Identity, Personhood, and Puerto Rican Students: Challenging Paradigms of Assimilation and Authenticity

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Abstract

How can teachers and schools help smooth the way for students undergoing difficult transitions of identity in a society that demands homogeneity? Focusing on the case of Puerto Rican youngsters, this article considers how adolescents negotiate a sense of identity and personhood, especially in terms of their school experiences. The article begins with a brief history of Puerto Rican students in U.S. schools and then presents case studies, narratives, and other educational research to demonstrate the dilemmas of creating personhood among this population. The article ends with a discussion of three strategies that challenge extremes of wholesale assimilation, or essentialized notions of “cultural authenticity” as the only possible solutions to the problem of forging healthy identities.

Introduction

What is the role of teachers in providing students of all backgrounds a sense of belonging and dignity, that is, a sense of personhood, in schools? This is a continuing dilemma for teachers and educational leaders because of, among other things, the growing diversity that now characterizes U.S. schools, especially in urban areas. The question becomes one of how to affirm students’ diverse identities without at the same time succumbing to partisan and essentialized notions of identity that are both misleading and potentially divisive. It is an especially daunting challenge at this time in our history because it is no longer possible to speak about
“assimilation” in the overly optimistic and ingenuous way it was used in the past. Schools can no longer enforce assimilation as the noble goal it was thought to be at the beginning of the twentieth century because students of diverse backgrounds and their communities no longer see wholesale assimilation as the answer to the problems of educational underachievement or lack of civic involvement (Gibson, 1995; Gibson & Ogbu, 1991). How can teachers and schools help smooth the way for students undergoing difficult transitions of identity in a society that demands homogeneity, especially among adolescents? What can teachers do to alleviate the dilemma of a bifurcated identity that so many youths experience? Why do teachers and faculty who prepare future teachers need to know these things?

In this article, I discuss how notions of identity and personhood figure prominently in the school experiences of young people of many backgrounds. I focus on the case of Puerto Rican youngsters, but I want to make clear that, although one case is never applicable to all others, it can nevertheless provide insights into the experiences of young people of other backgrounds. In this article, I first provide a brief history of Puerto Rican students in U.S. schools and then I use case studies, narratives, and other research to demonstrate how defining and creating personhood has been a consistent problem faced by Puerto Rican students in U.S. schools. The remainder of the article centers on three school and classroom strategies that challenge both extremes of assimilation and a rigid notion of cultural “authenticity.”

Defining Identity: Who’s the Real Puerto Rican?

A number of years ago I received an email message entitled “You Know You’re Puerto Rican When...” Meant to be humorous, it included a long list of experiences and characteristics that presumably describe what it means to be Puerto Rican in the United States (for example, being chased by your mother with a chancleta, or slipper, in hand; always having a dinner that consists of rice and beans and some kind of meat; having a grandmother who thinks Vick’s Vapor Rub is the miracle cure for everything). While I laughed at many of these things (and I shared a good number of these experiences when I was growing up in New York City), it was also sobering to read the list because it felt like a litmus test for puertorriqueñidad (Puerto Ricanness). If you could prove that you had these particular experiences, you could claim to be an “authentic” Puerto Rican; otherwise, you could not. Many were manifestations of a particular historical period and a working class, urban U.S. reality; most had no doubt been idealized over time. By putting them to paper, the author was making it clear that these experiences defined the very essence of being Puerto Rican in the United States.

Reading the list made me reflect on my own daughters, born and raised in the United States by highly educated middle-class parents. They would likely not pass the Puerto Rican litmus test: their dinner was just as likely to consist of take-out Chinese
or pizza as of rice and beans; they barely knew what Vick’s Vapor Rub was; and I don’t remember ever chasing them with chancleta in hand. Both of them identify as Puerto Rican (among other things, as my husband is Spanish and my older daughter identifies as both, and because my younger daughter, who is adopted, is multiracial and multiethnic), but their identities are complicated by living in a society characterized by tremendous diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, social class, and other differences.

At the other extreme, the pressure toward assimilation, both in their schooling and through their experiences in society in general, also affected my daughters’ identities. Except for the elementary years when my older daughter was in a self-consciously political and multicultural school organized and managed by the families of the students, the fact that they were Puerto Rican was rarely taken into account by most of the schools they attended. The curriculum in the schools they attended was largely monocultural and assimilationist, although there were some attempts at multiculturalism. The conventional understanding in most of those settings was that schooling was to be a kind of crucible where students were, if not melted, at least treated to a common experience that would homogenize them. This was almost uniformly seen as a good thing by their teachers and by society in general.

These examples represent two poles of a continuum where ethnic identity is either wiped out through assimilation, or defined in essentialist and limiting ways. Assimilation and essentialism are equally problematic paradigms for young people attempting to develop a strong sense of personhood, and they no doubt have an impact on how students identify with school and learning. Surely there must be a less painful, more accommodating, and healthier way to develop one’s sense of personhood than through one of these extremes. This is the dilemma at the core of this article.

The issue of identity is a complex one for Puerto Ricans because it has been shaped by a history of colonialism, immigration, and difference. Questions of social class, race, language use, and national loyalty are all embedded in the search for identity. Joy De Jesús (1997) has described the identity crisis that invariably results:

What makes growing up Puerto Rican unique is trying to define yourself within the unsettling condition of being neither here nor there: “Am I black or white?” “Is my primary language Spanish or English?” “Am I Puerto Rican or American?” For the Puerto Rican child, the answers to these questions tend to be somewhere in between, and never simple. (p. xviii)

What, then, does it mean to be Puerto Rican in the United States and how is this identity developed in families, schools, and society? Is there just one definition of Puerto Ricanness, or are there many? To begin to answer this question, we need first to understand something of the history of Puerto Ricans in U.S. schools.

