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Understanding Ethnic Labels and Puerto Rican Identity

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Very often my middle school students ask: “Are you Puerto Rican, Latino or Hispanic?” They also want to know “Is Cinco de Mayo a Puerto Rican or Latin American holiday?”

The truth is that the different labels used to refer to the diverse Spanish-speaking communities and their respective traditions in the United States baffle even adults.

This is a reflection of how little people know about the fastest growing minority group in the United States. Most Americans are not aware of the fact that there are different cultures and races among the more than 20 million Spanish-speaking people in the U.S.

Afraid of generalizing, stereotyping or leaving somebody or something out, people prefer not to have this type of discourse. We need to take time to research about these matters. As teachers, we need to better prepare our students to understand the different cultures and ethnic groups that are the fabric of this country. The dialogue on multiculturalism is becoming very crucial as we are moving toward a more global society. We need to talk about race and culture to understand the changes in our communities, in politics and in today’s popular culture.

Culture and Identity

Culture, in anthropology is defined as the study of all aspects of human life, past and present (Encarta Online Deluxe). Culture also refers to the patterns of behavior and thinking that people living in social groups learn, create and share. In this sense, culture and society are interchangeable in anthropology. The definition suggests that we all have a culture and that at some point as members of a larger society, we share certain traits. In the case of the Spanish-speaking community in the United States, some of those traits include a common language and shared history. However, when we study the group closely, we realize that its members share a diversity of cultures according to country of origin and other variants. Those cultures, as we will learn through this unit, are unique and its members want society to acknowledge this fact. People are defined by the culture they are in, and every one wants this important aspect of their lives acknowledged.

This unit explores identity issues among the Spanish-speaking communities in the United States by studying

some of their history, cultures and races.

I would begin this discussion with students by finding out how much they know about the terms Hispanic and Latino. I would proceed by discussing the latest immigration trends from Spanish-speaking countries into the United States. As I hold this discussion, I will point these countries on a map of Latin America.

Hispanic or Latino?

Figuring out which ethnic label was best had never been an issue for the writer of this unit even though I considered myself a member Spanish-speaking community in the United States. But when I began to report for a newspaper in suburban New York, I had to make a decision about how to identify a group of Spanish-speaking people there. The stories were about quality of life matters such as police protection, housing and other community news. I opted for the term Hispanic, which seemed to be accepted by most people, I thought. At the time, I was totally oblivious of all the attributes attached to it, and frankly I didn't think it mattered. Soon after my articles were published, I received several angry calls from readers. They preferred the term Latino, because, as they claimed, it was more faithful to their roots.

This incident illustrates the sensitive nature of this matter and how important it is for everybody to become educated about the Spanish-speaking community. It is also important to make the overall society aware of these labels in an effort to promote cultural understanding.

The debate over how to refer to Spanish-speaking people in the U.S. is one that has contributed to the confusion of identifying members of this group. In the 1970s, U.S. government came up with "Hispanic" to resolve the problem. The term is still used today as an umbrella name that includes all Spanish-speaking people living in the United States. But some members of the Spanish-speaking community have continued to opt for an identity which is connected with other aspects of their lives such as their countries of origin, their culture and the race with which they affiliate.

This is highlighted in an article published by Martha E. Gimenez of the Department of Sociology at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She is an Argentine-born woman who was classified as a minority and Hispanic by administrators at her institution. In the article, she expresses her discontent with this label and reviews its negative connotations along with other labels currently used in society. She writes the following about her being labeled a minority:

"This was indeed a surreal and upsetting experience first because of the racism entailed in the denial of my identity and the imposition of a spurious "hispanicity" loaded with negative connotations, and also because of the administrative uses to which I was subject by becoming part of the statistics used to show compliance with the law."

Her work and that of others used for the lessons in this unit, make it clear that national origin, social class, ethnicity, race, and length of stay in the U.S, make it exceedingly difficult to find a common term to define an already diverse Spanish-speaking community.

The existing terms only serve to perpetuate stereotypes further and oversimplify people's experiences in this country. Consider the fact that both labels, Hispanic and Latino were created in this country to refer to minority groups that are considered historically oppressed, socially rejected, economically excluded and

lacking of political power, according to Gimenez. If Latino is a label that as some claim, embraces the historical and political commonalities of Latin American countries, how come it is often employed to refer to the social/economic status of a group of people as they are compared to the larger society?

