

# VOICES



## Bilingual Youth Constructing and Defending Their Identities across Borders, a Binational Study of Puerto Rican Circular Migrant Students

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This article summarizes an interview-based investigation of Puerto Rican circular migrant students (CMSs) between Puerto Rico and the Northeastern United States. The goals of the study were (1) to identify the perceptions of Puerto Rican CMSs related to the reasons for migration (M) and circular migration (CM), and (2) to identify their perceptions of how CM affects their social and academic lives.

The study was binational in scope, involving CMSs from Puerto Rico as well as from the Northeastern region of the United States. Two Internet-based global learning networks, De Orilla a Orilla (From Shore to Shore) and I\*EARN (International Education and Resource Network (Cummins & Sayers, 1997), collaborated in the study. Kristin Brown also conducted dissertation research using a participatory research model (Brown, 1999).

The data collected consisted of structured interviews (Seidman, 1991), that is, audio-taped or video-taped dialogues between a student and a familiar teacher that focused on the student's "educational autobiography." Interviews were conducted in the preferred language of the student.

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Transcriptions were jointly coded and analyzed thematically (Denzin & Lincoln 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) by participating U.S. and Puerto Rican teachers attending a six-week summer conference at the University of Puerto Rico-Rio Piedras. These teachers also designed a survey based on their analyses of the student interviews that was administered to other circular migrant students in Puerto Rico and the Northeastern United States.

The purpose of this study was to amplify the voices of Puerto Rican circular migrant students and gain much-needed insight into the perceptions, feelings, opinions, positions, and world views of this growing group. At the time that this study was conducted there were no existing binational studies of Puerto Rican circular migrant students, though ground-breaking discussions of the topic (Meléndez 1993; Rivera-Medina 1984) have been published.

The newness of such research is illustrated by the few studies that have focused on the voices of Puerto Rican students, both on the island of Puerto Rico or the mainland United States (Nieto, 1992; Rivera-Medina, 1984). It was hoped that the new knowledge generated by the present study would add to the limited existing body of literature regarding this group and to help education and student support professionals to ease the transitions that this group undergoes.

The findings of this study have impli-

cations for designing effective pedagogy and support services with other groups that also undergo similar continual circular migrations across national borders and between states.

### Participants

Participants in this research were students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. They were all of Puerto Rican descent except for one student from the Dominican Republic. There were a total of seventeen students, eleven residing in the northeast United States and six residing in Puerto Rico. All of the students had a minimum of one full migration circle (i.e., starting in the U.S., moving to P.R., and moving back to the U.S., or vice versa). In the case of the 16 Puerto Rican students who are U.S. citizens at birth owing to United States occupation of the island nation in 1898 and subsequent U.S. control of the political system, the high rates of student mobility took place in a context of unrestricted travel to and from the "mainland."

A discussion of two interviews follows, that of a student interviewed in the United States and another interviewed in Puerto Rico. The article then continues with a presentation of the themes identified by the interviewing teachers in the United States and Puerto Rico. Finally, implications are

discussed for improving education and social support services for circular migrant students.

## **Norma**

### **Interviewed in the United States**

Norma was a 17-year old, ascending 11<sup>th</sup> grade, at the time of this investigation. By the second interview she was a senior in high school. She was born in the northeastern United States. She lived with her maternal grandparents and her twin brother. Her mother died when she and her brother were born. She has no contact with her father. In addition, she had four older brothers with whom she does not live. She went to school in the United States from kindergarten to sixth grade. She went to Puerto Rico from sixth to eighth grade and came back to the same northeast area from ninth to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Her complexion is brown and would be considered “trigueña” or brunet by Puerto Rican standards, but black by American standards.

The first interview took place in a small office within the library area in her high school. The second interview took place in the researcher’s home with his wife videotaping. Norma came in with a great disposition; however, at the beginning of the first interview she seemed timid and avoided eye contact, but eventually she warmed up and engaged in a lively dialogue. She became effervescent while discussing her explanation of what it is to be Puerto Rican.

