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Integrating the Hispanic Youth Population of the Hill into the New Haven Community

Curriculum Unit 89.01.01
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New Haven has long existed as a city known for its many neighborhoods. In the course of telling someone where they live, New Haveners commonly state that they live “in the Westville section of New Haven”, or “in the Hill area of New Haven”, or mention one of the other neighborhoods to pin down their location. Certain ethnic groups tend to be associated with each area of the city, although most areas have seen these ethnic groups change many times over their history. The Hill area of New Haven, for example, which remained largely undeveloped until the 1800s, was populated before 1900 largely by Irish and Germans, who were replaced after the turn of the century by Eastern European Jews and some Italians. Today this region is largely inhabited by Hispanics from Puerto Rico and blacks from America’s South. ¹

Within this framework of neighborhoods and the city as a whole, there exists the further division of people who move into the New Haven community with strong ties binding them to other communities from which they have moved. This is the case with many of the Hispanic speaking children in the Hill neighborhood who have come to New Haven from Puerto Rico to live, but who feel many very strong ties with the island of Puerto Rico. These are the children for whom I am writing this unit, and who comprise the largest ethnic group in the population at the Roberto Clemente Middle School. Figures for the 1988-89 school year indicate that out of a total school population of 844 children, 400 are black, 19 are white, 417 are Hispanic, and 8 children fit into other groups. Working with these Hispanic children and their families has left me with the impression that many of these children see themselves not as part of the New Haven community, but as part of the Puerto Rican community who happen to be living in New Haven, very possibly temporarily. Their ethnic background in Puerto Rico includes a long debate of how or how much to belong—the questions surrounding the relationship of Puerto Rico with the United States. There has long been a question in Puerto Rico of how to be associated with the United States: to be independent of the U.S., to maintain a commonwealth relationship, or to establish a direct relationship through statehood. ² In this mind set, I find that these Puerto Rican students are often not aware of their location in the greater New Haven community, the many opportunities available to them in their New Haven surroundings or of possible ways that they can participate in the New Haven community. Although I feel that we all value our heritage and want to maintain as many ties to the culture of our ancestors as possible, I believe that these children should also have the chance to become more familiar with their new surroundings and to understand the opportunities they have to become involved in the New Haven community.

When the *New Haven Register* studied Puerto Ricans living in the New Haven area, the problem cited most

often by the people they interviewed as interfering with the successful integration of Hispanics as functioning members of the community was the transient nature of the group, the information which they have to travel back and forth between New Haven and Puerto Rico which tends to keep the Hispanics isolated in language and culture. ³ Many of the Hispanics who leave Puerto Rico come to New Haven with hopes of obtaining better employment and a better education. Too many times, they decide after arrival here that the life they had hoped for is not to be. Frustrated, saddened, angry, or just resigned, these Puerto Rican families sometimes end up traveling back and forth between New Haven and Puerto Rico looking for a way to make a living. Certainly other ethnic groups have found these same problems to be true upon their arrival in the United States; however, none seem to have found it so easy to remain a marginal part of their former society, due partially to proximity and relative freedom of travel to and from their former homeland. ⁴ This process is eased for them by the fact that Puerto Ricans are American citizens and do not need a passport or visa to travel between the island and the mainland; there are no legal or political restrictions on their travel. Migration from the island to the mainland increases and decreases with the availability of employment on the mainland, and the relatively inexpensive plane fares enable families to easily travel back and forth between the two locations. In the midst of all of this, Hispanic children sometimes fail to see themselves as a part of the New Haven community outside of their own family and close friends.

