

Gender perspectives in Puerto Rican childhood education

March 4 2015, by Nardy Baeza Bickel

For the last few weeks, Puerto Rico's streets have seen protesters for and against the incorporation of 'perspectivas de género' or gender perspectives in the public schools' curriculum.

Proponents say the curriculum would help promote [gender equity](#) and prevent [domestic violence](#) as well as gender stereotyping in the island where last year 12,000 cases of domestic violence were reported. Retractors fear the curriculum would force children to learn about homosexuality in ways they disagree with.

Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, director of the Latina/o Studies Program at the University of Michigan, has been following the issue closely. Born and raised in Puerto Rico, La Fountain-Stokes authored "Queer Ricans: Cultures and Sexualities in the Diaspora," a collection of essays on migration and sexuality.

La Fountain-Stokes will be one of several U-M faculty participating in the "Negotiating Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in a New Global Age" symposium March 6-7. The event, organized by U-M and the Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras will take place at UPR. At least six U-M students and alumni will participate as panelists in the two-day event, the first in a series of annual conferences the universities expect to collaborate on.

La Fountain-Stokes discussed the issue with U-M's Portal en Español:

Q: What's "gender perspective" and why are legislators trying to make it part of the curriculum?

La Fountain-Stokes: "Perspectiva de género" (gender analysis) is the awareness of the social implications of gender at the individual and collective level. Specifically, how one's gender (being male or female, a man or a woman) affects a person's experiences at all levels, including in contexts of violence, inequality and discrimination. Gender analysis emphasizes multiple dimensions and variations of gender, and can include discussions of transgender experience. In Puerto Rico, gender analysis education is particularly needed given the high incidence of violence against women. Gender perspective is not sex education. It is different and it is a fallacy to confuse the two. This issue has to do with discrimination on the basis of gender, not on teaching questions of reproduction.

Q: The proposal has been rejected by conservative groups, as well as religious institutions, that have stated that it's parents, not public schools, who should educate their children on this type of issues. What is your opinion?

La Fountain-Stokes: Gender is a social phenomenon that affects citizens' rights. As such, it is the responsibility of the state to promote knowledge and education about it. The discussion of gender is not limited to religious contexts. Separation of church and state guarantees the right to discuss important matters in a public context. Parents have the liberty to educate their children in their own views and traditions but should not ban children from learning general concepts central to politics and culture in a democratic state.

Q: How does this initiative fit with what's currently taught at U.S. schools?

La Fountain-Stokes: U.S. schools have a wide range of approaches regarding the teaching and practice of [gender analysis](#) and some are more progressive than others. Debates about these issues frequently appear in the press, regarding matters such as extracurricular clubs (Gay/Straight Alliances), discrimination against transgender children, etc.

Q: What else has affected the discussion of this issue in Puerto Rico?

La Fountain-Stokes: The rise of politicians affiliated with conservative Pentecostal and evangelical churches in Puerto Rico has seriously distorted public debates about morality and civil rights. These politicians mobilize large groups that do not necessarily correspond to majoritarian viewpoints but nevertheless receive enormous media attention. Many of the traditional parties are also dominated by very conservative Catholics, who in some cases have affiliations with organizations such as Opus Dei. In this context, it is extremely difficult to get legislation on [gender](#) and sexuality approved. In spite of this, feminist and LGBT activists and sympathetic legislators work very hard to promote progressive viewpoints and laws.

Provided by University of Michigan

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