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ORAL HISTORY LAB (OHL)

University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez

Oral History Interview with Blanca Cruz Miranda

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview of Blanca Cruz Miranda conducted by Allan Cruz Pérez on March 6, 2022. This interview is part of course work done by students at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Allan: My name is Allan Cruz. I am from my apartment in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico through zoom with my aunt who I will be interviewing. Could you say your name?

Blanca: Yes, good morning, my name is Mrs. Blanca Cruz Miranda.

Allan: Do you want to share your date of birth?

Blanca: Yes, my date of birth is February 15, 1974.

Allan: Where are you from?

Blanca: I was born in the city of Bayamon Puerto Rico where I currently live.

Allan: We had agreed to talk about the situation of teachers in Puerto Rico. To start, you could say how long you have worked in the education system, and if you have worked in several schools.

Blanca: Ok, previously I had not worked in other schools because I dedicated myself to work more in commerce and sales, I was a store manager for Puerto Rican and American companies. Since 2005 I have been working for the Department of Education of Puerto Rico and this year, I am completing 17 years of service.

Allan: Did you work in several schools, or has it been just one?

Blanca: I have worked in more than 7 different schools in the educational region of Bayamon. I have worked in schools in Cataño, and Vega Alta. In Bayamon I've worked in high school, middle, pre-vocational, juvenile institutions, and elementary school where I specialized.

Allan: Could you describe more or less what the schools are like? What conditions are they in? How big are they?

Blanca: The schools vary, there are different structures, but it varies by level. The largest school I have ever worked in was a high school in Vega Alta, Escuela Iliana de Gracia. That school is a complete square, its divided by two staircases at each end, and it holds more than a thousand students. The elementary schools in the educational region of Bayamon are usually not very big because there are many schools. Holding an enrollment of approximately 200 students. The middle school with pre-vocational I worked with, used to be from 7th to 9th grades, now it changed and it's from 6th to 8th, and some reach high school senior. Basically, the biggest ones are the middle and high schools. As for the structure, since 2005 I have been working with them, basically none of the schools I have worked with has been remodeled. They are the same schools and classrooms since I studied and was a child. There is only one school, the José Antonio Davila in Bayamon. It was a middle school with prevocational, which they have already eliminated. That school became a 21st century school. I had the opportunity to see it before and after. They remodeled the school, but the facilities were not really what we expected. When the school was remodeled, they eliminated the basic windows, they put small glass windows on top, so if the A/C does not work or there is no power, as happened in María, unfortunately there is no ventilation in the classrooms. Yes, changing the structure was something nice for the students and teachers because they changed the desks for tables, and other facilities improved in that aspect, but of all the schools I have worked with, it has only happened in one. The others remain the same. They have simple changes. The one I currently work, they changed the structure of the doors and windows that were made of wood, they placed metal ones, but everything else remained the same.

Allan: We know that to be able to teach a class you must prepare and then evaluation. What would you say is a typical day as a teacher?

Blanca: Well, this is before and after. Before Maria, before the tremors, before COVID, and as it is now. I'll explain how it is now. In the case of my school, we are very committed teachers. We are teachers who work as a team, together with the principal. We try not to care about everyone's different way of thinking, for the students we try to work as a team. Our class schedule is from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. A day for us is to arrive at school at 7 in the morning. An hour before because due to the COVID protocol we do not want our students to have a lot of contact on the patio, as a precaution. So, we arrive an hour early to open the rooms and play music to set the mood. The student arrives, they go down to the school dining hall to get their breakfast. If there are too many students in the hall, they go come back and eat in the classroom. They give them a "to-go" service, a prepared tray with a bag, and they have breakfast with us. Once they have breakfast they can go down to the patio for a little while it's time to enter. In my case, I prefer to stay with them in the room, we let them talk, in order to waste time and get to know each other a little better while avoiding contact due to this COVID situation. At least in my school, which I imagine is the case in many other schools in Puerto Rico, I have many unvaccinated students. This year the student sits in a chair, and that desk where he sits is the same one that he will use all day. He is not going to be moving from room to room like other years for every hourly change of class. Now the student stays in the room and

we change from room to room every until three in the afternoon. It is a little tough because when it comes to using books or notebooks, we have to carry them. In my case, I work with the "Teams" platform, which is the one we are using in the education department, I try to download my lectures or activities for the Spanish class I am teaching. We are using half internet, because at least in our school the internet works, I teach half the class on the computer and the other part normally with exercises, notebooks, or handouts. It is a little more complicated for us, but in order to protect the student, this is the way we are working. At noon in my case, I don't go out for lunch, the student is accompanied to the dining room, he picks up his food, comes back to the classroom, and they have lunch with us in the classroom to avoid contact due to there being too many students in the dining room taking off their masks to eat , so we have a group of teachers who stay in the school attending to the students while they have lunch. Once they finish, they can go to the patio to play, or go to the library without removing their mask. So basically, we stay the whole day at school to deal with this COVID situation until three in the afternoon.