The New Haven Hispanic population has rapidly increased in the last two decades, while the black and white populations have steadily decreased. In the U.S. census of 1980, the overall population of this country had increased by 11 percent, but the Hispanic population in the same time had increased by 61 percent over the 1970 census figures. At that time, Connecticut was thirteenth in the ranking of states with the highest Hispanic population, with approximately 124,000 Hispanics. However, New Haven Hispanic leaders feel strongly that these numbers are deceptively low, possibly due to the fact that many Hispanics are likely not to respond to the survey. The dominant group of Hispanics in New Haven is Puerto Rican, probably representing about 97 percent of the Hispanics in the city. ⁵

Politically active Hispanics in New Haven strongly believe that the political strength of this group will greatly increase in the near future. They firmly believe that the more than 40 percent of the New Haven Hispanic population which was under 18 in the 1980 census will become an important political force as they reach voting age. They believe that the community will become more stable because these young people do not regard returning to Puerto Rico to live as the answer to all of their problems. People like Pura Delgado, a well known and respected community activist in New Haven, believe that these young people will prove to be the added force in making the Hispanic vote the "swing vote" which can decide important political actions in the city of New Haven. ⁶ This idea has already been reflected in local newspaper articles regarding the beginnings of the New Haven mayoral race. If this young Hispanic group is indeed so politically important, it would follow that it is of great importance that we educate them in respect to their city and their involvement in it.

Information indicates that times are hard for Hispanic Americans. The figures for Americans living at or below the national poverty level for 1985 indicated a decrease for the population as a whole, but the figures indicated that the number of Hispanics in poverty increased for the second year in a row (29 percent in 1985, as opposed to 28.4 percent in 1984). At the same time, between 1977 and 1985 the Hispanic population attending New Haven public schools increased 23.5 percent. Information gathered in the 1980 census indicates that Hispanics are the poorest of the city's poor, with 43 percent of Hispanic families making less than \$8,500 a year. The census further reported that about 55 percent of New Haven's unemployed had Hispanic surnames, and that almost 60 percent of Hispanics over 25 years of age in the Hill had less than an eight grade education. ⁷

An additional factor which affects these Hispanic children is their sometimes stressful home situations. In many Puerto Rican homes, there are no magazines, books, or toys. Parents work long and hard to deal with difficult economic situations, cope with the details of having many children in a crowded apartment, and stretch a limited food budget to cover not only family but guests also, so that they often have little time left to help children explore the world around them and their relationship with it. ⁸ Additionally, American schools generally encourage children to be creative and self-assertive, while Puerto Rican parents often place great value on children being quiet, submissive and respectful. Boys are expected to apply themselves enough to get an education which will allow them to obtain a good job which will bring respect to their family, while girls are expected only to get enough education to allow them to get a job if that should become necessary. ⁹ This family-oriented approach to life may limit the involvement which the child feels in his community as a whole.

The Hill area of New Haven where Roberto Clemente School is located is bounded on the north by South Frontage Road and Legion Avenue, on the west by the West River, on the east by Union Avenue and Cedar Street, and on the south by the New Haven Harbor. This area is generally divided into three sections: the Upper Hill, which is the area closest to Yale-New Haven Hospital; the Kimberly Square area, which is the midsection; and City Point, the southern section. ¹⁰

In 1637-1638 the New Haven Colony was founded on the fertile land between the Quinnipiac and West Rivers. The present Hill area was slightly south of the area where the Puritans settled, and was much like a peninsula. New Haven Colony itself was laid out in a street system of nine squares, with small creeks on each side of the grid allowing access to the community. The Hill area was mainly undeveloped while the rest of the colony grew during the 17th and 18th centuries, with the only settled area being a few small frame dwellings along the southern bank of West Creek (presently the site of the Oak Street connector) which were inhabited by shoemakers. The Hill during this time was an open area, divided into large plots of pasture and salt marshes.

¹¹

New Haven prospered during the period at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries, with much new development taking place within the nine square area, but the Hill remained mainly undeveloped. There was a second small residential area near the present junction of Congress Avenue and South Frontage Road, where free black men and poor whites lived in small frame houses.