Colonialism, Migration, and Education

The centenary of the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States
was commemorated near the end of the twentieth century (1898-1998). The beginning of the twenty-first century is thus a particularly suitable historical moment in which to investigate the education of Puerto Ricans in the United States. Most teachers and teacher educators are only vaguely aware, if at all, of the nature of the connection between Puerto Rico and the United States (Harvard Educational Review, 1998; Nieto, 2000b). The colonization of Puerto Rico, and the massive diaspora of the Puerto Rican people to the United States during the twentieth century are topics that need to be explored by those interested in the development of a sense of personhood among Puerto Rican students.

Colonialism, migration, and education are all inextricably linked in the case of Puerto Ricans, and this connection needs to be explored to provide insight into the current situation of Puerto Rican students in U.S. schools. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Puerto Ricans living in the United States numbered 3,039,000, about 15% of the total Latino population and the second largest Latino ethnic group in the nation (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Nearly one-half of all Puerto Ricans now live in the United States, making the case of Puerto Ricans one of the most dramatic diasporas of any people in the world.

The sociologist Clara Rodríguez (1991) has suggested that since 1917, all Puerto Ricans have been “born in the USA.” That was the year that Puerto Ricans were made U.S. citizens. Although the gratuitous word “granted” is often added to U.S. history books, both elected houses of the Puerto Rican legislature at the time voted against U.S. citizenship (Rodríguez, 1991). Even before then, since 1898 to be precise, the United States controlled all matters Puerto Rican because the island was handed over to the United States by Spain as spoils of the Spanish-American War. We can therefore accurately say that Puerto Rican students have been attending U.S. schools since 1898, not in the sense that the experiences of Puerto Rican students in Puerto Rico and those in the United States have been the same, but because both educational systems have been controlled by the United States.

Puerto Rico and the United States were joined as a result of “an act of conquest” (Rodríguez, 1991), but this point is frequently overlooked or minimized in the literature. As a result, Puerto Ricans are generally perceived as simply one of the latest in a long line of newcomers in the traditional sense of European immigration (Rodríguez, 1991). But Puerto Ricans are not Europeans, and the historical context under which they come to the United States differs markedly from that of immigrants who arrived at the dawn of the twentieth century. Moreover, the colonial status of Puerto Rico has affected the education of all Puerto Rican students since 1898, whether on the island or in the United States itself.

In Puerto Rico, the U.S. Congress mandated from early on that all children needed to learn English and the “American way of life” (Osuna, 1949; Negrón de Montilla, 1971). The evidence that this mandate was taken seriously became apparent quite soon in island schools. Almost from the start, Puerto Rican schools were steeped in U.S. ideals and traditions through U.S. textbooks, materials and
methods, imported structures of schooling, English-only language policies, teacher preparation practices, and the celebration of U.S. holidays, including ironically, United States independence. According to Juan José Osuna (1949), shortly after 1898, the average Puerto Rican child knew more about George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Betsy Ross than the average child in the United States. Although this may be hyperbole, it underscores the assimilationist nature of the curriculum and of schooling in general on the colonized island.

In the United States, colonialism has also left its mark on the education of Puerto Rican students. John Ogbu’s (1987) theory concerning the nature of immigration is helpful in understanding this phenomenon. Ogbu theorizes that a group’s political situation in the host society and its perceptions of opportunities available in that society influence its educational achievement to a far greater degree than simple cultural differences. As a result, Ogbu characterizes as voluntary minorities those racial and ethnic minorities who do not have a history of subjugation at the hands of the United States, while involuntary minorities are those groups that in some way have been colonized or otherwise subjugated by the United States. He characterizes Puerto Ricans, African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans as involuntary minorities. In the case of Puerto Rico, it is because of its colonial relationship to the United States. According to Ogbu, the major academic problem for U.S. Puerto Ricans and other involuntary minorities is not that they possess a different language, culture, or cognitive or communication style, but rather the nature of the history, subjugation, and exploitation they have experienced, together with their own responses to their treatment.

While helpful in understanding the situation of Puerto Rican students in U.S. schools, Ogbu’s theory fails to explain other issues that may also influence the academic success of students. For instance, in spite of shared experiences, why do some students succeed in school while others do not? In recent research, Nilda Flores-González (2002) took on this question and demonstrated how Puerto Rican students in the high school she studied created identities as either “school kids” or “street kids” based on both their individual experiences and on the climate and context of the school they attended. These identities as “school kids” or “street kids” either helped or hindered them in achieving academic success. According to Flores-González, the school has a significant role to play in creating success or failure for Puerto Rican students.

Race and social class differences, length of time in the United States, English-language fluency, and other differences also influence students’ school experiences. For example, most Puerto Ricans are poor, and they live in deteriorating inner-city neighborhoods where children are confined to poorly financed and overburdened schools, and this too needs to be taken into account (Orfield, 2001). Also, the fact that Puerto Ricans are racially mixed means that U.S. racism has been a consistent obstacle affecting education. This is not to say that racism does not exist in Puerto Rico, or that it is more benign there, but rather to suggest that
the nature of racism is different from what it is in the United States (Rodríguez; 1991; Centro Bulletin, 1996).