Allan: Regarding tools and materials, do the students have them or are they provided?

Blanca: The reality is that they are supposed to have materials, most of them are PAN beneficiary students and this year they gave each student \$1,000 to purchase materials, but the reality is different. Well, unfortunately when they arrive at school, some arrive without money **[PAUSE]**. Well, the reality is that the vast majority do not bring materials, and we have to provide them with it. This year the department of education gave a backpack to each student, they had almost \$80 in school supplies. What happens is that they give the packages to the students, they take them home, and those materials did not return, and they arrive without the materials. Their parents buy a box of pencils and put several in it in August, and throughout the year the reality is that they have no materials. Almost none of them have materials in the classroom because they have them at home and we have to provide them with materials.

Allan: How are the missing materials provided since they don't have them?

Blanca: Well, the teachers! We have to provide them with the material because if I have an exam or a performance task or I want to do a different activity with crayons, colored pencils, paint, they don't have it and I don't like it when the student doesn't work because they don't have the material. So, in my case I have to buy the material and I have to have a storage there in the classroom to provide it to the students. On the other hand, this year is different because of COVID. In other years I regularly had little boxes of green, red, and blue crayons, and I worked at tables, and everyone shared, but this year they prohibited us from sharing material with the student. So, a box of crayons that a student takes, I must give it to them, or I keep while it is disinfected or only that same student uses it.

Allan: I was checking data from the education department and over the last few years they have had a fairly significant reduction in enrollment in the system. Has this reduction been noticeable in the school where you work?

Blanca: It has been remarkable in all schools. But let's discuss two different realities. One was that many people in María, before and during all these situations, have had to move to the US to look for better jobs and because of their parents they have had to move from Puerto Rico. But on the other hand, the large impact of enrollment in middle and high schools, I dare say it has to do with social problems. Not so much problems with the system or the government. We have a large number of students whose parents have decided to give them "home schooling" due to security situations in the schools. When we talk about security situations we are talking about short columns, in the educational part, there are many schools without trained teachers, which is something else that we can talk about later. The schools are full of teachers, but many of the teachers are untrained. So when you find parents who have the opportunity to seek "home schooling" or are prepared, it is easier for them to stay at home or look for someone to give them that education, they are opting a lot for "home schooling", it is also happening with students who have medical conditions, or their health is compromised, they are also taking "home schooling", and there is the care-style school, it is something safer for the parent who works. On the other hand, we're seeing a pretty big uptick in middle and high schools where students are dropping out because they're being introduced to this wonderful system of finishing high school in three months. So, we have students from the age of 16, or 17, from middle school, they leave school to take fourth year and a quick technical career, but being minors they are not hired to work anywhere. That's why the universities and everyone is affected, it's a chain. Without taking into consideration the social part, students who are out of school because they don't have supervision, the department of family unfortunately can't cope. We refer cases of students with serious situations, and they do not respond until three and four months later to investigate when the student has basically either left school, or the parents took him out of school. It's a chain.

Allan: So, compared to previous years, have you seen an increase or decrease in the academic performance of students?

Blanca: Unfortunately, I see academic performance has worsened. We had a situation for two years where all the students were promoted two years in a row. Regardless of the grade they had had. The earthquakes occurred in January, students who already had "F's" in November, which is possible non-promotion of grade, did not return to school. Many did not even report to the schools because there was no way for their parents to contact us, all those students were passed. A second grader, learning to read and write, who barely knew how to read and write, is transferred to third and fourth grade, then in fourth grade they don't know how to read or write. We have the other situation, which is what is currently happening to me, I am a fourth and fifth grade Spanish teacher, we have a student who was promoted in third, promoted in fourth, now they are in fifth grade, and unfortunately, they are students who go unprepared to middle school. We have the situation of students with "A" of 4/4 points GPA, because they were taking virtual courses, but unfortunately the ones who did the work for them were the parents, and they told them what they had to do. I have many students that we have been working on all year, I have this student who is emotionally affected by fear of making decisions. For example, they had an assignment and mom or dad, or tutor, instead of explaining the assignment and helping them answer, no, it's write this, do this, color this of this color, but now the student is in the classroom and is afraid to answer an exam, is afraid

