

“[Laura] Por eso es que yo entiendo que los niños tienen que crear una sensibilidad—que tú ves un problema que aunque no te afecte a ti, tu entiendas que eso va a afectar a otra persona y que hay que comportarse correctamente. Pero entonces si tú tienes una base de que tú estas viviendo en unas comunidades, entonces la gente de tu misma comunidad
comparte problemas y entonces comparte un mayor interés en resolverlos y es como un punto de partida a un mayor interés en la educación que se esta dando.

”[Julia] Y otra cosa es que se les enseña a los niños la cuestión de la solidaridad. Cómo ser solidario con otras comunidades y con las suyas también. […] Porque la idea, a veces, de: ‘ah no, yo no me puedo meter ahí porque ese no es mi problema, ese no es mi espacio, ese no es mi lugar’. Pero si se les enseña a los niños que también todos somos espacios compartidos y que también son problemas de todos, aunque quizás ellos no lo estén enfrentando en ese momento, pues también les enseña a ellos a desarrollarse.

”[Rosa] Indudablemente van a ver ocasiones en que el individuo—el niño o la niña—[sean] entes externos a una comunidad, pero yo creo que la actitud que ellos deben desarrollar es una actitud de colaboración. Por ejemplo, ahora mismo yo estoy trabajando en un proyecto que a mí me toca [ser] ente externa, pero yo estoy colaborando. Y vamos a desarrollar y vamos a hacer reuniones y vamos a integrarnos. Y yo creo que eso debe ser también uno de los enfoques que debe dar Conuco. […] Y más basándonos en este problema y la estructura de los Retoños.

”[Laura] Por ejemplo, cuando a mí me pasaron el calendario de este año, alguna de las actividades a mí me resultaron más difíciles—lo de la ciudad, ‘Observa Tu Ciudad’. Como todos los niños eran de distintos sitios, no es como […] los estudiantes de la Perla que pues viven casi todos en el mismo sitio, se enfrentan a los mismos problemas, y entonces pueden desarrollar como una dinámica que está de acuerdo con lo que se planteó en el calendario. Pero entonces si yo trato de desarrollar esa misma dinámica, a mi me vinieron estudiantes con que ellos no tenían problemas ambientales… Obviamente eso no es cierto, pero como no están en la misma comunidad yo no pude decir: ‘ah no, mira, pero en esa comunidad hay tal cosa’ y claro yo los ayude a reflexionar y los encontraron.

”[Violeta] "I mean", ¿quién me dice que en Guaynabo no hay problemas ambientales?

”[Julia] Obviamente, hay problemas ambientales en todos sitios.

”[Violeta] Que se den cuenta de que sí, estas cosas que están pasando aquí, están [pasando en] todo el mundo”.

xlv “[El otro reto] es lo de la integración, sí. Es súper difícil que en una escuela todo el mundo trabaje junto—es una jodienda. En la Kafka, la directora no había organizado nada cuando ya era el [día del] taller y como que se le había dicho ya a la directora hace tiempo que hablara con los [estudiantes]. Tú sabes, que siempre, sí, hay como una dejadez. A veces es también causada por el mismo Departamento [de Educación] y por el mismo sistema en sí y como que los maestros […] pues, sí, hay como una dejadez. A veces [es] como esta idea de que ‘los maestros no pueden hacer nada’, ‘son nada más maestros’, ‘ustedes no pueden influir en cuestiones de la comunidad, no pueden influir en cuestiones de la escuela’. O sea, es como que son maestros y ya. Entonces como que eso ha sido difícil y es como importante que los maestros se sientan parte y sientan que son importantes dentro de la escuela, y dentro de la comunidad, y dentro de la vida de los niños y ¡dentro de todo! Hay maestro que han perdido toda esperanza y están allí, como… Eso es algo importante que también [hay que] trabajararlo y que, a veces, no se trabaja. Que no sea nada más los coordinadores [haciendo este trabajo], si no que en verdad se integre [en toda la escuela]”.

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“Nota: Estos proyectos son ideas. Pueden variar y están abiertas a sugerencias o propuestas repentinas o situacionales, dependiendo de cosas que le preocupen a los niños, cosas que les guste hacer, disponibilidad de tiempo de la escuela y de los talleristas, etc. No es un plan ni una agenda rígida, pero es un esquema de cosas que nos gustaría hacer en Conuco. Los talleres o sesiones serán amenizadas con medios audiovisuales, juegos teatrales para catalizar su imaginación, etc.”