However, by 1812 Oyster Point, a group of streets between Howard Avenue and the harbor, was beginning to be slowly developed. Oyster Point got its name from the fact that at one time this area was the location of ten oyster processing plants. This area included Howard Avenue, Liberty Street, Columbus Street and Putnam Street. Oyster Point was a quiet fishing village where New Haven swam at a sandy beach between South Second and South Water Streets. Of interest is the fact that on July 4th of each year the residents of this area would light enormous bonfires on heaps of oyster shells, with resulting flames that were so huge as to be visible from the Green. ¹²

The construction of the Farmington Canal in 1825 helped strengthen New Haven as a mercantile center, but although many new neighborhoods began to prosper the Hill was not much affected. The leather trade on West Creek Road expanded, and along the creek there were small shoe manufacturers and tanneries. Portsea, Carlisle and Cedar streets came into existence east of Howard Avenue. Housing was increasing, but not rapidly. In order to allow access to area fields and marshes, Lamberton Street, Congress Avenue, and Washington Avenue were laid out. ¹³

It is to be noted that it was during this time that the first State Hospital Building was designed by Ithiel Town

and constructed on the present site of Yale-New Haven Hospital.

By 1845 residential development began more earnestly in the Hill area, although the area was not a cohesive neighborhood, since the developments occurred in isolation of each other, a few small factories were built along West, Creek and the streets nearby held tenements and small dwellings for those who worked in the factories and waterfront shops, most of whom were recent Irish and German immigrants. There was a small working class settlement with a little industrial complex and workers' housing at the west end of Davenport Avenue and Congress Avenues. ¹⁴

Howard Avenue, a broad tree lined street laid out through the influence of James Hillhouse, became the main artery and the most fashionable boulevard in the Hill. Many of the Greek revival and Italian style houses of this era still stand in the area today. Unlike other Hill areas, which still generally housed the poor, this area was a middle-class neighborhood with large house lots. Houses from this period include 493, 551 and 622 Howard Avenue.

An important stage in the growth of the Hill area centered around two New Haven philanthropists and abolitionists, Nathaniel and Simeon Jocelyn. The Jocelyns purchased large tracts of land in the Oyster Point quarter, between Columbus Avenue and Portsea Street, in hopes of building a residential community for poor whites and blacks, some of whom might be runaway slaves. Their plan was to duplicate the nine squares at the center of town, with a public common in the center. This common, to be known as Trowbridge Square, is now a New Haven park. However, the Jocelyns gave up in 1850 after building only three houses. Other speculators took over and developed a group of small "reduced" workers cottages. Several of these remain 193-207 Portsea Street, 172-180 Carlisle Street, and 24-32 Salem Street. ¹⁵

In 1851 the South Congregational Church was designed by one of the city's leading architects, Sidney Mason Stone, and built on Columbus Avenue. Around the same time, a small working class settlement developed at mid-century at the west end of Davenport and Congress Avenues. This was a small industrial complex with adjacent workers' housing.

New Haven's neighborhoods changed greatly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as manufacturing and transportation advanced. From 1861 to 1900 the city population went from 40,000 to 108,000. Much of this increase was due to the entrance of foreign born immigrants. As these immigrants moved into the densely settled nine-square area, middle-class residents took advantage of the horsecar railway to move out to housing being built in the Hill area. This new residential growth led to the development of social services such as the building of many neighborhood churches, and both public and private schools. At this time, lower Congress Avenue was the major commercial district with three and four blocks of small shops and markets, while many immigrant laborers lived above these stores in tenements.

In 1866, an event occurred which had a major influence on the Hill. The New York and New Haven Railroad purchased the Gerard Hallock estate at the corner of Lamberton and Cedar streets and the mud flats across the street. On the mud flats, the railroad built a major repair complex featuring a roundhouse and car shops. They also built a new station on Water Street in the mid-1870's which contained the regional offices of the railroad. These developments brought many new jobs to the area, and led to the construction of more buildings to house the railroad engineers and workers. ¹⁶

At the beginning of the 20th century New Haven experienced a second wave of immigration which resulted in middle class residents moving further and further out to the suburbs. Single family homes gave way to

tenements and duplexes. Truman Avenue, which was developed at this time, shows how dense the development of this period was. The families moving into the Hill at this time were mainly eastern European and Italian.