to color of a wrong color, and they ask frequently "teacher, is this good like this" or "teacher, what color should I use?" and having children in fifth grade asking what color they can paint a tree, or a landscape, and they don't dare to answer due to fear of lowering their grade and being scolded by their parents, that's another situation we are struggling with. But academically, yes, they have been affected. Our students in my school did connect virtually, our classes were very good classes and I had very good enrollment, very good support from parents, but we had the situation of having grandparents answering the children, parents doing the exams because they were virtually and now certainty in the student is the one that is well affected. But many were affected because in other schools they did not show and were still promoted. I dare say not two years, but at least a year and a half or a year they are a little behind in many things and in the emotional part as well. I see them like babies, I don't see mine prepared for a middle school. Children of 11 or 12 years old to meet children of 15 years old, as I see them, they are babies emotionally. Enrollment in my school despite these situations has increased a little. It has been maintained and has increased a little because where I am working, thank God, it is a well-committed school where, despite the fact that we had earthquakes, we were with COVID, we even arrived and had to go virtually again because they were repairing the short columns which took almost a month. But since our school has always been active and with direct communication with parents, my school really has a structure like a private school. My little school is, from the uniforms at the entrance, to the protocols, communication with parents is direct, for example I don't wait for something to happen to send a letter, we quickly call dad, write a message by email, it's a good school, active, and the school has been filled with high school children whose parents lost their job, or financially cannot pay for a private school, and we have many children who went to school, and that has maintained a fairly balanced and even enrollment.

Allan: So, what you had mentioned that academic performance has decreased, do you think that in part it has to do with the lack of educational resources provided by the department or does it have nothing to do with it.

Blanca: I think this has been a combination of everything. I think it has been a combination because when we started to teach the reality is that no one, it is very tough to say it because the educational system must be something solid, right, but I had the advantage that, by working on other things, and constantly studying, because I love it. For example, on Saturdays I go to the University of Humacao with marine biology, that is, I stay active in projects and modern technological things. But we ran into colleagues who did not know how to work with "zoom", "teams", prepare some classes and present it on a screen. The reality is that the teachers in Puerto Rico was not prepared. Never in my 17 years of service, the education department gave me a computer, trained me to teach virtual classes, nothing like that. All this was like "oops", this happened, we are going to improvise, and thank God that we teachers are experts at improvising, and we started to get into "YouTube" to look for information, to communicate. There are many pages of teachers on social networks where they are supportive and after we were prepared to give classes and do everything, then the education department began to offer us workshops, training, computers, but at first many parents and children did not know either. The fear of changes. Perhaps if we had been more prepared in the schools from the beginning. Right now, in my school there are no screens, no projectors, no speakers,

none of that exists and it has to be modernized. Not counting the internet part. The department, it must be said, has definitely failed because the money is there, the funds came, many millionaire funds came for the education department now for the COVID thing, and even so our school has not received anything different other than alcohol, wipes, or disinfectants so far. It is reality.

Allan: You mentioned that there was a delay in the reaction of the department to train teachers, during our era, between 2018 to 2020, where technology in education has been quite important. Do you think the department should have been prepared for that already, even if COVID had not happened?

Blanca: I believe that with all the millions that have been taken, all that aid, and those federal proposals, I believe that teachers, students, and parents, we are already at a time when, after what has happened, we have to be connected and we are not. Parents still don't know how to register online. That is happening to us this year. We have many parents who are from college, and they are parents who do not know how to register online, there is no one to explain them and the students are not registering themselves, it is not until June that students begin to register. School desertion, enrollment, everything is affected. It is due to the lack of information to parents. I think there is a lot to do, they have improved in some things in some aspects, but I think there is a lot to work on. Comparing education in the US with Puerto Rico, for me it is essential that the education department make that "click" and connect with social services. For example, in the United States, a child who does not come to school, there is an automated system that the parent calls, "my child cannot go" and indicates if it is due to illness. But in PR I have students with 56 absences in a semester and two months. Social services are called and that is not a priority for them. We have had students with other situations and then the parent who is perhaps not very organized, applied, or responsible, seeing social services does not do anything, the parent does not care. They have that little game that he can be late, in a month he can be absent 8 times, I go on a cruise the whole week without an excuse. That parent's responsibility is getting worse and worse. The commitment to do homework, check notebooks, sign, call the school, visit, write, that does not happen.