“Como que ellos necesitan que los saquen de la rutina de las maestras estás que les gritan y solamente lo que hacen es gritarle porque ellos están acostumbrados a ese sistema de control, verdad. Sí, ellos están bien contentos con los talleres. […] Los [ejercicios] que más funcionaban eran los que le integrábamos musicalidad, porque ellos vienen de una cultura que a pesar de todos los problemas que tienen mucho folklore, como que es algo que esta cercano a ellos y entonces la música yo entiendo que ellos la entienden muy bien. Y cuando integrábamos musicalidad a los juegos teatrales que estábamos trabajando con ellos, pues funcionaban bien.”

“Los talleres de nosotros obviamente no tiene el propósito que tiene cualquier otra clase que tu cojas en el salón, tú sabes, con tarjetas y vamos a estar evaluándote, pero obviamente, nada más con que se vean en ese espacio que tú tienes que sentarte de 8 a 3 a escuchar taca-taca-ta, pues es cómo perjudicial. Porque lo pueden ver o como un alivio, como que salieron de esta rutina o quizás como hasta parte de la misma rutina que se crea. Porque están dentro del mismo espacio y entonces sigue siendo relacionado a tu escuela. [Además,] yo pienso que lo que estamos haciendo se presta para que el estudiante pueda decir en un futuro “ah si yo me acuerdo de tal y tal taller”. Yo confío en que ellos van a poder recordarlo y que sea así como pullitas hasta cierto punto. Que así como yo me veo en la obligación, y no me gusta decir obligación, pero sí hay que decirlo porque es así, yo me puedo ver en la obligación de “yo estoy dando estos talleres, yo a mi se me dieron estas oportunidades, yo tengo que uno sacarle provecho y dos compartirlo”. Pues que ellos quizás también puedan verlo también de esa forma. No una manera como que chabona pero que puedan tenerlo en mente o aplicarlo o, si, estar consciente de todas esas cosas.”

“Yo creo más bien que es la mentalidad o el estilo, o la forma. Y que no es que sea malo y tampoco es que queramos que las otras escuelas se ajusten al estilo que tiene la CHS solo porque para ellos ha sido conveniente, sino que es un factor que esta ahí. […] Hay como una apertura a reconocer “a mira esto es un buen…, esto es una buena idea”. […] Pero lo digo porque mi hermana estudia en la CHS y yo puedo ver que a ellos se les da una educación distinta y hay unos métodos de enseñanza [diferentes], tu sabes” (Violeta).

1 “Estaba buscando ahora lo de los grupos focales que hicimos en un principio con la Washington y… pero los tengo en el ‘pen drive’ ese que no tengo el coso, pero nada el punto es que de esa investigación salió la pues las preocupaciones de los de la Washington eran bien distintas a los de la elemental, tu sabes, sin generalizar, eso fue lo
que salió. Que las preocupaciones de los de la Washington era la cuestión de las jeringuillas tiradas en la calle, en los lugares de recreación y las preocupaciones de los de la elemental, que igual también son preocupaciones bien válidas aunque no son las mismas, era como que [el tipo de] alimentación—que sí yo era vegetariano o no [y otras cosas]” [Julia].

ii “Otras maestras se coordinan a través de la maestra contacto. También a través de la directora, que la directora también coopera con lo que nosotros hacemos. […] ah y la maestra de inglés que está interesada en el proyecto de la basura en la escuela, pero eso es también a través de las otras maestras. […] Yo creo que les gusta bastante la idea del proyecto. [Aunque,] tal vez me gustaría que se viera menos como un club de los que van los otros niños, y mas como un proyecto. Por ejemplo, cuando se hizo el día del planeta tierra, el año pasado, no fueron sólo los Retoños, fue casi toda la es[cuela], bueno, no casi toda la escuela, pero fueron muchos más niños que los Retoños. Entonces hicieron distintos trabajos que yo creo que eso sería ideal, que se pudiera integrar el proyecto con más clases o con más actividades dentro de la escuela. Como por ejemplo, en la clase de ciencias.”