Colonialism has also affected the migration of Puerto Ricans, which has been unlike any other in U.S. history (History Task Force, 1982). For one, Puerto Ricans were the first group of newcomers to arrive as U.S. citizens. As a result, the term “migration” rather than “immigration” has usually been used to describe the Puerto Rican experience (although some writers prefer the term “[im]migration” because of its unique hybrid character; see Marquez, 1995). Second, because travel to and from the island was relatively easy and inexpensive with the growing accessibility of air travel beginning in the 1940s (the period that has been called “the Great Migration”; see Sánchez Korrol, 1994), Puerto Rican migration was the first “jet-age” mass movement of people to the United States. Third, Puerto Rican migration has occurred at a time when technical and professional skills are far more important than was ever the case with previous immigrants. Puerto Rican migration, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, was overwhelmingly working-class in origin, and the newcomers’ low levels of education placed them at a unique disadvantage (Fitzpatrick, 1971; 1987).

The colonial experience has also led to a back-and-forth migration, creating what have been called circulatory migrants or “the students in between,” those who spend time on both island and mainland (Quality Education for Minorities Project, 1990; Reyes, 2000). Gillian Rivera, a high school student whose essay about moving frequently between Puerto Rico and the United States, as well as within the United States, provides a poignant reminder of the effects of displacement on children. “As a child,” she writes, “moving around to different places was like picking a new breakfast cereal at the supermarket...” (Rivera, 2000, p. 69). Another example: from 1969 to 1973, about 30% of all New York City Puerto Rican students reported between one and four changes in schools between grades 7 and 9 (Quality Education for Minorities Project, 1990). Special programs and policies to help ease the transition from island to mainland or vice-versa have been recommended since the late 1950s (Morrison, 1958; Gallardo, 1970; Rivera-Medina, 1984; Santiago-Santiago, 1986), although they have never been fully implemented.

As we can see, issues of language, race, culture, and social class all complicate how Puerto Rican youngsters develop a sense of personhood. In what follows, examples from selected research spanning several decades will be reviewed.

**Puerto Rican Students’ Struggle for Personhood in U.S. Schools**

Defining identity and claiming personhood are the primary psychological and sociocultural tasks of adolescents of all backgrounds. For some, particularly first- and second-generation youths, it is an exceedingly difficult job because they must
negotiate sharply contrasting cultural beliefs about identity and community. For Puerto Rican students, this task has traditionally been situated in discussions of race, ethnicity, social class, and language use (Zavala, 2000). Questions of difference pose terrible dilemmas for Puerto Rican youths because in our society diversity has historically been viewed in a negative light. For instance, Stanley Aronowitz (1997) has suggested that ethnicity in the United States has been little more than “a temporary condition on the way to assimilation” (p. 194). Given this perspective, ethnic and other differences have been perceived by schools as obstacles to overcome.

Developing a sense of personhood implies constructing a self that is worthy of self-respect. But Puerto Rican youths have struggled to develop this sense of personhood in the face of numerous strategies to “deculturalize” them (Spring, 2000). In this section, I first briefly address the issue of self-esteem because this is a topic that is frequently used to explain the academic failure and alienation of Puerto Rican and other subordinated youth. Then, I use examples from research on Puerto Rican youths to reveal how the process of developing personhood often occurs in the midst of schools’ attempts to strip young people of their identities, or of attempts to define them in static and stereotypic ways.

**Poor Self-Esteem and Personhood**

Much has been written in recent years about the need to build up the self-esteem of students. The conventional wisdom is that students of culturally dominated and economically poor backgrounds are characterized by poor self-esteem. The notion that some students have an intrinsic poor self-esteem because of their cultural background or economic situation brings up the chicken-or-egg question: that is, do students feel badly about themselves before they enter school, or does their schooling help produce poor self-esteem? Or is it perhaps a bit of both? As pointed out by Joseph Kahne (1996), self-esteem is at best a “slippery concept” (p. 17). Alfie Kohn (1994) has been even more critical: “Getting students to chant ‘I’m special!’ - or to read a similar perfunctory message on cheerful posters or in prepackaged curricular materials — is pointless at best” (p. 276).

A critical perspective problematizes the simplistic rendering of self-esteem evident in the pre-packaged curricula that Kohn criticizes. Rather than think of self-esteem as a unitary concept, we need to understand that it operates in relation to particular contexts. If self-esteem is viewed only as an individual psychological construct, the problem is defined as residing in the individual. This purely psychological perspective conveniently overlooks the sociopolitical context of students’ lives, downplaying or denying the racism and other oppressive conditions that students experience. Self-esteem is a complicated issue that includes many variables: it does not come fully formed out of the blue, but is created in particular contexts and responds to conditions that vary from situation to situation. As a consequence, how schools and society create and perpetuate low self-esteem in children also needs to be considered. The self-esteem of students is often the result
of policies and practices in schools that devalue and reject their identities and teachers' and schools' complicity in creating negative self-esteem cannot be discounted. Nitza Hidalgo (1991) found this to be the case in research she did among high school students in an urban school. Lillian, a young woman interviewed in the study, commented, “That’s another problem I have, teachers, they are always talking about how we have no type of self-esteem or anything like that... But they’re the people that’s putting us down. That’s why our self-esteem is so low” (p. 95).

A compelling example of how poor self-concept is created can be found in Catherine Walsh’s (1991) research among Puerto Rican fourth graders in a Northeastern urban school. When she asked children in mainstream and in bilingual classes to comment in English on the picture of a young Puerto Rican man, the children’s responses focused on stereotypical characterizations (they were gang members, smoked, were dirty and lazy, and so on). When she showed the same picture to Spanish-dominant students in bilingual classrooms, their responses were totally different. Two typical answers were (p. 86), “Es puertorriqueño igual que yo” [He’s Puerto Rican just like me]; and “Habla español y respeto mucho” [He speaks Spanish and is very respectful]. In these cases, it is evident that the Spanish language helps mediate the negative images that children pick up daily about members of their group and this can help them to maintain a healthy identity.