Allan: There is a combination with parent education from the department.

Blanca: Well, in my school there is an enrollment of 200 students, a workshop for parents was given for orientation, and only 1 of 200 or so students attended.

Allan: Do you think that in part that has to do with the department, or does it have to do more with the social part in the students' home?

Blanca: I think it is a combination of both. Because if we as a department work on some things and are referred, but there is no commitment on the part of social services, if there are no consequences for the bad things we do, or doing bad things, then it gets worse and worse, we have girls having boys and that's where we continue. It's very tough, we have to work with what we have and stay positive with what we have.

Allan: Additionally, one of the biggest things we've seen in the news recently, and cause for protest, is the pay that teachers receive. As for what the department pays as teachers' salaries, do you think it's enough to live in Puerto Rico?

Blanca: No! I can't tell you yes because no. Unfortunately, I started with \$1,500 as a teacher, currently I am at \$2,016. When I started in 2005, it was signed so that each year there was a \$25 increase that they were going to give us, with a few steps, the same if we studied for a master's degree, the teaching career would compensate us if we took training, there were payments, in the case. For example, I receive students from the university, before they gave us some bonuses from the same university, but I don't know what has happened that lately there is nothing. I have been with the same salary for more than 10 or 11 years. From that salary I have to pay almost \$500 for the medical insurance, since we are the government employees who have the least contributions for the medical plan, and because we have a family medical insurance. I am also dealing with a health condition of mine, and I cannot risk leaving the medical insurance. Well, unfortunately, my biweekly leftover salary is \$616. In other words, \$1,200 a month where any government employee including my daughters, any government employee being an office worker earns more than me without studies, with a high school diploma. We constantly spend time studying, training, we go on Saturdays and stay up late, not considering painting the rooms, cleaning, that's part of it. But I think we are the only government employees who have to provide our pens, our pencils, our whiteboard markers, everything.

Allan: You mentioned the painting and cleaning of the classrooms. Can you add to that?

Blanca: Well, approximately in a summer I can spend \$300 to \$400 because it's not just painting, it's paint, materials, it's my materials, my internet, not counting if there is a Christmas activity. At Christmas I spent \$278 buying things for the kids because one has to bring them a little gift, some detail, and if I attend 5 groups with 25 students or more, everyone has to receive the same. What can I say? A lot of funds, but they don't reach the teachers. My materials, crafts, if I want to make a craft to make a different or fun class. There is no photocopier because it is damaged, no one ever comes to fix it, you have to wait for someone from the department to come and all that protocol. This year it was a little stronger because we painted the rooms in the summer. After painting the rooms, on a weekend out of nowhere they started breaking for the short columns inside the rooms without notifying us, so we had to buy paint again to be able to paint what we had already painted. Clean with a hose to remove the cement and all that mess.

Allan: Is this part of the structure of the school that the department is not contributing to?

Blanca: Exactly. Not to mention that the employees stole our fans, extensions and "multiplugs". And a scented candle. They are little things that perhaps people do not understand as far as the pay is concerned, it is frustrating.

Allan: We know that, in Puerto Rico, compared to the US, the pay is much higher. Have you ever considered leaving the country to be a teacher there?

Blanca: My three best friends live in the US with a wonderful life since they left. In my case I have considered it, but not to work in education but rather to develop myself in other areas, but I love my country, I would not want to leave. My English is not the best, it is not the same to communicate in English and to resolve, but for one to be a teacher, to stand up, to teach. I even have one of my best friends who was a colleague of mine. She is right now the director of a bilingual area in Austin, Texas, and she tells me to come here because they need teachers who speak Spanish, and they are paid very well. She is at \$70k, or a little more. The difference is that they give them a lot of bonuses. She tells me, if a percentage of the students pass the class, they give you bonuses, if you stay to work in the afternoon tutoring or assisting parents or students, they give you bonuses. They give you bonuses for everything, not here. Something that is a reality is that everyone talks about money and salary. Everyone goes "the salary of the teacher, the salary", but why not better touch on the subject of how teachers have their credit. Because then when you start as a teacher, everyone knows that you start working in the education department, and it's not until a month or two that you start getting paid. The same thing happens with the teacher who retires. The retiring teacher can spend up to 6 months without pay. So, if one as a teacher has children, he wants to give them an education, he wants to have them in sports, well look, you have to take either the credit card, or the loan. When you come to see the teacher either has a bad credit, or he has a credit loaded for life that you have to have. People ask how do I pay then? Well, one month the water, the other the power, because that is the reality. And if a child gets sick that month, I'm going to have to stop paying something, because then you have to buy medicine, medications, the doctor, deductible. When one comes to see, there are things while people talk about the salary, the additional consequences of having such a low salary. A teacher never says I am in the process of buying a house, because with my salary who approves me. This is a chain. You want to have a better quality of life and even if you don't want to, everything gets complicated.