iii “Las maestras, ellas están en su viaje (risa), un embeleco. […] Hay unas que no les gusta fijate, las que son más estrictas que tienen un orden bien específico en su salón. Otras que aprovechan para decorar el salón cosas así, te hacen algún comentario al final. No se involucran tanto, como que ‘ah una gente que vino ahí a entreterer los nenes’. […] Claro, la política en esa escuela es ‘mientras menos trabajes mejor’. La última vez que yo fui a reunirme con la directora ella me estuvo como una hora hablando del Club de Leones, que yo no sé qué cosa. Porque ella alegadamente estaba buscando en su oficina así el papel que necesitaba para responderme a qué hora íbamos a venir a dar el taller, eso era todo el propósito y no pensé que eso fuese a ser tan complicado (risas). Y de verdad que ellos tienen un plan para la escuela con los horarios de todos los grupos y todas las cosas y eso era lo que ella estaba buscando y ella no lo encontraba y finalmente me hizo un cuento de las vacaciones que estuvo dos semanas fuera, que cuando llegó faltó cinco días. Ella regreso de vacaciones, fue un día a la escuela a chequear cómo estaba la cosa y luego faltó cinco días. Entonces y después que me hizo todo ese cuento no encontró la hoja y pues me dijo que la llamara y después no me contesto. ¡Ay fue horrible! Y es que no hay ningún tipo de orden, tú puedes entrar a esa escuela y hacer lo que tú quieras, de verdad.

“[Entrevistador] ¿Y qué te dice eso de la educación en Puerto Rico?

“[Raúl] Que no tienen recursos, esta bien jodía (risas). Sí, de verdad, me hace sentir muy mal porque no estoy seguro si es que no tienen suficientes recursos o si es que lo que tienen no lo saben administrar, la administración está mal. O que simplemente los maestros no les interesa su profesión como una combinación de factores ahí. Pero de que esta jodía, esta jodía (risas). Especialmente para estas comunidades, porque yo pienso que igual hay escuelas en Puerto Rico que son muy buenas y porque esta tiene que ser una escuela mediocre, porque es para los dominicanos que viven en Río Piedras”.

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“Me interesó trabajar con ellos porque sentí que a ellos nadie les hace caso. […] Entonces pues sentí que era mi responsabilidad en parte. De hecho, me sentí bien mal al principio de este semestre porque no pudimos coordinar las visitas [a la escuela], [sin embargo] cuando nosotros pasábamos por allí, [los estudiante] nos saludaban. A veces cuando los vemos en la comunidad [nos preguntan]: "¿Cuándo van para la escuela?" […] Una cosa como que bien bonita, bien chévere.”

“Yo pienso que están pues manifestándose en un ambiente bien difícil, que abarca problemas de situaciones económicas, sociales, de discriment, de violencia, tantas cosas a la vez”.

A few weeks before returning to the University of South Florida to continue with the analysis of the data and the write-up of the dissertation, I started volunteering for this organization in their needle exchange program. Although my stay in the program was not longer than a month, it allowed me to experience first-hand their commitment to eradicate the stigma associated to drug users and homeless people. Since its inception, the team of Iniciativa Comunitaria and its founder, Dr. Vargas Vidot, has worked unwearyingly to promote a public health approach to the treatment of addiction rather than the current criminalization of drug users, which systematically results in physical and mental abuses and violations to these individual’s human rights (cf. Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009).

“Estábamos chequeando los videos que ellos están haciendo sobre Río Piedras. E hicieron uno donde [risa de verguenza] un nene pregunta: ‘¿Y qué tú quieres para Río Piedras?’ Y el [otro] le dijo: ‘que no hubiese más tecatos y meter a todos los vagabundos en una […]’. Yo encuentro que esto es súper importante, e importante decirlo y analizarlo, porque que un niño diga esto esta bien ‘fucked-up’. [Él] dijo: “yo quisiera (esto es un niño dominicano diciéndolo, para colmo), yo quisiera meter a todos los vagabundos en una guagua, ponerlos en un barco y llevárnoslos a todos a República Dominicana. Para que vivieran en República Dominicana en vez de aquí’. Esto es un niño en la Lorca. ‘So’. que no sé, como que preocupa un poco. Cómo un niño va a decir eso. Y esas son las cosas que si se diera como que un trabajo con Iniciativa Comunitaria, se pueden trabajar con usuarios [de drogas] y trabajar con esos temas y ellos me [lo dicen] todo el tiempo”.