At about the turn of the century, roads which had previously been made with oyster shells were changed to asphalt, and the former "Oyster Point" became known as "City Point." These mudflats are still home to many species of birds, marine life, and marsh flora and fauna. City Point currently is the location of an alternative New Haven high school program known as Schooner, Inc., where students engage in maritime studies and marine biology. In addition, the marina at City Point is still used by both fishing and pleasure boats, and is the location of the well known Chart House, a popular restaurant overlooking the water.

The Hill has seen a rapid decline since World War II. As suburban towns developed and prospered, poverty in the Hill spread. Typical families left in the area are low-income, predominantly minority families. Industrial pollution and starfish infestation have caused the decline of the oyster industry which had formerly brought some prosperity to the neighborhood.

The Oak Street district was destroyed when the Oak Street Connector was built. Since the early 1970's, there have been many attempts to renew the Hill area. Residents in the area in recent years have supported a philosophy of rebuilding and restoring dilapidated buildings, and thus preserving much of the area's history, rather than tearing the buildings down and starting from scratch. Hill residents have established strong block watches and neighborhood groups to work with the city in helping revitalize the area. These organizations include the Hill Development Corporation, the Upper Hill Project Area Committee, and the Kimberly Square Central Hill Neighborhood Association, Inc. In 1983, Congress Avenue and West Street, which had been an area considered dangerous by local residents, became the site of Columbus West, a 65 unit, government-subsidized housing project.¹⁷ Additional recent building projects include Casa Otonal, the first elderly housing project in New Haven developed by a Hispanic non-profit sponsor, and the new Scranton School, since renamed the Vincent E. Mauro School. Some of the problems which these groups have listed as priorities have included better law enforcement, especially where drugs are concerned; listing vacant lots and buildings most in need of attention; and areas to target for rehabilitation.¹⁸

One of my objectives in teaching this unit would be to have children explore the idea of what a community is, and why people live together in communities. To achieve this, children could explore the idea of people functioning together as a group as opposed to separately. They could actively participate in projects where given tasks are to be achieved by certain students working together and others working individually. These could be physical tasks, such as keeping the classroom clean and tidy for a given period of time, and academic tasks, such as researching answers on a given topic. Even a project such as an egg drop, where students have to create a container to protect an egg from breaking when dropped from a certain height, can help students to see the value in sharing ideas. The goal of these activities would be that students would generate the concept in discussions afterward that tasks are much more manageable when shared by a group. I would also include a simple task to be done by the class as a whole, where they would hopefully deduce that there are certain types of tasks which are best done by small groups rather than large ones, thus bringing out the concept of neighborhoods in a city. My goal would be for students to come away from these activities with the concept of division of labor, and the idea that by interacting with each other and sharing the workload for certain common goals, we can actually make life more manageable.

As part of this unit, I would have students maintain journals and/or create experience charts listing the various activities and their own reaction to them. In this case, I would encourage students to list the pros and cons of

each approach to the given tasks, and to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of group effort on certain tasks. At the end of this exploration, I would encourage the class as a whole to come up with their definition of the word *community* and to compare or contrast it with definitions they can find in dictionaries.

My next objective would be to expose students to the impact community life can have on areas such as: food and shelter, social services, government and rules, earning a living, and socializing with or aiding others. To achieve this objective I would have students explore these ideas with worksheets, and then lead class discussions of their findings. Worksheets could include such questions as: What do you think you would do to supply your family with food if you lived alone, outside of a community setting? How would you receive an education? What would you do if you were very ill and needed medical help? What would you do if other people came and stole your food supply or took your belongings? What would you do for entertainment? How does living in a community make it easier for stores to exist? Name five activities that you enjoy doing that you would probably not be able to do if you lived outside of a community setting.