What happens to second-generation Latinos in the United States? Do they share the historical and political experiences attributed to their counterparts in Latin America? If so, should they be considered a minority because of it? These thoughts raise questions about the validity of the following terms currently used to refer to members of the Spanish-speaking community.

The information that follows was collected from Oboler's Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives, and the articles "Latinos/Hispanics...What next?" and "Taxonomy: More on the Label Trap." The articles can be found on the Internet by searching under the keyword Latin American Studies and Labels:

Spanish-speaking: Used to refer indiscriminately to any person who speaks Spanish. Some believe it is imprecise and inappropriate because it clusters together people from two dozen countries, spanning the entire American continent, the Caribbean and Spain.

Hispanics: This term is used to refer collectively to all Spanish-speakers in the U.S. Officially, it identifies people of Latin American and Spanish descent living in the U.S. It specifically connotes a lineage or cultural heritage related to Spain. It was created by state agencies after 1970.

Problems: As stated in Oboler's book, some feel that this term ignores the diverse experiences of descendants of U.S. conquest, such as the Chicanos and those of the Puerto Rican populations. It homogenizes the varied social and political experiences of more than 23 million people of different races, classes languages, national origins, gender and religions. The term may be cause for offense as to the millions of people who speak Spanish but are not of true Spanish descent (Native Americans).

Advantages: Some feel it ensures the community access to resources from the ethnically based political structure of the government.

Latinos: This term describes a geographically derived national origin group. It refers to people originating from or having a heritage related to Latin America. "Latin" refers to the romance languages (Spanish, Portuguese and French) spoken by the majority of Latin Americans.

Origins: The term began to emerge among grassroots sectors of the population, created as an alternative to what was perceived to be an imposed label: Hispanic. It is preferred by health practitioners and policymakers for describing populations of Latin American descent.

Problems: Very much as the other terms, it undermines generalizations about the entire group. The term is not considered appropriate for the millions of native Americans who inhabit the Latin American region. The adoption of the new term would merely add to the confusion and ultimately hinder Hispanics' competition with blacks and other groups for government resources.

Hispano: Preferred by a group of people located in the U.S. Southwest, who identify with the Spanish settlers of the area and not with the Mexican settlers. They seem to be descendants of persecuted Jews who fled Spain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. When the term was coined, it was used to make the distinction between mestizo (half-breed) Mexicans from racially pure Europeans.

Chicano: Its first use seems to have been discriminatory. The source of the word is traced to the 1930s

and 40s period, when poor, rural Mexicans, often Native Americans, were imported to the U.S. to provide cheap field labor under an agreement of the government of both countries. The term originated from the inability of Native American speakers to pronounce the word Mexicanos and instead said “Mesheecanos.” . Mexican-American activists who took part in the Brown power movement of the 60s and 70s later appropriated the term. Among more assimilated Mexican-Americans, the term still retains an unsavory connotation, particularly because it is preferred by political activists and by those who seek to create a new fresh identity for their culture rather than to subsume it blandly under the guise of any mainstream culture.

Spanish-speaking Americans

It is important to understand that there isn't just one type of Spanish-speaking person in the United States. Spanish-speaking Americans come from a variety of places and belong to a variety of different ethnic groups. Some examples of Spanish-speaking American groups are Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans, to mention a few. Although tied by the same language, Spanish-speaking Americans don't share the same historical, political or social experiences. Furthermore, their conditions upon entering this country varied significantly.

Mexicans, for example, were residents of a section of Mexico that became part of the United States following the Mexican American War. They soon supplied a demand for workers in the country's mining and agricultural resources. Their entering differed significantly from Puerto Ricans, whose island and population was colonized 50 years later by the United States. The exploitation of Puerto Rico's human and material resources led to the massive migration of unemployed Puerto Ricans whom were attracted by the postwar demand for labor in the east coast of the U.S.