“La última vez que fuimos fue bien fuerte, porque para esos días estaba la noticia del violador que estaba en Río Piedras. Entonces un nene de momento pues salió con eso “ah que si el violador” y la nena que estaba al lado, que es increíble porque esa nena es como una doña, pero es una nena (risas) una cosa bien […] Ella es una doña, la personalidad y todo. Ella vive con la abuela o algo así. Así como se dirige a la gente y como que la malicia que tiene es una doña (risas). Entonces ella viene y dice “ay nene uno que se había olvidado de eso ya y tu vienes a recordárselo a uno”. Entonces el nene sigue hablando del violador y ella le dice “tú dices eso porque el violador viola niñas no niños”. Le dijo… yo no supe que responder yo [les dije:] “sí vamos a dejar de hablar de eso ya” (Raúl).
“[Entrevistador] Y, ¿qué otros temas han salido [a relucir]?
“[Raúl] [El discrimen. Los problemas económicos.] Pero también un tema, que no es que ellos lo han hablado, si no que yo lo observo en ellos es la violencia. Porque si tú te pones a observar la dinámica que se da entre ellos mismos, como que siempre están peleando, siempre se están dando […] [Se agreden, o sea, se agreden al nivel, verdad, de esa edad, pero creo que en el futuro se convertiría como que en un problema. Y yo pienso que pues es el entorno en que están. Porque yo a veces me encuentro a esos nenes. Yo, caminando a las 11 de la noche por Río Piedras, me encontré a uno. Yo no pienso que eso es un lugar apropiado para criar niños.
“[Entrevistador] ¿Y ustedes discuten eso como parte de sus talleres?
“[Raúl] No, no, no. No esto es acá observando, pero no lo hemos [discutido]… Bueno en parte sí, desde la perspectiva de lo ecológico y de los espacios pues uno les ha hablado de lo que no nos gusta de Río Piedras, de los problemas. Bueno ahora que lo pienso sí [lo hemos hablado].”

“Yo lo dije en la otra reunión, que yo me quedé enamorada con un nene. Cómo él expresaba esa… ese ‘excitement’ de ver una lombriz […] No era una lombriz, era como un renacuajito en el agua y el [decía:] ‘¡mira, mira, se mueve, mira! ¿Cómo se llama eso?’ Y era cómo él mismo [se daba cuenta…], cómo nace esa [curiosidad], esa necesidad de conocer. […] Y es que yo tengo un conflicto, verdad, porque yo siento que [enseñar] es algo que viene de uno mismo, tú ves un árbol y dices: ‘contra eso me da oxígeno, eso me da una sombra, y tú lo sientes—físicamente, tú lo sientes, esa brisa que pasa bajo tu árbol es fría. [Por el contrario,] tú estas debajo de un cemento, tú sabes, de un edificio y es otra brisa, o sea pegajosa, calurosa. Entonces, educar para eso es a veces, tú sabes, necesario, pero que yo pienso que debería ser incluido de una manera menos […] como: ‘vamos a educar sobre el ambiente’. […] Que no sea forzado, […] sino que sea algo que uno se engrane, como ir de ‘shopping’, ir de compras [risas], que es algo normal. Pues sembrar un árbol, […] ir a la feria orgánica y comprar de esos productos, y colaborar con la agricultura de Puerto Rico [también]. Vez, que eso venga naturalmente, que eso salga del estudiante o de quién sea.”
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About the Author

The author was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico. He holds a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Puerto Rico and a Master of Arts from the University of Southampton, England. Throughout his career, Cintrón-Moscoso has conducted research in Puerto Rico, Costa Rica and the United States in four of the five sub-fields of anthropology—applied, socio-cultural, linguistics and archaeology. Currently, his work centers on the study and development of cultural spaces that promote young people’s political participation and community development. Other topics of interest are youth participatory action research, bilingual education, migration, and youth health.

Additionally, this engaged scholar actively collaborates with a number of grassroots organizations in the utilization of media and ‘popular education’ strategies to systematize and implement educational campaigns around social and environmental justice. Cintrón-Moscoso’s work corroborates that the process of gaining access to political power (i.e., youth inclusion and participation) can be facilitated by the formation of a structured process of discussion, research and action that will allow young people to make better informed decisions about what they want for their community and for themselves.