Allan: Considering this, which basically continues to worsen the financial capacity of the teacher the longer he is in the system, and with the increase in the cost of living that is being reflected throughout the world. If these situations are not resolved, what do you think would be happening with the educational system and teachers in 2, 3, 4 years from now?

Blanca: Simple, you don't have to go that far. Let's go this summer. Something I wanted to tell you before, the teacher, because we have a basic salary, permanent, permanent salary, we do not qualify for any help. We do not qualify for reform, if they give a bonus, home offers, we do not qualify for anything. This is something very important to emphasize because having a "stable" job does not qualify us for anything. Now, what you just told me, don't go too far, we're going to May. What the government wanted to happen is going to happen. That the education system collapsed to begin to privatize the schools. Example, we have a person who works in the radio media and all this, Deddie Romero. Right now, Deddie Romero bought a public school from Caparra Gardens. She turned it into a talent school. She is the owner of the school, but the one she has working around her is her niece, her niece's husband, her brother-in-law. People who unfortunately are not prepared. But teachers' salaries are paid by the education department. I have a private school, but everything is paid for by the government. So, in the case of their school, they are the ones who motivate the students, we are going to finish your high

school earlier so that you don't have to be all those years, and we started with what I was explaining to you about the senior students not being able to work because they are not old enough. What are they going to do? I don't know if you knew, but several years ago a law was signed, where many parents of the students do not know it, where anyone with 9 credits in Spanish, 9 credits in mathematics, or 9 credits in English, can be a teacher. Any university student, with one year of university, with 9 credits in Spanish, English, mathematics, and you are already a teacher. In schools, which is what I was telling you right now, schools are full of teachers who are not teachers because they don't have pedagogy, they don't have evaluation and assessment classes, they don't have management classes, control classes, group control, all these theorists that must be studied. Because each theoretician teaches us how to work with each situation, each student. Well, we have schools full of teachers who are little friends, cousins. For example, if your aunt works in human resources in the education department, and she tells you, I have four vacancies for drama, music, science, and physics teachers, well, you can be teachers because now you are going to charge \$2,700. That's why I say wait until May, because with what's happening with the retirement, half of the teachers who were about to retire are going to leave. The system is going to collapse because teachers are going to be lacking. There are currently no education students. If you work at "Home Depot" you earn more than me, why study education? Well then unfortunately we are going to have schools full of people who maybe do master math, English, but they don't know how to educate, they don't know how to express themselves, they don't know how to control the group, they don't know how to work with a child with autism, or with a child with different specific learning problems.

Allan: Is it partly as if the department was not respecting this profession, which is studied, and you must learn a lot to be able to educate?

Blanca: Unfortunately, neither are they respecting it, nor are they valuing it. Truly, education in Puerto Rico is not the government's priority. It is convenient for the government to have people who do not analyze, who do not think for themselves. I have a home room of 28 students, and of 28 students I can tell you that 18 or 19 are people whose parents do not work, and if they work they have companies under the table, we do nails, we assemble air conditioners. There are very few, the students we have whose parents are legally workers, who want to promote a study for their children, and it's like the fewer people we have working, the fewer people we have thinking, the better.

Allan: Do you want to add something? Some peculiar situation that has happened that the department does not help to solve.

Blanca: I can give you my current situation as a teacher. I started in 2005, and from 2005 until March 15 (2022) I qualified for a retirement pension of almost \$1,600. Currently at \$1600 my pension would be \$511. So they are orienting us about social security, where there are teachers who have never paid social security, I would have had to work until I was 55, now I have to work until I am 63, but the only thing I accumulate from social security is 10 years. So from those 10 years of social security, it is not the same formula of the other people from outside. When you work for the department of education, or for the PR police, since we have a different withdrawal, it is not the same formula as the others. I would be taking from social security, they were calculating about \$280 from

social security. And if I'm married, my spouse's share is divided into 2 thirds, plus \$250 is taken from me. After those two thirds. What they want is for the remaining teacher to resign. Because if I quit, I get the money, I don't have it for life, but later I can get better social security, this is very complicated.