It is not surprising that students from culturally dominated groups internalize to one degree or another some of the messages to which they are subjected about their culture, race, ethnic group, class, gender, language, or sexual orientation, among other differences. But young people are not simply passive recipients of such messages. They also actively resist negative messages through their interactions with peers, family, and school. Sometimes, their negotiations can lead to destructive outcomes. This is one way of understanding the connection that some students have with gangs or other groups, which although ultimately contrary to their best interests, can help them feel better about themselves. Families, communities, and schools have a substantial role to play in contradicting the negative messages that students are exposed to about their cultural groups, and reinforcing positive and affirming ones.

Identity and Assimilation

As soon as many Puerto Rican children step foot in schools, they are bombarded with the message that they need to change their identity. Even one’s name becomes an issue. One of the first reports on Puerto Rican students in U.S. schools, The Losers (Margolis, 1968), described this situation poignantly. In the report, which was commissioned by Aspira, the Puerto Rican educational leadership agency, Richard Margolis cited scenes he witnessed while visiting schools in New York and New Jersey, including the following: “José González, a kindergartner, has given up trying to tell his teacher his name is not Joe. It makes her angry” (p. 3). When students such as José learn at a tender age that the names they were given at birth are no longer suitable, there is little wonder that, in due course, they become Joe.
Even before Margolis’s report, an ethnographic study done in 1965 by Eugene Bucchioni documented the persistent pressure toward assimilation in schools with large Puerto Rican populations in New York City (Bucchioni, 1982). Using the classroom of a teacher he called “Miss Dwight” for detailed analysis and discussion, Bucchioni recounted numerous assimilationist practices in the curriculum content and teaching methods in her classroom: Miss Dwight admonished students not to speak Spanish; she led the students in frequent rituals honoring the United States and its heroes (reciting the morning prayer, selecting the best students to be “Mr. and Mrs. America” for the daily pledge to the flag, celebrating U.S. national holidays); in a discussion about what constitutes a nutritious diet, no Puerto Rican foods were mentioned. Moreover, in their hallway conversations, the teachers described Puerto Rican parents as uncaring and Puerto Rican students as lazy and incompetent. The cumulative effect of these beliefs and practices was to give students the message that their experiences and culture lacked inherent value.

Miss Dwight’s social studies class provides a particularly glaring example of insensitivity. As the class was learning about different kinds of neighborhoods, the children were amazed to discover that some families lived in their own homes and, unlike most of the children in the class, most families did not have to share a bathroom. When one of the children commented on this, Miss Dwight responded, “You will find, children, that many families have houses all to themselves, with sometimes two bathrooms upstairs — one for each bedroom and one on the first floor too” (p. 210). When Juan, one of the children, ventured that only very rich people lived in those places, Miss Dwight answered, “Not exactly rich, Juan. But they do work hard, and every day” (p. 210). Juan’s response that his father worked hard every day, even on Sunday, was met by Miss Dwight’s counsel to the students to be grateful for what they had. She also told them that if they studied very hard, they too could live in houses like that.

What are children to make of teachers’ pronouncements that diminish and devalue the families they love? How can they resolve the daily classroom scenes that ask them to forget who they are and where they come from? Another poignant example was described by Catherine Walsh (1991) in the research cited previously. When asked to define “Puerto Rican,” a ten-year old girl named María said, “Puerto Ricans are sad, Puerto Ricans are dirty, Puerto Ricans are lazy.” Then she reflected, “But I’m Puerto Rican, and I’m not sad, I’m not dirty or lazy, and I work real hard... Maybe all Puerto Ricans aren’t like that, right?” (p. 47).

In research with students of diverse backgrounds first published several years ago (Nieto, 2000a, first edition, 1992), I found the same ambivalence about their cultural identities. Although the students’ cultures were important to them personally and in their families, their identities were also problematic because they were rarely acknowledged or valued by their schools. Ambivalence about her cultural background was clear in the case of Marisol, a Puerto Rican student I interviewed. During our interviews, Marisol proclaimed clearly and often, “I’m proud of myself
and my culture,” and “I’m proud of being Puerto Rican.” When I asked her “Are there any differences between Puerto Rican students and others?” she responded, “No, ’cause you know you can’t say that Puerto Ricans act one way and the Whites act the other.” But she quickly added, “I know that Puerto Ricans are way, way badder than the Whites. . . . You know, the way they act and they fight” (Nieto, 2000a, p. 158).

How can we understand the discrepancy between Marisol’s avowed pride in being Puerto Rican and her apparent shame about Puerto Ricans? In some ways, it is easy to see why Marisol resolved the apparent contradiction she saw in this way. The attitudes young people develop about their culture and heritage cannot be separated from the sociopolitical context in which they live. In Marisol’s city, for example, there had been a proposal in the City Council to limit the number of Puerto Ricans coming into town, based on the argument that they were a drain on the welfare rolls. The Puerto Rican population of the city had increased greatly in the past two decades and although it did not pass, the proposal was positively received by some segments of the non–Puerto Rican population. Also, the “English only” movement found its way here at just about the time I interviewed Marisol. Municipal workers were told they could not speak Spanish on the job, and although the order was later rescinded, it created a climate of fear and alienation. Some Puerto Rican residents also mentioned seeing signs reading “No Puerto Ricans” on apartments for rent. That these incidents might profoundly affect young people is not surprising; what is surprising is that young people retain any pride at all in their culture given the chilling effect of the climate in this town.