During her discussion her own definition of a Puerto Rican seemed to contradict her nationality or cultural identity. The dialogue made her question her definitions of Puerto Rican and ultimately led her to create a new construct in order to include herself in this definition. During her dialogue Norma shared that she wanted to finish her high school studies in the U.S. She expressed that when she went back to Puerto Rico it was her grandparents’ decision because they wanted to get away from the cold weather. When her grandparents decided to return to the United States, they did so because some of her grandmother’s sons had problems. During the interview Norma referred to her as grandmother and mother interchangeably, because this is the only mother she has known.

When asked about her language preference, she said both English and Spanish. To that effect, this researcher asked if she wanted the interview to be in Spanish or English, and she replied Spanish. When asked about her school system preference she answered the United States, because she felt that school was more difficult in

Puerto Rico. In addition, due to the fact that she had spent more time in the U.S. than in Puerto Rico, she is used to U.S. schools. Another area identified by Norma was the electives and additional course availability in her school in the U.S. and the lack of such courses on the island. She talked about typing, French, Italian, and physical education with a pool and better physical plant overall.

She emphasized what she didn’t like in a teacher and gave specific examples of these teachers. She spoke to the issue of teachers yelling at her or the class saying that she felt “mal” [bad], adding “me abochorno” [I feel ashamed] in front of the other students. She was passionate about telling stories of teachers whom she asked for help and kept walking without even acknowledging her. She felt anger and added that if she were a teacher she would treat the students well and help them and respect them so that they would respect her too. She shared how she felt saying ‘Como que uno no cabe. Como que uno está demás’ [Like one doesn’t fit in. Like one doesn’t belong].

She also spoke at length about the teachers she liked and why she liked them. For Norma, the most important thing was to feel that the teacher had a germane interest in helping her and to be “cheers” [roughly translated to be really nice or extra nice]. She likes teachers who go out of their way to help students. Norma said the best teachers were the ones that treated people nicely and explained concepts to the students and kept explaining until the students got it. Another important trait in dealing with students like her seemed to be having a good sense of humor. These teachers, she said, made her feel like she belonged.

When asked if she saw herself as Puerto Rican or American, she responded that she was an American citizen but that she was Puerto Rican. “Siempre me identifico como puertorriqueña” [I always identify myself as Puerto Rican]. She believed that being bilingual was an asset. The researcher asked her to give a definition of a Puerto Rican. She answered that it was someone who was born in Puerto Rico and lived in Puerto Rico all his/her life. The researcher questioned her to that effect, since there seemed to be a contradiction between her definition and identifying herself as a Puerto Rican.

Instead of redefining herself as other than Puerto Rican, she opted to expand her construct of a Puerto Rican in order to include herself, by saying “Porque mis padres son de allá y mis hermanos mayores son de allá, los únicos que nacimos acá fuimos yo

y mi hermano pequeño” [Because my parents are from there, my older siblings are from there, the only ones that were born here were me and my younger brother]. For Norma, her family roots then became the identity-defining factor rather than the place of birth and where they lived. At one point in the dialogue she said that Puerto Ricans were “gente...importante” [people...important people].

Norma had aspirations to become a pediatric nurse and work in the same northeastern U.S. town where she was born and went to school. She mentioned that some teachers had said to her that she had a pleasant demeanor and agreeable personality that would go well with her choice of career. At the time her grandparents had assured her that they would stay in the U.S. until she finished high school but offered no promises after that, leaving the door open for them to go back to Puerto Rico. Again the reason given was that the cold weather is bad for them health-wise.

When asked if she would go back to Puerto Rico or stay in the U.S. to go to college she answered that she would stay but also try to remain in touch with her grandparents. Her demeanor then changed to one of sadness, to which the researcher asked if it was a hard decision and she assented with a nod of her head. She responded the same way to the question of missing her grandparents and again agreed, nodding.

## **Nerry**

### **Interviewed in Puerto Rico**

Nerry was a 10-year old fifth grade student. She lived with her parents and two older sisters. She was born in Puerto Rico and attended first and second grades on the island. She then went to the southeast United States for third grade. The reason for this move was because her father went there to write a book. When he finished they returned to Puerto Rico for fourth grade.

When they returned to the island, their house in the metropolitan area was not yet ready so they temporarily went back to the part of the island from which they had come. In Puerto Rico she lived in the rural setting first and then moved to a major metropolitan area.