Initially students will probably laughingly present such solutions as saying that they will perform all tasks themselves. However, hopefully they will be interested enough to pursue further solutions. Students should be encouraged to realistically consider the impediments for any given solutions. For example, in the question of providing food a student might answer that he would grow / raise all of the food that his family would need. I would remind him to consider the impact of weather and soil conditions in this area on his plan thinking about winter conditions and, how he would cover that time. Again, students would be encouraged to record their reactions in a journal.

My third objective in this unit would involve students in a brief history and geographical study of their own community. Ideally, this would involve spending time walking in the community and locating given sites. Because of the particularly violent nature currently of the Hill area where my school is located, I would be inclined to do much of my own unit from within the building. Activities to teach familiarity with the Hill neighborhood would include studying labeled maps of the community, practicing labeling blank maps of the area, drawing in each child's house at its approximate location, etc. In addition, I would include maps of New Haven as a whole which would familiarize students with various other New Haven neighborhoods and with places they are likely to hear about (i.e. the New Haven Green, the shopping mall in downtown New Haven, Yale, Peabody Museum, etc.)

Part of keeping up students' interest in a unit is to make it fun, and this is a unit which could involve many creative activities. At this point I would encourage students in an art project where they would create a large map which could be hung up on a classroom wall. The area covered could be of their choosing; it might cover only a small neighborhood area or it might be a map of downtown New Haven. Another project I would invite students to participate in would be to create a three-dimensional model of the Hill area. This could be created out of milk cartons covered with construction paper, using a piece of plywood as a base, paint and sand for soil and roads, LEGO trees, etc. In addition, I would have students generate a list of places to be photographed, and would then take slides (or have students do this, depending on time constraints) to be shown as part of a final project. Students could generate narrative to accompany this presentation.

A fourth objective which I would set for this unit would be to familiarize students with important community groups in New Haven. This would include studying names and roles of people in governing positions such as the mayor and top city officials, the Board of Aldermen, particularly the Alderman representing the hill, and the Board of Education, since that group has so much governing power over the students. I would also include a brief study of New Haven Schools (How many? Where located? Which ones would our students be likely to

attend? etc.) I would include Police and Fire Department services in this review of social services. There would be great potential for field trips to develop this objective. Most of these services are willing to either send out speakers or allow on site visits; both the Police and Fire Departments are very willing to gear their speakers to the age and nature of the group at your request. Further, I would include such neighborhood social groups as the Boys Club and the New Haven Y.M.C.A.

My last objective in teaching this unit would be for students to see that they can be an active part of their New Haven community without feeling that they are giving up their attachment to their Puerto Rican community of origin. One of the best ways I can see to do this is to give the students examples of prominent New Haven adults of Hispanic background and exploring the roles which they have played/are playing in the New Haven community. Initially, I would like the students to try to identify any people they can think of who would fit this category. Then, in addition to any whom they suggest, I would want to include such people as: Dr. Antonio Perez, President of South Central Community College; Tomas Reyes, Jr., Hill Alderman; Pura Delgado, activist who helped establish the Hill Health Center and Latino Youth Services; Rosa Quesada, New Haven School official; and leaders of LULAC and the Junta for Progressive action.

Culminating activities for this unit could include a slide presentation, student generated poems and stories about the material presented, dramatizations of material covered, and display of maps and graphs created on the unit's materials. In addition, students might be interested in videotaping interviews with either people presented in the course of the unit, parents/adults in the community, or fellow students.

Sample Lesson Plans for Exploring Your Community through Maps

(5th/6th Grade Learning Center Students)

Goal To encourage students to increase familiarity with the physical organization of the neighborhood in which they live.

Objectives

1. Students will increase familiarity with local street names.
2. Students will be able to locate their own homes within the community setting.
3. Students will be able to locate important neighborhood structures / areas on a given map.

Lesson 1 Begin these lessons by discussing with students some of the reasons for knowing your way around your neighborhood. These could include being able to find your way home, being able to find homes of friends that you want to visit, being able to get to and from school, being able to get to medical help, being able to find your way to a certain store, being able to use resources such as the New Haven Library, etc.