In Miss Dwight’s classroom thirty years ago, in Marisol’s school just a decade ago, and in many classrooms today, the messages in the expressed and hidden curriculum have made it clear that everything associated with the lives of Puerto Rican youth — their names, native language, foods, life-styles, music, and even their parents — are deficient. As early as the 1960s, it was becoming clear to educators and advocates of Puerto Rican youths that the effect of attitudes and practices such as those in Miss Dwight’s classroom were disastrous for young people struggling to maintain a sense of integrity in a dominant culture hostile to them.

The scenes in today’s schools may be less obvious now than they were thirty years ago in Miss Dwight’s classroom, but distressing situations such as these are not a thing of the past. Several years ago, when Virginia Vogel Zanger (1993) interviewed successful Latino students in the Boston area, one of them related how a teacher had called him “spic” right in class. Although the teacher was later dismissed, the wound he left was deep. When we consider that the victim of this slur was an honors student with a positive self-esteem and a great deal of self-confidence, we can only imagine the devastating effect of this kind of behavior on students who do not have similar academic and psychological strengths.

Appalling examples of racism on the part of teachers or students are most evident not through individual actions of teachers and students, but through
institutional policies and practices. Evelyn Hanssen (1998), a White teacher who has reflected on this issue, writes,

> We need to remember that institutional racism typically isn’t ugly. Rather than being expressed through racial slurs, it tends to be wrapped in noble proclamations of tradition, fairness, and high standards. Rather than being a rare incident, it is woven into the fabric of our historically racist society. (p. 698)

For example, schools’ assumptions about intelligence and ability are also associated with students’ identities. Students who do not measure up to the acceptable norm — through fluency in standard English and middle-class knowledge — may be judged as less intelligent than students who demonstrate these behaviors. In the first extensive report on the Puerto Rican community by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1976), a Puerto Rican student from Connecticut testified, “A Spanish-speaking student comes into the room, immediately that person is considered dumb without even being given a chance” (p. 108). Such notions continue to haunt Puerto Rican youngsters even today. For instance, in a book on the education of Puerto Rican students in U.S. schools that I edited, Manny Caraballo, a 14 year-old student, described his schooling in an urban school today in an essay entitled “Teachers Don’t Care” (Caraballo, 2000). Manny is convinced that some of his teachers’ negative behaviors are a direct result of his being Puerto Rican.

The historic attempt by schools to rid Puerto Rican and other Latino students of the Spanish language is another institutional practice that has the effect of demeaning students’ identities. Although it was individual teachers such as Miss Dwight who carried out the practice of prohibiting the use of Spanish in the classroom, the assimilationist function of institutions such as schools made the practice almost necessary. In the recent efforts to eliminate bilingual education in many states, the pressure to speak only English is still evident in many schools. When this is the case, teachers become the frontline enforcers of institutional policies and practices that, despite their stated beneficial intentions, may result in diminishing students’ identities. As a result, bilingualism itself is singled out as the reason for student failure. This was evident in an ethnographic study by Ellen Bigler (1999) in a town she called Arnhem, an upstate New York community caught in the midst of a conflict over multicultural education. In Arnhem, the aging White community saw bilingualism quite differently from the growing Puerto Rican and Latino community. Claimed as a symbol of pride among Latinos, bilingualism was defined by White ethnics as “a threat to national unity and a key contributor to the lower socioeconomic status of the Puerto Rican community” (pp. 83-84). The benefits of maintaining the use of Spanish at home and school has been proven time and again (see, for example, research by Lourdes Díaz Soto, 1997; and Ana Celia Zentella, 1997). But the myth that bilingualism is an obstacle to academic success dies hard.

In Bigler’s study, the issue was not limited to the Spanish language, however. Students’ very identities as Puerto Ricans were viewed as limiting their futures. In
a telling example, Bigler recounts an incident where she asked the librarian in the junior high school about books on the Puerto Rican experience. The librarian replied that she didn’t believe in having such books available because “they might interfere with students’ identification as ‘American’ and with their learning English” (p. 128).

The problem with wiping out students’ identities is not just a problem of making some students feel bad, or of having them accept bad-tasting medicine that will in the long run be advantageous to them. The crux of the problem lies in the fact that students whose identities are disparaged may find it impossible to identify in a positive way with their teachers, and consequently with schools or with learning. Some may see dropping out as the only viable option. The high dropout rate of Puerto Rican students is infamous (Nieto, 2003), and student alienation cannot be discounted as one of the reasons that it exists.

**Challenging Assimilation and “Authenticity”**

What can educators do when the very identities of their students are perceived to be the major problem keeping them from succeeding in school? In the remainder of this article, I describe a number of perspectives that teachers can use to develop strategies that challenge both assimilation as the solution to students’ academic failure, and essentialized definitions of cultural “authenticity” as the only response to claiming a sense of personhood that has integrity and value. These are cultural commuting, centering pedagogies, and creating communities of learners.

**Cultural Commuting**

“Cultural commuting” is a concept I have derived from a term coined by Fr. Joseph Fitzpatrick, a sociologist/priest whose research focused on the Puerto Rican community in the United States. Fitzpatrick described Puerto Rican migration as “a process of Puerto Rican commuting” (Fitzpatrick, 1971). He used this term to illustrate the frequent comings and goings of Puerto Ricans between the island and mainland, but the term is also useful for depicting the process that Puerto Rican youngsters go through daily in negotiating their position in the United States. The concept of cultural commuting also builds on the theoretical work of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) concerning the space between cultures that she calls “borderlands/la frontera,” and that of Henry Giroux (1992) and Peter McLaren (Giroux & McLaren, 1994) on crossing sociocultural borders. In classrooms, “cultural commuting” can become an approach that challenges both assimilation and essentialism.