During the first two years in school Nerry had good grades. She had a good experience in the United States, and by her account she had a 4.0 average in all classes. She did not attend the bilingual program because her mother was opposed to it. All of her classes were in English, but she also had an English as a Second

Language class with three other children who did not speak English.

She expressed that she didn't like the school in the United States. "Allí no me querían. Los niños no me hablaban ni jugaban conmigo" [They didn't want me there. The kids didn't talk to me or play with me.] In her perception the students did not like her or approach her because she was Puerto Rican and spoke Spanish. She added, "Mi inglés no era como de ellos. Allí no quieren a los hablan español" [My English was not as good as theirs. There the people that speak Spanish are not liked.]

Nerry did not have friends at school, but had plenty of friends in her neighborhood that spoke Spanish. She was asked if she would ever want to go back to that part of the U.S. and she emphatically said that she would never. Upon her return to Puerto Rico she had a good experience and she mentioned that the students treated her nicely and that they were all her friends. She struggled with reading Spanish at the beginning for a little while for she had forgotten how to read well. She picked it up quickly. At the end of the year the principal gave her an award for the highest average in the school of 3.90. At the beginning the students didn't remember her from first and second grade because she had changed and developed. After she showed her friends an old photograph, they all seemed to remember her. She found it was funny that they thought she was a different person.

She was asked if she felt differently regarding her cultural or national identity depending on where she was living. "Siempre me siento puertorriqueña. Yo nací en Puerto Rico y hablo español" [I always feel Puerto Rican. I was born in Puerto Rico and I speak Spanish.] She disliked being asked if she feels Puerto Rican or American. It was her belief that people knew that she was Puerto Rican and called her American just to bother her. She felt intelligent because she knew English, "like I am very important."

In her perception she felt that students didn't trust her in the United States. They had groups or cliques that were divided by nationality, such as African Americans, Chinese, and others. She had no Puerto Rican group and no other group would accept her. When speaking about the meaning of a Puerto Rican she said it was a person who had been born in Puerto Rico. However, if that person was born in the United States, "si sus papas son puertorriqueños, él es puertorriqueño también" [If his parents are Puerto Rican, he is Puerto Rican also.] She said that even if the person didn't speak Spanish,

but their parents were Puerto Rican, they would be considered Puerto Rican.

She gave an example of some of her cousins who did not speak Spanish, but they would tell everyone that they were Puerto Rican. "Pero cuando crezcan tienen que hablar español porque nadie le va a creer que son puertorriqueños, si no están con su mamá y papá que hablen español con la gente" [But when they grow up they have to speak Spanish because no one will believe that they are Puerto Rican unless they are with their parents who would speak Spanish with the people.]

She added that there were Puerto Ricans that were born in other countries such as Mexico or Spain. In contrast she said that an American was a person whose parents were American and that only spoke English. She said that such a person would continue to be an American even if he were born in Puerto Rico.

In comparing American and Puerto Rican schools, Nerry expressed that she liked Puerto Rican schools better. "Mis maestros me quieren mucho. Me gusta como me enseñan las cosas. Tienen paciencia y nunca se molestan cuando hay que explicar algo muchas veces. Los maestros de aquí se ríen con uno. Aquellos siempre estaban bien serios todo el tiempo" [My teachers love me very much. I like the way they teach me things. They have patience and they are never bothered when they have to explain something several times. The teachers here laugh with you. The other ones were serious all the time.]

Academically speaking she was of the opinion that the schools were equal. However, she pointed out a major difference in that the teachers in the United States didn't treat her well. In her words, "aquellos maestros no me trataban bien." She explained that they almost never looked at her directly and they never called on her to go to the blackboard. In her perception this happened because she was Puerto Rican. She described that they always picked the American kids to answer questions and go to the blackboard.

### Thematic Coding

Seven themes were identified by participating teacher-researchers at the six-week conference held at the University of Puerto Rico.

### Findings

1. *Lack of control by students*: Circular migrant students in this study felt that they had little control over the transitions in their lives.

2. *Bicultural Identities*: CMSs' cultural identities may vary over time and different situations. Those living in the U.S. tended to feel "more Puerto Rican" than American. Those living in Puerto Rico tend to feel American.

