

University of Massachusetts/Amherst

School of Education

Course Syllabus for  
Education 588

**Teaching About the Puerto Rican Experience**

Professor Sonia Nieto  
Bilingual, ESL, Multicultural Practitioner Program  
and  
Language, Literacy, and Culture Doctoral Program

Fall 2004 Semester

Education 588

**General Information**

Course Title: Teaching About the Puerto Rican Experience

Credits: 3

Classroom: Furcolo 21A

Meeting Time: Tuesdays, 4 - 6:30 P.M.

Instructor: Sonia Nieto

Office: 210 Furcolo Hall

Hours: Wednesdays, 1:30 - 4:00 p.m. and by appointment

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Messages: May be left in mailbox outside my office, on my voicemail, or through email

Required Text: Ruth Glasser, *Âquí Me Quedo*

Course Pack of additional readings available at  
Collective Copies  
71 S. Pleasant Street  
Amherst  
256-6425

In addition, *Puerto Rican Students in U.S. Schools* (Nieto, 2000) will be on Reserve in the W.E.B. Du Bois Library.

## Course Description

"School systems that don't care, no matter their expertise, are hardly school systems at all, because very little 'schooling' -- teaching and learning -- occurs within them. Things will get no better until the schools face up to their obligations and decide that what needs improvement is not their image but their performance. Meanwhile, they forfeit their responsibilities, just as the children forfeit their hopes and the nation forfeits its future. We are all the losers."

from "The Losers: A Report on Puerto Ricans and the Public Schools," by Richard J. Margolis, Commissioned by ASPIRA, Inc., May, 1968

This rather bleak assessment of the response of educational systems to Puerto Rican youngsters was written thirty-five years ago. Yet it still rings true today. Despite the dramatic changes that have taken place in our society since 1968, U.S. public schools remain alienating places for many Puerto Rican youngsters, who continue to fail and drop out at extremely high rates. Why is this? What should teachers and other educators know in order to be effective teachers of their Puerto Rican students? And what changes can they make, in their classrooms and out, so that Puerto Rican students benefit more from their education, and so that all students learn about the Puerto Rican community?

The course has been designed to provide teachers, prospective teachers, and other human service professionals with a basic introduction to Puerto Rican history, immigration, culture, and educational experiences in the United States so that they may use this information in designing the curriculum and making other educational decisions. The focus will be on understanding the education of Puerto Rican youngsters in U.S. schools within a broad historical and cultural framework. In addition, participants will explore how curricular innovations and other reforms in schools can influence educational outcomes for Puerto Rican students.

The major goals of the course are:

1. To briefly explore the history of the Puerto Rican people, emphasizing the experience in the United States, in order to understand the present reality of the Puerto Rican community.
2. To examine the history of education among Puerto Ricans in the United States, with specific attention paid to Massachusetts, to better understand the themes, dilemmas, and strategies of individuals, school systems, and the community to change it.
3. To study the social and cultural manifestations of the Puerto Rican people in such areas as music, art, poetry, religion, values, and child-rearing practices to understand how these might influence schooling.
4. To develop strategies for using the Puerto Rican experience in curricular and instructional practices in educational settings from pre-school through college.

## Course Outline

### Introduction: General Overview of Course

- Puerto Rican History
  - From the Taínos to Spanish Colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century
  - Colonialism and the Puerto Rico/U.S. Connection
- The Puerto Rican Experience in the United States: [Im]migration and the
  - Puerto Rican Diaspora
- Puerto Rican Culture: Selections from the Following:
  - The Family and Child-Rearing Practices
  - Expectations of Children in and out of School
  - The Puerto Rican Woman
  - Race and Racism in Puerto Rico
  - The Arts in Puerto Rican Culture
  - Non-Verbal Communication
  - Learning Preferences and Cultural Influence on Learning
- Identity and the Puerto Rican Community:
  - What Does it Mean to be Puerto Rican?
  - Creating Hybrid Identities
- Education and the Puerto Rican Community in Massachusetts and the United States
  - A Brief History
  - Recurring Themes and Dilemmas
  - The Role of Bilingual Education
  - The Politics of Exclusion
- Educational Reform and the Puerto Rican Community
  - Social Activism in the Puerto Rican Community
  - Community and Family Involvement
  - Policies and Practices in Schools
  - The Role of Teachers in Creating Positive Learning Environments

### Summary and Evaluation

Please note: *If you have any condition, such as a physical or sensory disability, which will make it difficult for you to carry out the work as I have outlined it or which will require extra time on examinations, please notify me in the first two weeks of the course so that we may make appropriate arrangements.*

## Course Format and Requirements

### Course Format

I have designed this course to be flexible in structure and to allow for maximum student involvement. While the major goals outlined on page 3 will provide a basic framework for the course content, you are encouraged to raise and pursue any of the many issues suggested by the goals.