For Puerto Ricans, crossing cultural borders is a question of academic, social, and political survival. In a sense, Puerto Rican and other non-mainstream students cross borders every day. All Puerto Ricans — whether they live in Puerto Rico or the United States, whether they are old or young, whether they speak English or Spanish or a
combination, whether they are students or not — commute daily between the world of their families and community and the world of school, work, and the non-Puerto Rican community. Although students and teachers from the cultural mainstream also cross some borders, they inhabit the dominant cultural space, whether they know and acknowledge it or not. As a result, they seldom experience the level of alienation of Puerto Ricans and other culturally marginalized youths.

Borders are everywhere, including in schools, communities, and homes. They can be dangerous and contested terrains where culturally dominated students struggle to uphold a sense of dignity and self-worth. We have seen in the examples I’ve cited previously just how difficult these sites can be because they challenge students’ sense of personhood, and consequently, their identification with teachers and schools. But cultural, racial, and other differences are rarely discussed in classrooms because many teachers find them too unsettling and conflicted. In discussing the potential benefits of multicultural literature in schools, one of the conclusions that Bigler (1999) reached as a result of her ethnographic study of Arnhem was the following:

Cultural differences in the classroom can form the basis for the dialogic, reflective thinking that all students need to learn, but only if new stances toward texts, collaborative reflection, and sustained dialogue are actively sought in classroom literature discussions. (p. 154)

A classroom where cultural commuting is permitted and even welcomed is based on the premise that such conversations — these “new stances toward texts” — are beneficial and necessary if schools are to become places where all students believe they belong.

Borders for Puerto Rican youths are more permeable than the geographic borders between nations. Using the metaphor of “cultural commuting” means taking the stance that students and their teachers need to explore and affirm students’ emerging, hybrid, and complex identities. It means using literature and other curriculum related to students’ experiences as a starting point for expanding their world. Cultural commuting also implies that there is not just one way of being Puerto Rican, or anything else for that matter. One can be a native English-speaking Puerto Rican, or a middle-class Puerto Rican, or a Black Puerto Rican, or a studious Puerto Rican, or a musical Puerto Rican, or all of these together. Essentialized notions of what it means to be Puerto Rican are challenged when a framework of cultural commuting is used.

Centering Pedagogies

Growing up among various cultures and frames of reference related to ethnicity, race, social class, gender, and language, among other differences, Puerto Rican children in the United States form their identities within different positionalities. The healthy construction of their identities requires that Puerto Rican students have
social spaces where they can explore who they are, but this opportunity is not usually available to Puerto Rican youngsters. In most assimilationist classrooms, the identities of culturally subordinated students are simply decentered in the expectation that students will take on a more socially acceptable mainstream identity.

Carmen Rolón developed the concept of “centering pedagogies,” and she and I have elaborated it further (Nieto & Rolón, 1997) as one strategy for providing the safe spaces that Puerto Rican youngsters need to create healthy identities and a sound sense of personhood. The term “centering pedagogies” is shorthand for what in reality are three closely related processes: centering, decentering, and recentering pedagogies. That is, this approach assumes that student learning begins when students’ identities are at the center of learning. But the approach does not stop at simple cultural affirmation. It also assumes that learning that is only culture-specific is ultimately limited and limiting. A centering pedagogies approach is also based on the need to function effectively and comfortably in diverse sociocultural and sociopolitical environments. As such, the process needs to be accompanied by decentering students’ individual identities and recentering them as part of a complex heterogeneous society.

Centering pedagogies are instructional and curricular approaches that begin where students are at — experientially, cognitively, psychologically, and sociopolitically — in order to then move them beyond their own particular experiences. They are based neither on essentialist notions of identity (“You know you’re Puerto Rican if...”) nor on an assimilationist model of success (forgetting who you are in order to fit in). Biculturalism and multiculturalism become natural attitudes and behaviors in classrooms where centering pedagogies are used. Curriculum centered around a range of bicultural identities can be in place and the discontinuities that seem to exist between life in school and life in their homes and communities can be reduced. A classroom where centering pedagogies are used is characterized by the need to understand “otherness” as an integral part of life in a diverse society.

There are a number of strategies for implementing centering pedagogies with the purpose of creating positive conditions for learning among Puerto Rican students. At the institutional level, bicultural educational environments need to be created and this requires, among other things, a number of bicultural and bilingual staff. The presence of Puerto Rican teachers and administrators, for example, can have a major impact on the way that students identify with school. This was very clear in the case of the first Puerto Rican principal in a school as described by Mary Ginley (1999). Mary wrote about the effect that the principal, Dora Fuentes, had in the school:

... I noticed that the conversations in the staff room weren’t quite so negative; the things that were said at staff meetings were less outrageous, less “anti-kid” and most definitely not blatantly racist. I don’t think that all the staff had a remarkable change of heart within a year — Dora was an amazing woman but not
quite that amazing... Some might say that it wasn’t real, it didn’t come from the heart. I say it doesn’t matter; it was a first step and at least the kids were somewhat safe. (p. 33)

This is not to suggest that Puerto Rican students need to have Puerto Rican teachers or principals in their schools in order to learn. Many Puerto Rican students never have the opportunity to have Puerto Rican teachers or administrators in their schools, and they do well in spite of it. For example, Elizabeth Capifali (2000) did not have a Puerto Rican teacher until she was a doctoral student. She had largely positive experiences as a child attending New York City public schools almost 40 years ago. However, she asks:

