

EDUC 784 - Critical Multicultural Children's Literature and the Puerto Rican Community
Fall 2004 – Spring 2005
Wednesdays, 3:30 – 6:30 PM
Holyoke Public Schools

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Children's literature is a powerful way to explore sociopolitical issues, both in the curriculum and outside the school's doors. For instance, the growing diversity in our nation and schools is becoming more evident in children's literature as multicultural children's literature becomes more available. Issues of race, social class, gender, privilege, and injustice are the subject of a growing number of books, from picture books to biography, fiction to nonfiction. At the same time, some communities are still nearly invisible in what one children's literature scholar many years ago called "the all-white world of children's books" (Larrick, 1965). Although this is no longer completely true, some segments of our population are still underrepresented in children's stories. To cite one case: although Latinos represent more than 12% of the U.S. population, information compiled by the Cooperative Children's Book Center in 2002 indicates that out of the 5,000 new titles published that year, the Center reviewed 3,100 books, of which 94 books were by and/or about Latinos/as, Latino/a writers and illustrators, with only 48 books created by Latino artists.

In Holyoke, Puerto Rican and other Latino children make up about 70% of the schools' population, yet it is sometimes difficult for teachers to locate children's literature that reflects the Puerto Rican and Latino experience. Equally important, teachers need to know more about the cultural backgrounds of the students they teach in order to best serve them. Using children's literature to engage students and to connect families and communities to classrooms and schools is one important way to do this. In this course, we plan to address all these issues.

Consequently, the purpose of this course is to use children's literature (K-8) that focuses on the Puerto Rican and Latino communities to explore the historical, philosophical, sociocultural, sociopolitical, and pedagogical foundations of multicultural education. Children's literature will be used throughout the course as a way to understand the Puerto Rican experience in the United States, as a model for incorporating issues of language, culture, and power into the curriculum, and as a way to reach out to the community. The goals of the course are:

1. To examine from different theoretical and ideological perspectives the nature of pluralism and intergroup relations in U.S. society in order to elucidate the basic causes and complex dynamics of racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination and intergroup conflict.
2. To study the historical and contemporary experiences and perspectives of Puerto Ricans in the

United States, and to reexamine U.S. history, culture, and institutions through these lenses.

3. To analyze the influence of sociocultural and sociopolitical variables such as race, ethnicity, gender, and social class background on the learning of Puerto Rican/Latino and other ELL students, and to gain an understanding of how the structures, policies, and practices of schools can serve to maintain, perpetuate, or challenge unequal power relations.

4. To develop a sound philosophical and pedagogical rationale for multicultural education through the exploration of children's literature; to experiment with various strategies for using such literature in the curriculum; and to explore and use effective approaches for involving parents and family members in the education of their children through the use of children's literature.

COURSE FORMAT

The course has been designed to be flexible in structure. Much of the discussion and analysis in class will revolve around children's books, most of which are about the Puerto Rican/Latino experience. Each of the topics in the corresponding Course Schedule will be approached through children's literature, with the books providing a context to examine these issues. Many children's books will be available so that you can use them for your projects.

READINGS

In addition to the children's books, you will be reading articles and book chapters related to the topics to be discussed each week. The course pack will be available through the ereserves (electronic reserve) site of the W.E.B. DuBois Library at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Log on to their address at <http://ereserves.library.umass.edu/>. Click on "Faculty Information, Forms and Handouts," to retrieve an instruction sheet for students. The password for this course is "**children**" (all in lowercase letters).

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Besides reading the children's books and the readings in the course packet, you will be responsible for the following:

- Double Entry Journal
- Family Literacy History Project
- Critical Multicultural Analysis of Selected Children's Books
- Gathering Stories from Children and Families and Collaboratively Writing a Children's Book for Classroom Use

- Classroom Action Plan

Each will be briefly described below, but we will also discuss them in more detail during class.