3. *Choque cultural* (Culture Shock): CMSs experienced a feeling of shock (choque cultural) when they arrived in the new place.

4. *Linguistic obstacles*: CMSs faced difficulties understanding English upon their arrival to the U.S. and Spanish upon arrival to Puerto Rico. They also faced linguistic prejudice against speakers of Spanish in the U.S. and against speakers of English in Puerto Rico.

5. *Prejudice, Racism, Rejection, and Stereotypes*: CMSs felt sadness and anger at the rejection and discrimination they encountered both on the mainland and the island.

6. *Unresponsive Schools*: In the views of CMSs, neither the U.S. nor the Puerto Rican school system adapted well to their needs. The Puerto Rican system seemed to show more care to the psychological well-being of the students, though students were held back a grade more often upon migrating to Puerto Rico.

7. *Hope and Understanding*: Although some of the CMSs' personal experiences tended to be negative, they believed there could be positive experiences associated with being bilingual and bicultural.

### Recommendations

The schools that served the CMSs in this study proved to be ill-equipped to fulfill the students' needs. There is a sense of urgency to respond to the needs of this growing group, as evidenced within the context of these reflective dialogues. The school systems in Puerto Rico and the United States should develop sound strategies in order to deal with the needs of these students.

Special attention to emotional needs is needed in order to engage these students and alleviate their feelings of marginalization. At the same time, special attention should be paid to the stories of resiliency and success brought to light by these dialogues. The schools should focus on the strengths of the students and also involve the parents in this process.

### Specific Recommendations

◆ For CMS to have a greater chance at succeeding academically, school practices

on both the island and the mainland need to be reevaluated.

◆ There is a need for adequate counseling assistance for migrant students during transitional periods.

◆ Special attention to the emotional needs of CMS is needed in order to engage these students and alleviate their feelings of marginalization.

◆ Schools should focus on the strengths of CMS and involve parents in this process.

◆ Schools should employ authentic assessment practices such as portfolios that CMS can take with them when they move.

◆ Schools should establish strong dual language programs that emphasize Language 1 maintenance and Language 2 development.

◆ Schools need to be proactive in countering stereotypes and prejudice against newcomers.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions in English

1. How many times have you moved between Puerto Rico and the mainland United States?
2. Tell me some of the reasons for moving.
3. Did you have any say in the decision(s) to move?
4. Is there a difference in living in Puerto Rico or the mainland United States?
5. Has circular migration affected your social life in any way? If so, how?
6. How have your friendships been affected by your moving?
7. Socially, what things do you find in Puerto Rico that you don't find in the mainland United States?
8. Socially, what things do you find in the mainland United States that you don't find in Puerto Rico?
9. Has circular migration affected your academic life in any way? If so, how?
10. Academically, what things do you find in Puerto Rico that you don't find in the mainland United States?
11. Academically, what things do you find in the mainland United States that you don't find in Puerto Rico?

12. Do you consider yourself Puerto Rican or American?

13. Is there anything that you would like to add?

### Interview Questions in Spanish

1. ¿Cuántas veces te has mudado entre Puerto Rico y los Estados Unidos?
2. Dime alguna de las razones para mudarte.
3. ¿Tuviste alguna influencia en la decisión de mudarse?
4. ¿Existe alguna diferencia en vivir en Puerto Rico ó en Estados Unidos?
5. ¿Ha afectado la migración circular tu vida social de alguna manera? ¿Cómo, si sí?
6. ¿Cómo las mudanzas han afectado tus amistades?
7. Socialmente hablando. ¿Qué cosas encuentras en Puerto Rico que no encuentras en Estados Unidos?
8. Socialmente hablando. ¿Qué cosas encuentras en Estados Unidos que no encuentras en Puerto Rico?
9. ¿Há afectado la migración circular tu vida académica de alguna manera? ¿Cómo, si sí?
10. Académicamente hablando. ¿Qué cosas encuentras in Puerto Rico que no encuentras en Estados Unidos?
11. Académicamente hablando. ¿Qué cosas encuentras en Estados Unidos que no encuentras en Puerto Rico?
12. ¿Como te consideras, como Puertorriqueño o Americano?
13. ¿Hay algo que quieras añadir?