But still I have asked myself, what was missing from my education? I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I had Puerto Ricans as teachers earlier in my education... This is quite significant for me because it wasn’t until my late forties that I had a Puerto Rican professor. The analogy I can use to explain how I felt after I was exposed to a teacher from my own culture is that of a car that is finally aligned, and drives smoothly and straight ahead. Reflecting back on my experiences, I can truly say that my education was misaligned and I was not cognizant of the incongruencies between how I felt as a student and how I perceived myself in this society. (p. 295)

Other conditions that can create a positive learning environment for Puerto Rican youngsters include curricular materials that reflect their lives and learning preferences; instruction in Spanish and English; and meaningful parent involvement. It also means accepting students’ varieties of Spanish, English, and whatever combinations of these they may use as a basis for their learning. Also at the pedagogical level, providing for academic intimacy between students and teachers is essential. This can be established through small group discussions, assignment of learning partners and peers, heterogeneous grouping, and the active participation of students in selecting and facilitating topics for discussion and study.

When all students are accepted where they are and they also accept where others are, they learn that there can be a place for everyone. School then becomes a place where students can develop their intellectual identities. The connection between personhood and learning is central to academic success. Developing an identity as a learner creates the possibility that students can acquire the academic skills to become active and productive citizens of a society they can claim as their own. This cannot happen while they remain the “other.”

**Developing a Community of Learners**

Sustaining a healthy personhood within educational environments hostile to students’ identities is nearly impossible, yet this is the situation in which many Puerto Rican youngsters find themselves in school. Cultural commuting and centering pedagogies are two approaches for challenging both assimilationist and essentialized notions of identity. A community of learners where Puerto Rican
youngsters are central and where they are encouraged to develop a sense of personhood based on all their identities — cultural, social, intellectual, and academic — is another approach for creating a more affirming learning climate. A number of school and classroom conditions are essential for developing such a community of learners. John Bruner (1996), for example, has suggested that

...if agency and esteem are central to the construction of a concept of the self, then the ordinary practices of school need to be examined with a view to what contribution they make to these two crucial ingredients of personhood. Surely the “community of learners” approach ... contributes to both. (p. 38)

What are the “ordinary practices of school” to which Bruner refers? Elsewhere (Nieto, 1999), I have suggested a number of conditions that are fundamental for creating a meaningful community of learners. In what follows, I briefly describe them as practices that are

◆ anti-racist and anti-bias;
◆ reflect an understanding of all students as having talents and strengths that can enhance their education;
◆ based on the notion that those most intimately connected with students need to be meaningfully involved in their education;
◆ based on high expectations and rigorous standards for all learners; and
◆ empowering and just.

Practices that are anti-racist and anti-bias: Being anti-racist means paying attention to the areas in which some students are favored over others, including the curriculum, choice of materials, sorting policies, and teachers’ interactions and relationships with students and their communities. Moreover, teachers’ knowledge, experiences, attitudes, and beliefs play a crucial role in promoting anti-racist and anti-bias school practices.

Educators committed to anti-racist practices need to closely examine both school policies and their own attitudes and behaviors to think about how these might be complicitous in causing academic failure. In the case of Puerto Rican students, these can include lower expectations, whether the use of Spanish is allowed and even encouraged in the classroom, and how their families are included in classroom and school activities. In many of the essays by Puerto Ricans who reflected on their experiences as students in public schools (Nieto, 2000b), low expectations were mentioned time and again as thwarting the possibility for their progress.

Beyond practices in the individual classroom, institutional power is a significant consideration for making school a more affirming place for Puerto Rican students. Racism is viewed by many people as only individual biases. But institutional racism is far more damaging than individual hurtful comments and actions.
(Weinberg, 1990; Tatum, 1992). In the case of Puerto Rican students, anti-racist and anti-bias practices at the institutional level include revisiting policies and practices that may disproportionately disadvantage some students over others. These include ability tracking, curricular and pedagogical practices, placement in special education and gifted and talented programs, outreach to families, and policies related to the use of Spanish, among others.

Practices that reflect the understanding that all students have talents and strengths that can enhance their education: Puerto Rican students are sometimes thought by their teachers to be deficient for social, cultural, or genetic reasons. As a result, sometimes even well-meaning educators approach their role in teaching Puerto Rican students with the assumption that these students bring little of value to their education. The potential inherent strengths of Puerto Rican students — among them, their cultural insights and language abilities — are overlooked when teachers believe that they need to begin educating them by doing away with their prior learning. Beginning with a more positive view of students’ strengths is in the long run not only a better policy, but also a more hopeful strategy.

Teachers who begin by, first, learning about their Puerto Rican students and then building on the talents and strengths they already have, change dramatically the nature of the teaching/learning dynamic and the climate in which education takes place. Rather than thinking that Puerto Rican students have nothing to give, the perspective that students can be active, engaged, and motivated co-constructors of learning is the result.

Practices based on the notion that those most intimately connected with students need to be meaningfully involved in their education: The people who are closest to students, and students themselves, are frequently excluded in discussions, policy implications, and implementation of school reform measures. Although schools give lip service to parent and student involvement, they are not usually organized to encourage the involvement of culturally subordinated groups, and this is certainly the case with the Puerto Rican community. Yet Jim Cummins (1996), in a review of programs that included student empowerment as a goal, concluded that students who are encouraged to develop a positive cultural identity through interactions with their teachers experience a sense of control over their own lives and develop the confidence and motivation to succeed academically.