Double Entry Journal

The double entry journal is a tool for critical and creative thinking. It is one in which you will keep separate entries related to the same topic, idea, event, activity, observation, etc. Any notebook can become double-entry pages by drawing in a line down the middle of each page from top to bottom to create two columns. You begin by writing down notes from class sessions, reports of information, summaries of readings or events, quotations, sketches, and/or observations on the left-hand column. In the right-hand column, directly opposite these entries, you make second entries—personal observations, analyses, interpretations, pose questions, comments, and probe further.

This journal will become a resource for your learning in this course. You will use it as a catchall for all of your course experiences. We will collect it mid-semester (February 2) and at the end of the semester as a way to check into your process and contribute to your thinking. We encourage you to develop this habit because this journal will provide seeds for all of the writing in this course.

The advantages of this type of journal or notebook are:

- It encourages you to make connections between your own knowledge and information that is new to you.
- It offers you a space to rethink and reassess an idea or new information. It encourages you to interpret and analyze.
- It links reading, writing, listening, speaking, and thinking.

Family Literacy History Project

This project is an invitation for you to explore and think about the function literacy and children's stories and books play in your family's life, as well as how your family literacy history might influence how you teach reading, writing, and children's literature. Reflecting on our own personal and family literacy histories is essential to the process of becoming critical multicultural teachers, lifelong processes. This project will be conducted in three steps:

- in-class interview with a partner
- interview with a family member(s)
- analysis of both experiences

We will supply guiding questions for each step.

This project should synthesize your in-class learning, your own recollections, family

interview(s), and your critical analysis. Your final product should not read like three separate papers but one, coherent, thoughtful four- to six-page paper. This project is due on January 19.

Critical Multicultural Analysis of Selected Children's Books

You will do critical multicultural analyses of three children's books against the course readings and class discussions. Your books should draw from an array of genres and be about the Puerto Rican and/or Latino experience. Please follow these guidelines to complete each analysis and use questions as placeholders for areas of uncertainty. Each analysis will be approximately three pages long, beginning with a story synopsis.

- **Initial Reading:** Read the book first for an overall impression. How did the book make you feel? What were the prevalent cultural themes? What content was confusing? Reread the book, annotating it in the margins as a way to "talk back" at the text. (Post Its™ are a great way to keep track of this thinking.) Ask questions, point out anything that seems out of place, puzzling, or not accurate or authentic.
- **Point of View:** What is the point of view? Who is telling the story? How is the story being told? Whose story is this? Who sees? Who is observed?
- **Social Processes Among the Characters:** How is power exercised? Who has agency? Who resists and challenges domination and collusion? Who speaks and who is silenced? Who acts? and who is acted upon? Who waits? What possibilities for being in the world are offered by the text? For example, what possibilities are offered to be a young Latina?
- **Ending:** How did the writer close the story? What are the assumptions imbedded in this closure? Is there a space for imagining different outcomes or is the ending fixed?
- **Illustrations:** If your text has illustrations, how does the text and images work together? How is power represented in the illustrations?
- **Genre:** What is the genre? How does the genre shape how the story is told and your expectations as the reader? How does the genre organize the reader's perceptions of the reality created by the story?
- **Sociopolitical Context:** What are the cultural themes imbedded in the work? What cultural statements [in literary and nonliterary texts] is this book responding to? (Myers, 1988) What is the sociopolitical situation of the characters? What dominant messages about race, gender, and class are imbedded in the children's book and its reviews? (Locate book reviews through the following W.E.B. Dubois Library Website. Go to the University's Website. Click on "Libraries." Click on "Databases." Click on "Comprehensive Children's Literature Database." Enter each book title.)
- **Historical Context:** How has the Puerto Rican and Latino experience been rendered in children's literature over time? Since these texts are social transcripts

of U.S. power relations, what are the prevailing dominant ideologies about class, race, and gender translated in the texts? When relevant, use the historical information provided in the course pack.

These critical multicultural analyses will be due on January 26, February 16, and March 2.