The course will be participatory in nature and although occasional lectures will be given, you will be involved in designing the course through presentations, committee work, and other means. As a result, some of the themes included in the outline may not be covered so that others may be covered in more depth. In addition, media will be used quite extensively.

### Course Requirements

Although all course requirements are subject to revision and modification based on your feedback and our dialogue, I propose the following as important aspects of the course:

- A. Attendance/Participation/Class Journal/Readings journal
- B. Oral Presentation/Research Paper
- C. Book Critique

Each of these requirements will be described in more detail.

#### **A. Attendance/Participation/Class Journal/Readings Journal**

Since you will be expected to participate in class discussions, you should make every effort to attend all classes.

You are required to maintain a class journal during the semester. It is intended to be a fairly spontaneous and informal account of your thoughts and reactions to the activities in the course. Your comments in this journal either should be typed on a computer or handwritten (but legible, and in pen, please!). During and after each class session, you should write about the following aspects of the session:

1. What were some of the things you learned from this session?
2. What changes, if any, did you experience in your attitudes?
3. Did anything that happened in class trigger some ideas for your classroom (or other work setting?)
4. What did you think of the learning activities (lecture, film, student presentations, class discussions, etc.) in the session?
5. Did you disagree with anything said in the session. If so, what are your views?

In addition, from time to time, you will be asked to comment in your journal on specific issues or questions raised during a session. Journals will be collected mid-term (April 8) and at the last class session (May 13).

You will also be responsible for maintaining a journal of readings during the semester. Your reflections should be written primarily for your own purposes, as a way to recall particular insights you learned from the readings. Readings journals will be collected on the last day of class. I may also ask you to prepare specific readings for class discussions. Your responsibility will include reading the article(s), preparing notes, and designing questions or comments to lead the discussion.

### **B. Oral Presentation/Research Paper**

You are required to do an oral presentation, either individually or in a small group. The presentation should focus on any aspect of Puerto Rican history or culture of interest to you; the only requirement is that it be related to education. Some ideas for presentations are suggested at the end of this syllabus, but you may instead select a presentation of your choice. You should be prepared with a topic by the second class session (February 4).

After your oral presentation, a written research paper on the topic should be handed in within two weeks. [NOTE: Hand your paper in as a hard copy, not electronically]. The paper should include related research as well as the information presented in your oral presentation. You may incorporate any of the ideas, criticisms, and suggestions of the instructor and other class members in your paper. Footnotes citing your sources and a list of references must be included.

### **C. Book Critique**

To become more familiar with the culture and/or history of Puerto Ricans, you are also required to read and write a critique of a book focusing on history, education, or some aspect of Puerto Rican culture (music, dance, religion, poetry, etc.). It can also be a novel, a play, or a book of poetry. You may select the book from the Reference List at the end of the syllabus or you may choose an alternative. The book can be either in English or Spanish and should focus on one of the themes covered in the course. If you are particularly interested in children's literature, you may select a number of children's books (at least 4) that focus on Puerto Ricans and critique them. Your book critique is due on April 1.

Please note that all remaining projects, papers, and journals are due by the last class session. I cannot guarantee that I will be able to read the paper in time to give you a grade for the course if you do not get everything in on time.

### **Grading**

You are free to select either a Pass/Fail or a Grade for this class. Let me know by the second class session which you prefer.

## Suggested Topics for Oral Presentation/Research Paper

One of the purposes of the presentations is to explore the history of the education of Puerto Ricans in the United States and some of the reasons and outcomes of this history. Another is to suggest how information about Puerto Rican history and culture can be incorporated into the curriculum, an approach that combines theory and practice. Below are some topics that you may be interested in pursuing. A research paper (or, in some cases, a curriculum) is due two weeks after the presentation.

### Suggested Topics

#### 1. The Status Question

More than any other controversy, the status of Puerto Rico (state, independent nation, or “commonwealth” status) permeates every discussion and all decisions in Puerto Rico. It is a particularly salient issue now, with more Puerto Ricans living in the United States than ever before. Present the major alternatives, describing the advantages and disadvantages of each. Also address the implications of this debate for the Puerto Rican community in the United States, and for the education of Puerto Rican students.