Just as it is wrong to assume that Spanish-speaking Americans share the same culture and history, it would be erroneous to compare the more recent Latin American immigrants with earlier European arrivals. New immigrants face a declining demand for unskilled workers and entry-level jobs and they cannot follow the kinds of labor market insertion open to earlier groups. The particular historical and economic situation when Latin American populations arrived in the country has shaped each national group's experiences.

One aspect in the history of many Latin American countries that sets them part from Europeans, is the repeated U.S. military interventions in their native land. There have been U.S. interventions in Guatemala, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and Panama. There was an overthrow of democratically elected leaders as in Chile and the constant policing of Latin American governments. Our own history reveals our government's intention with Monroe Doctrine, which basically gave the United States an excuse to intervene in Latin America affairs. Monroe was vying the Caribbean with plans of turning it into an “American Lake.”

Expansion to Latin America was a reality. The U.S took over Puerto Rico in 1898 with intentions of making it a naval base. Despite pleas to end the military regime, Puerto Rico remained colonized by Americans and the military governors soon began the process of “Americanization” of Puerto Rico by implanting U.S. institutions, influencing education, culture and economy. One of the tools of Americanization was the teaching of English as the primary language in the public schools.

Puerto Ricans between two cultures

Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens by virtue of the Jones Act of 1917. As American citizens they can travel freely to and from the mainland. The exploitation of the island's natural resources since the U.S. intervention caused the overpopulated island's economy to deplete and as a result, thousands of Puerto Ricans have emigrated to the U.S.

From the time of their inception into the mainland --dating back to the 1960s-- Puerto Ricans have experienced adjustment issues in the new society. They continue to face ethnic, racial and religious prejudice in the American society. A new Puerto Rican has emerged in the mainland, especially in New York City, where there has a large concentration of people of Puerto Rican descent.

A pressing matter for Puerto Ricans in the United States is that of their identity. With what they identify in terms of culture and ancestry has been a major source of debate among Puerto Ricans.

When they arrived in the mainland, Puerto Ricans interactions with Black people in the United States have been the prominent and much of the ethnic literature that emerged from New York reveals the group's affinity with African Americans. This kinship was strengthened by the groups' socioeconomic positions and struggles, and a similarity in racial background among some of the first Puerto Ricans who emigrated to the mainland. A rich racial mixture of mulattos, whites and blacks characterizes Puerto Rico.

Roberto Santiago's essay, "Black and Latino," encapsulates much of the inner conflict that some Puerto Ricans in the U.S. experience in regard to their skin color, and their African and Latino cultural heritage. It tells the story of how a young boy came to understand this country's attitudes toward people of color, and how that boy, now an adult (the author) finds no harm in identifying himself as both Black and Puerto Rican.

In most of the literature accompanying this unit, the reader will find an underlying theme surrounding the issue of Puerto Rican identity: Are Puerto Ricans black or white because of their skin? Do Puerto Ricans have an American culture? These are only some of the questions that the literature poses.

Puerto Ricans of all colors and ancestry would say that they are just Puerto Ricans. The most telling fact about Puerto Rican culture in the U.S. is its emphasis on difference, and most notably, on the distinction between cultures of colonial peoples and that of imperialist society.

Some of the American Puerto Rican literature reflects the influence of North American culture in a special mixture with the elements of the Latin American and Caribbean cultures.

Students will see that for Puerto Ricans, cultural identification supersedes everything else. The poem "Ending Poem" by Rosario Morales and Auroa Levins Morales contains a special blend that characterize Puerto Rican identity in the U.S. The poem reveals an inner struggle to find a concrete classification in terms of cultural and historical identity. The Morales (mother and daughter) reject any preconceived category and search for their own definition of who they are. Other writers that will be studied under this unit, refer to a lack of identity among Puerto Ricans, an idea furbished by the establish cannons of the dominant society.

"Ending Poem" encapsulates the complexities of being Puerto Rican: it can mean island-born and of a Hispanic tradition, but it can also mean North American, Jewish, inner city, country or poor. The poem also reveals elements of African, Amerindian and European roots, without necessarily wanting to be exclusive of any of

them.