Gathering Stories from Children and Families and Collaboratively Writing a Children's Book for Classroom Use

As teachers, we can intervene in the skewed perspective of society rendered by children's books. By inviting our children and families to help publish books about their lived experiences we can affirm their stories: They have stories to tell. In addition, gathering and publishing stories for classroom use shows children that people are involved in constructing children's books. This project lets children and their families into this process of story making, thus affirming children and families' ways with language. Children come to see themselves as authors and illustrators, becoming conscious of the power of their own words and images.

1. Gathering Stories Through Families

Although it is sometimes difficult to connect with families because of their busy schedules, here are some ways to try to gather their stories, rhymes, tongue twisters, poetry, and other genres:

- **Connecting before and after school**

When family members (parents, grandparents, guardians, older siblings) bring children to school in the morning or pick them up after school, try to set aside a few minutes to chat with them and ask if they can send in – or tell – their children family stories or treasured folktales or poems to share with the class.

- **Borrowing photo albums and other family items**

Send a note home to families asking them to send in photographs of their child as a baby, along with a story they can share. Also, family stories based on the family's migration, their experiences in Puerto Rico or other countries, and their experiences in other places in the United States can be told through family photographs.

- **Inviting family members to school**

Set aside time in the week for family visits, and invite families to come to the class to share favorite stories, or poems they learned in childhood. These can be audio or videotaped and later transcribed to be used as the basis for stories.

- **If feasible, lending children tape recorders or giving them disposable cameras**

Collecting family stories through audiotaping or photographs is another creative way to gather stories. We may be able to provide some disposable cameras; stay tuned!

2. Gathering Stories in the Classroom

Many stories also emerge from our daily routine and rituals: Classroom life lends itself to collecting stories. Just listen to children's interactions with each other, and you'll spot those stories. Modeling the joy of storytelling for your students by telling childhood stories, folklore, rhymes, and the like, can also contribute to this process. Writing down stories is one way to document their development. Here are some supportive ways to work with children in the process of telling and preserving stories:

- Dictation

Getting started: Ask children simple leading questions, such as: "How does your story about these drawings or photographs begin?" "What happened when you...?"

Dictating: Ask children to tell you their stories about their daily activities at home and within their communities, and write it down.

Echoing: As children dictate their stories, you repeat their words while writing them down.

Rereading: Sometimes children can't think of what to say next. Rereading what was said up to that point could give them a new idea.

Reiteration: You repeat what children have said without writing it down, to ask if you have heard the words correctly. You might ask: "Is that what you said?"

Older children can be invited to write down their classmates' stories.

- Writing

Children can write stories from photographs or drawings, drama, collected playground games and rhymes, family storytelling, and the like.

Experiment with different genres. For example, publish a nonfiction book about city gardening or a collection of child-generated poetry.

Invite children into the writing process. Let them jot down their initial ideas without worrying about spelling and grammar. Invented spelling and drawing can play key roles in the initial stages of writing. Guide children through multiple drafts.

Experiment with multiple ways of publishing books. Your children's book will be due on March 16.

Action Plan

Because we believe that all knowledge should be characterized by *praxis* (i.e., using theory to illuminate practice and vice-versa), as a final class project we want you to develop an “Action Plan” based on your learning and your work in this course. For your action plan, please include the following:

Describe Your New Understandings

Summarize what you learned and how this learning has influenced your classroom practice

Define Your Action Plan

These are some of the questions you should focus on in your Action Plan:

- What do you intend to do and why?
- What goals do you hope to accomplish through this action plan?
- What specific activities will you include?
- How will your classroom practice change as a result?
- How will family and community resources be included?
- How is your plan related to multicultural children’s literature?
- What is your timeline?

Present Your Project In Class

Consider multiple ways (e.g., poster, video clip, PowerPoint presentation, mini-lecture, simulation, visual representations, etc.) to present your Action Plans at the end of the semester on March 23 and March 30. (We will assign dates early in the course).

GRADING

The course is offered as a PASS/FAIL. To receive a pass, you are expected to complete all course assignments. Please consult the Course Schedule to see when particular assignments are due. We discourage you from taking an INCOMPLETE except in emergency situations.

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