#### 2. The Puerto Rican Diaspora

Almost one-half of all Puerto Rican people now live outside Puerto Rico, making this one of the most massive immigration movements in history. We will be discussing this issue in class in some details, but your presentation can provide information about specific contexts (for ex., the case of Massachusetts, or the implications of immigration for education), as well as strategies and materials on this topic that can be used with children.

#### 3. Race and Race Relations in Puerto Rico

The African experience has had an important impact on the island of Puerto Rico since the early 1500s. However, the African legacy is often overlooked or denied in history books and school curricula. In your presentation, give a historical overview of the African presence in Puerto Rico, and an analysis of racism as it exists on the island and in the United States. Discuss how this information can be used in the curriculum.

#### 4. Religion in the Puerto Rican Community

Religious expression in the Puerto Rican community takes many forms and is a hybrid of both European and African roots of Puerto Rican culture. Give a presentation outlining how religious values are apparent in everyday life and what this has to do with education.

#### 5. The Puerto Rican Woman

Women have played a central role throughout Puerto Rican history, but information about them has often been missing from history books and curricula. Address the historical role of women in Puerto Rico, including current changes in gender roles, and how this information can be presented in elementary and high school classrooms. Alternatively, you may want to focus on *machismo*, its role in gender relations, and how it has been addressed by women, or on specific women in the arts, politics, or other fields.

## **6. Puerto Rican Poetry in the Classroom**

Poetry, formal and informal, is an important part of Puerto Rican culture, and activities related to poetry can be found in many events in the Puerto Rican community. Whether written in Spanish or English, or in a combination of the two (a situation becoming more commonplace every day), poetry can be used throughout the grades with different purposes and using different examples. In your presentation, you can address the reasons for using Puerto Rican poetry, the ways in which it can be done, and some examples of poetry that are appropriate for young people. Alternatively, you can develop an actual curriculum unit to use with a particular grade level.

## **7. Puerto Rican Literature for Young People**

Children's and young adult literature can be used to teach in many contexts and subject areas. In spite of the growing Puerto Rican population in schools, children's literature about the Puerto Rican experience is severely limited. For this project, locate children's and young adult books that concern Puerto Rican history and culture, or stories that focus on the Puerto Rican experience, especially in the United States. Describe some of the issues that this literature focuses on, and mention some of the criteria that can be used to evaluate it. You may also want to describe how it can be used in classrooms, or you may want to develop some related interdisciplinary curriculum for this literature.

## **8. Bilingual Education in the Puerto Rican Community**

Bilingual education has particular relevance for the Puerto Rican community because of Puerto Rico's relationship to the United States and the back-and-forth migration. Since its re-introduction on the national scene in the 1960s, bilingual education has been a hotly contested issue. Nothing has made this controversy clearer than Ballot Question 2 in last fall's election in Massachusetts. In your presentation, you can focus on the impact that the passage of this initiative will have for bilingual education in Massachusetts, or on another topic that may be of interest to you.

## **9. Learning Styles and Preferences of Puerto Rican Children**

Current research lends support to the theory that child-rearing practices of different ethnic and cultural groups may lead to the development of different learning styles or preferences. Review some of the relevant research and draw some conclusions about its relation to the education of Puerto Rican children. The presentation can also focus on specific strategies teachers can use to work with children who have learning styles that are different from the mainstream.

## **10. What works with Puerto Rican youth?**

Some educators argue that certain activities, strategies, and curricula may be more appropriate for use with Puerto Rican students because they are more culturally, linguistically, or stylistically congruent with their experiences. Others disagree, saying that what is good education for *all* students is good education for Puerto Rican students. Consult some of the major reports and studies concerning the education of Puerto Ricans to develop a presentation in which you explore this issue.

You can instead focus on what makes an effective teacher of Puerto Rican students? For this project, you can identify a number of teachers of any background (between 3-5) who have been pointed out as excellent teachers of Puerto Rican youths. Visit their classrooms and interview them to find out what underlies their effectiveness: what are their beliefs and attitudes? how do they relate to Puerto Rican students? to their families? what are their practices? In your presentation, highlight some of their commonalities as well as their differences. Conclude with some observations concerning teacher education and recruitment, and professional development.

### **11. Parent/Family and Community Involvement**

Should parents/families and community members be involved in schools? If so, what is the appropriate role in schools for them? From the community control movement of the 1960s to Title VII PACs, parents have been at the center of the education of their children. In your presentation, you can give an overview of the reasons for and against parental involvement. Discuss some of the ways in which parents can be involved, what skills teachers need to develop in order to work with parents, and some specific strategies for meaningful parent involvement.

### Some Relevant References

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