Identity and race

Skin color and other physical characteristics are used by residents in the island of Puerto Rico to identify themselves in terms of race. The terms *trige-o*, *blanco* and *moreno* are perceived by Puerto Ricans as racial classifications. Other aspects considered for racial identification are color, class, facial features and texture of hair, thus resulting in a variety of racial classifications that are not recognized in the North American society. Rodriguez explains that in Puerto Rico, not only is the racial classification very different from that of the United States, but that a black or white Puerto Rican, for instance, is not considered a distinguishable ethnic group..

Race as a form of identity is a recent concept in human history according to Audry Smedley of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the Virginia Commonwealth University. The author goes on to say that race in American society has become equivalent and the dominant source of human identity, in many cases superseding all other aspects of identity. The problem Smedley sees with that is that no social ingredient in our understanding of race has allowed for mixed-races expressions of which are recognized by many Spanish-speaking cultures as in the Puerto Ricans *trige-os* and *morenos*.

This problem is highlighted by the misunderstood attempts in the American census to establish a mixed-race category. The result is that a large group of people is left feeling an absence of identity because they do not exist formally. These sentiments are echoed in many works of Puerto Ricans in the U.S., some of which will be utilized in the lessons of this unit.

The following lessons will allow teachers to incorporate elements of this narrative with the students' activities included. Participants of the unit will be involved in reading, researching and writing reflection pieces that would demonstrate their understanding of the topic.

Curriculum Objectives

All the lessons in this unit are geared at helping students understand the process of identifying Spanish-speaking Americans and at promoting a better understanding of the culture within that group. Students will learn about the issues surrounding Puerto Rican identity. The lessons will show students how ethnic labels were created in the U.S. to refer to Spanish-speaking peoples.

@Text: As students review these matters, they will find that other groups face similar struggles. This will allow students to make comparisons with African Americans and Mexican Americans, some ethnic groups to which they may belong. This unit involves terminology which can sometimes be subject to several interpretations. That is why when we refer to groups of people as an ethnic group and we discuss their race and culture, students should have an understanding about these terms also. To accomplish that, students will explore different perspectives on the concept of culture from a historical, anthropological and sociological standpoint. They will also be exposed to some of the elements that constitute ethnicity.

Spanish-speaking Cultures

Lesson I

Objectives:

- to promote understanding of the diverse Spanish-speaking cultures in the United States
- to identify Spanish-speaking countries on a map

Warm-up

I will begin with a brief discussion about Spanish-speaking Americans in the United States. Provide students with the following facts about the Spanish-speaking world:

- a) More than 360 million people around the world speak Spanish.
- b) Spanish is the third most widely spoken language after Chinese and English
- c) Spanish is the most commonly spoken language in the United States, where more than 22 million people speak it

Main Activity:

Pose the following questions to the class:

1. What do you know about Spanish-speaking people? Do you know where they come from and why they are here?
2. Where is Spanish spoken in the world?
3. What are some of the ways of referring to Spanish-speaking peoples in the U.S.?
4. Have you had any interactions with Hispanics or Latinos? Elaborate.

Teachers will have students answer these questions as part of a whole-class activity. Chances are that their responses will touch upon the various aspects of this unit. As their answers are acknowledged, I will make connections with one of the upcoming lessons, which is a look at the different labels used to refer Spanish

Americans.

Reading/Map skills:

Students study the globe and identify on an activity sheet with a blank map of the world, the 20 Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America, Europe and Africa (Equatorial Guinea).

Ethnicity

Lesson II

Objectives:

-to understand the term ethnicity and how it applies to different groups in the U.S.

Warm-up

Before talking about ethnic labels with students, I will study the term ethnicity with them. I begin by posing the following questions:

- 1) Do you come from an ethnic or racial group?
- 2) How did you come to be part of that group?
- 3) Can people identify you in a different way?

To get into what ethnicity is, I will introduce the following elements of ethnicity:

1. Generally, the members of such a group think of themselves as being somehow different from other groups and in turn are so regarded.

2. An ethnic group is often usually a numerically smaller group, that is smaller than the "majority," whom we tend not to consider as an ethnic group. At least this is the situation in the United States, although not necessarily worldwide.

3. The group has either migrated, voluntarily or involuntarily, to an area away from its homeland or has been overrun in its own land.