Next present students with copies of maps of their local neighborhood. The school and any other major spots you want to teach should be very clearly marked. For the Hill neighborhood, I would label the Hill Health Center, the Boys Club, the New Haven Library, Hill-Central Elementary School, Roberto Clemente School,

Truman School, and the Sound School.

Spend the rest of this lesson discussing the map with the class, letting them decide the direction of the discussion and encouraging them to point out streets or places they recognized by name. I would not attempt to teach them new information in this first lesson, but would give them a chance to feel comfortable with the information they recognized on their own.

As a homework assignment, encourage each student to take his/her map home and talk about it with someone at home.

Lesson 2 Begin this lesson by passing out labeled maps again and allowing students to talk about any reaction from the homework assignment the night before.

Pass out more map copies (many students will probably have left theirs at home) and begin to discuss major streets in the area. Any background you have available about the origin of street names or interesting history of how they came to be should be presented at this time.

Discuss the labeled areas of the map. Students should contribute to the discussion of what importance these places have for them, what experiences they have had at them already, etc. Encourage students to talk about the location of these spots in terms of street names, and also how they would get to these spots from their homes. Encourage them to give oral directions from their home or the school to given location, while the rest of the class tries to follow the given path on their maps.

As a homework assignment, ask each student to mark the location of his/her home and three friends' homes on his/her map.

Lesson 3 Use an overhead projector to make a large bulletin-board size copy of the neighborhood map. You may want to select a few students to do this task, or assign students to work in groups to each complete one part of the task.

When this task is completed, allow students to mark and label the locations they put on their homework maps.

Lesson 4 Begin today's class session with a "street game." On small slips of paper, write the names of street names given on the labeled maps. Students can take turns selecting a slip from a container, and trying to have other students guess which street name they chose. Students may give clues involving buildings located on their street, other streets which intersect with their street, etc. may be helpful to set up teams to compete with one another in order to spur students participation. For example, the class could be divided into right and left sides, and each time a person guesses the street correctly, his side gets one point. The person correctly guessing the street comes forward to choose the next slip. Students might be allowed to look at maps for the first part of the game, and then encouraged to attempt to guess without their maps as their familiarity increases.

Lesson 5 Today hand students a blank map and ask them to label as many streets as they are able. I personally would not put on the pressure of a grade, but would offer a prize to the person correctly naming the most streets. (This does not have to involve a cost to the teacher but could be 10 minutes of free time, a chance to be a "student teacher" or teacher helper, etc.)

Lesson 6 Possible field trip around the neighborhood to identify streets and sights located on the map.

Lesson 7 Review with a blank map to identify major streets listed on board. Have students quiz each other.

Lesson 8 Test—List major streets and sights on board; have students identify them on a blank map.

Notes

1. Floyd Shumway and Richard Hegel, *New Haven, An Illustrated History* , p 30.
2. Francesco Cordasco, ed., *Puerto Rican Children in Mainland Schools* , p.39.
3. Magaly Olevero and Chris Jones, "People on the Fringe," *New Haven Register* , February 9, 1986, p.2.
- 4 . Olevero and Jones, p.2.
5. Bill Lazarus, "Hispanics seek to change 'fate' ", *New Haven Register* , February 9, 1986, p.2.
6. Chris Janus and Magaly Olivero, "New Generation", p.13.
7. Janus and Olivero, "People on the Fringe", p.2.
8. Cordasco, p. 272.
9. Cordasco, p. 274.
10. New Haven Colony Historical Society, *Inside New Haven Neighborhoods* , p. 129.
11. New Haven Preservation Trust. *New Haven Historical Resources Inventory* , p.29.
12. New Haven Colony Historical Society, p.140.
13. New Haven Preservation Trust, p.30.
14. New Haven Preservation Trust, p.31.
15. New Haven Preservation Trust, p.30.
16. New Haven Colony Historical Society, p.139.
17. Janet Kipphut, "Columbus West", p.1.
18. Board of Aldermen, "Neighborhood Meetings: Hill", 1983.

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