One compelling example of the empowerment that can occur when those closest to students are involved in their education is the research done in a culturally heterogeneous second-grade classroom in a Springfield, Massachusetts classroom by Judith Solsken, Jo-Anne Wilson-Keenan, and Jerri Willett (1993). Their research was based on the premise that parents and other family members of children from widely diverse backgrounds can enhance their children’s learning. Although projects in which parents are invited to speak about their culture and to share food or teach youngsters particular crafts are not new, the research by Solsken,
Keenan, and Willett focused instead on how parents’ talents and skills can actually promote student learning. The researchers explained how the visits of students’ families changed the nature of the conversation in the second-grade classroom they studied. Families brought in many aspects of the children’s language and lives that had not previously had a place in the classroom, and all the students, as well as the teacher, were enriched as a result.

*Practices that are based on high expectations and rigorous standards for all learners:* Like students of other backgrounds, many Puerto Rican youngsters struggle on a daily basis with tremendous odds, not only in their school lives, but also for their very existence. These odds include personal, family, and social problems such as poverty, racism, violence, drug abuse, and lack of health care and appropriate housing. Add to this the fact that the very identities of Puerto Rican students, including their social class, race, ethnicity, and native language, are considered by some educators to be a barrier to their learning, and the situation might seem hopeless for expecting these students to do well in school.

But because schools in our society have historically been expected to provide an equal and equitable education for all students, not just for those who are White, or middle class, or those who speak English fluently, it is with even greater urgency that the academic learning of Puerto Rican students needs to be supported. If schools are purposeful about giving all students more options in life, particularly students such as Puerto Ricans who have been denied the necessary resources with which to access these options, then we need to begin with the assumption that they are academically able, individually and as a group.

*Practices that are empowering and just:* When educational practices are thought of simply as bureaucratic procedures or technical processes, then crucial questions related to social justice and student empowerment are swept aside. But practices that have as their primary goal the improvement of learning for all students need to concern more than just technical matters.

Classroom and school practices that have as their underlying focus both the empowerment of students and the creation of socially just learning environments are based on the view that critical reflection and analysis are fundamental to the development and maintenance of a democratic society. Without this perspective, learning can be defined as simply “banking education” (Freire, 1970), or as the depositing of knowledge into otherwise empty receptacles. But if we expect schools to be living laboratories for democracy, where all students know that they are worthy and capable of learning and where they develop a social awareness and responsibility to their various communities, then classrooms and schools need to become just and empowering environments for all students.

In the case of Puerto Rican students, it is not simply saying a few words in Spanish or letting students work in groups that will transform the classroom and school into empowering and just spaces. Rather, it is placing social justice at the
center of learning so that all classroom and school policies and practices are critically analyzed. This means asking what I call “profoundly multicultural questions” (Nieto, 2002/2003), that is, questions that get at the heart of access and equity. This might include such questions as: are the school’s disciplinary policies fair? who gets placed in gifted and talented programs? in special education? are students encouraged to speak and maintain Spanish? is there a bilingual program? if so, is it in the basement? does the curriculum reflect different perspectives and realities? is the pedagogy designed with an eye toward how all students best learn? are Puerto Rican families encouraged to participate in the education of their children?

**Conclusion**

Personhood is not just an individual psychological construct. Rather, it emerges from the social, cultural, and sociopolitical context in which individuals live and develop. Having a healthy sense of personhood cannot be separated from the various environments in which Puerto Rican youngsters exist. This is true for all young people. As Manuel, a Cape Verdean youngster who was interviewed for previous research I did with young people (Nieto, 2000a), wisely stated, “If you don’t know a student, there’s no way to influence him. If you don’t know his background, there’s no way you are going to get in touch with him. There’s no way you’re going to influence him if you don’t know where he’s been” (p. 212).

If teachers are to influence their Puerto Rican students to see themselves as effective learners, they need to know where they’ve been, as Manuel suggests. This means creating environments where Puerto Rican youngsters develop identities rooted in their cultural and family experiences as well as in their academic endeavors. At present, the school identities of Puerto Rican youngsters are not, for the most part, grounded in a strong sense of personhood. But the situation can be remedied. All teachers of all backgrounds can, and indeed must, go about creating such environments if Puerto Rican youths are to develop a sense of worth concerning both their identities and their abilities.

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Sonia Nieto is Professor of Education, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She has been a teacher for 35 years, teaching students at all levels from elementary grades through graduate school. Her research focuses on multicultural education, the education of Latinos, immigrants, and other culturally and linguistically diverse students, and Puerto Rican children’s literature. Her books include *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education* (4th ed., 2004), *The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities* (1999), *Puerto Rican Students in U.S. Schools*, an edited volume (2000), and *What Keeps Teachers Going?* (2003). She has also published numerous book chapters and articles in such journals as *Educational Forum*, *The Harvard Educational Review*, *Multicultural Education*, and *Theory into Practice*. She serves on several national advisory boards that focus on educational equity and social justice, including Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO) and Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR). She has received many awards for her advocacy and activism, including the 1989 *Human and Civil Rights Award* from the Massachusetts Teachers Association, the 1995 Drylongso Award for Anti-Racist Activists from Community Change in Boston, the 1996 Teacher of the Year Award from the Hispanic Educators of Massachusetts, and the 1997 *Multicultural Educator of the Year Award* from NAME, the National Association for Multicultural Education. She was an Annenberg Institute Senior Fellow (1998-2000) and she received an honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters from Lesley College in Cambridge, Massachusetts in May, 1999. In June, 2000, she was awarded a month-long residency at the Bellagio Center in Italy. She is married to Angel Nieto, a former teacher and author of children’s books, and they have two daughters and six grandchildren.