Activity:

Make a list of ethnic groups known in the United States. Research two of them as homework assignment.

Lesson III

Warm-up

Objective: -to understand the meaning of ethnic labels used in the U.S. society today to refer to Spanish-speaking people

Warm-up:

Teachers begin this section by discussing the volatile nature of ethnic labels when used to refer to people indiscriminately (as described in the narrative of this unit)

Reading Activity:

Students read the article, "The Label Trap" which appeared on the Albuquerque Journal (bibliography is included in teachers and students' readings).

Discuss the controversy: which names do people prefer? Why? Students comment on whether these labels affect the lives of the people involved, based on what it is expressed in the article. I will keep the discussion oral until students begin to study each term individually.

Provide students with a list of terms used to refer to members of the Spanish-speaking community in the United States.

Activities

Pre-writing: After discussing the terms with the class, I will solicit students' comments. Questions will include:

- 1) How do you feel about the different terminology?
- 2) In your opinion, which labels are more appropriate?
- 3) Should people have the right to choose, or should the government impose a term?
- 4) Are Puerto Ricans Hispanic or Latinos?

Proceed by explaining that Puerto Ricans arguably fall under many of the terms described in this section, but that as members of other groups do -such as Cubans and Mexicans--they identify themselves with their country of origin.

Writing:

I will have students research information about the terminology used to refer to other ethnic groups in the

United States such as Blacks and Native Americans. Students will write about the diversity of cultures within these groups and compares their predicament to that Spanish-speaking groups in the U.S. in terms of how they are perceived. Students' essays will contain their personal opinions about the matter.

Puerto Rican Identity

Lesson IV

Objective: -to understand the complexity of Puerto Rican identity

To set the tone for this lesson, I will have two students read out loud the poem "Ending Poem" as found in Puerto Rican Writers at Home in the USA..

Activity:

I will divide the class into groups of about four and have them answer the following questions:

What geographical regions can be identified in this poem?

Describe the message within the following verses:

"History made me" and "I was born at the crossroads."

Define Caribe-a and Taíno.

How would you characterize the speaker's racial and ethnic background?

At this point I will emphasize the history of Puerto Rico as it is found in Puerto Rico: Island Between Two Worlds.

Homework activity: Prior to this lesson, students will be asked to research the history of Puerto Rico. Recommend the following Website to students: LANIC (Latin American Network Information Center) at HYPERLINK <http://lanic.utexas.edu/las.html> <http://lanic.utexas.edu/las.html>.

I will use "Ending Poem" to introduce some of the issues that characterize the Puerto Rican identity, making the following points about Puerto Ricans in the U.S.

- a) Puerto Ricans consider themselves a cultural group
- b) They struggle to find a place (in terms of social class) within the dominant culture in the United States.
- c) Puerto Rican literature in the U.S. reveals a mixture of North American and Puerto Rican cultures, all of which at times comes to a clash.

d) Some struggle to preserve aspects of the Puerto Rican culture while trying to accept their new roles in the United States at the same time

Students then analyze the following poems by Sandra Maria Esteves: “My Name is Maria Cristina,” “For Lolita Lebrón,” “From Fanon” and “Here,” the last three of which can be found in Puerto Rican Writers at Home in the USA. “My Name is Maria Cristina” can be found in Herejes y Mitificadores.

Divide the class in four groups and assign a poem to each and provide the following questions:

“My Name is Maria Cristina”:

1. What do you understand by the following sentence: “I am a Puerto Rican Woman born in el barrio”?
2. What is el barrio? Why is there a change in language?
3. There are some verses that reflect the writer’s attachment to some elements of Hispanic culture. Provide some examples.
4. What is the meaning of the word negra (black woman) in this poem? Explain that negra should be read not in racial terms, but in its context of love and affection as it is used in the Caribbean.

I will allow students to discuss the remaining three poems in their respective groups and have a reporter from each share their interpretation of the poem with the rest of the class. The following are some guiding questions for some of these poems.

For “Lolita Lebron”

1. What do you think the speaker of this poem is asking for?

“From Fanon”

1. Describe the historical events that the speaker is talking about in the fourth and fifth stanzas.
2. Whom is she referring to in the last stanza?
3. What does the speaker mean in the last line of the first stanza?
4. What is this speaker’s mood?

“Here”

What two parts is the speaker referring to?

Lesson V

Objective: -to understand how Puerto Ricans view race

Reading/Writing Activity:

Discuss Roberto Santiago’s Essay “Latino and Black” found in *Boricuas* by talking the discrimination he experienced. Ask students if they have been in a similar situation or whether they know somebody who has.

They proceed by writing brief reactions to the reading based on the previous discussion.

Ask students to define the terms mulatto, mestizo and trige-o.

Lesson VI

Objective: -to study the life of Puerto Rican-born Arturo Alfonso Schomburg and his contributions to the black community in the U.S.

Activity:

Here’s a brief summary of his life:

Arturo Alfonso Schomburg was a black Puerto Rican who conducted extensive research on the black community of New York City.

While still living in Puerto Rico, Schomburg was told by one of his teachers that blacks had accomplished nothing in the past and probably would not accomplish anything in the future. Schomburg reacted by researching and collecting significant works by black Puerto Ricans. When he relocated to the U.S., he continued his work in highlighting the black and African American communities in New York City. The black community regards him as a strong activist against discrimination. He was subject to more racism when he moved to the United States. On a trip to the Deep South, he was denied accommodations. He sued and won.

Trip:

One activity that teachers might want to consider for this unit is a trip to the Schomburg Center for Research in New York City. This can be done by raising funds or applying for a grant to pay for the costs of the trip.

This museum contains more than 75,000 volumes on black culture as well as magnificent pictures of the black community in New York City. There is a rendering of the way African slaves were transported through the Middle Passage, and portraits of prominent personalities in American history.

Writing:

Students reflect on the documents and renderings. Choose one that made an impact.

Lesson VII

Objective: -to further explore Puerto Ricans connections to their African roots.

Reading Activity:

Students analyze the following poems. "Ay Ay Ay for the Kinky Black Woman," by Julia de Burgos, which can be found in *Boricuas*; "African Things," by Victor Hernandez Cruz, found in *Puerto Rican Writers at Home in the USA*.

Here are some possible questions students can answer when analyzing the poem:

1. What elements of the Puerto Rican ancestry does this poem reveal? Give examples from the poem.
2. Can you see any similarities to your own history?
3. Do you come from racially mixed parents, or do you live in a multicultural neighborhood?

Culture and Race

Lesson VIII

Objectives: -to study how culture and race affect people's identity

Previewing Activity:

Solicit students' understanding of the term culture. Based on their responses, ask them how that definition affects the way they describe themselves to others.

Provide the following definition to the class: according to the Encarta Encyclopedia (which is available through the Internet), culture, in anthropology, includes the patterns of behavior and thinking that people living in social groups learn, create and share. Culture distinguishes groups from each other.

Based on this definition students answer the following questions:

- 1) Is it possible to have no culture? Why?
- 2) Are we solely defined by the culture we live in?
- 3) Why do you think Puerto Ricans are so attached to their culture?
- 4) Describe the Puerto Rican culture and give an example of a North American tradition.
- 5) How is Puerto Rican culture different from the North American culture?

Lesson IX

Objective: -to understand the role of race in people's identity.

Define Race:

Applied to an individual, race refers to membership in a group, and not to aspects of the person's appearance, such as skin color, according to the Encarta Online Deluxe encyclopedia. In anthropology, the term was created to identify biological properties of human populations by regions. Thus, we have race categories known as Caucasians, Mongoloids, Negroes, etc.

But in the U.S. race is now used by people and some ethnic groups to identify themselves. In the case of Puerto Ricans, people like Roberto Santiago align themselves to the "black" race in this country based on his ancestry and physical appearance. This aspect of his life has served as point of reference for him to formulate his identity.

Questions for the class:

- 1) Is race an important aspect of one's identity? Why?
- 2) Can you be a member of more than one race?
- 3) Are Puerto Ricans members of the black or white races as recognized in the United States? Would it depend on their physical or biological traits?
- 4) What role, if any, does our ancestry play in our race?
- 5) How important is it to be recognized as a member of a race?

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Endnotes

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